

## Europe and the Global South. How to gain influence and credibility in a complex world

Shada Islam | Founder and director, New Horizons Project | @shada\_islam X

### Theme

The European Union (EU) faces the difficult dual challenge of adjusting and adapting to a more complex and unpredictable multipolar world and acknowledging the stronger voice, increased power and agency of African, Asian and Latin American states – often referred to as the [Global South](#).

### Summary

Developing countries represent an important part of the EU's foreign, trade and development policies and activities. Over the years, the bloc has constructed an impressive network of partnerships with emerging powers encompassing not only trade and aid but also climate change, security, cyber security, connectivity and migration. This outreach has been important in improving the EU's visibility in the Global South, but has also prompted the EU to think of itself as a champion of multilateralism, a force for global good and a benign international actor. Nevertheless, the Global South often sees the EU as 'hypocritical, self-serving, and post-colonial'. In order to elevate the EU's role in a changed and increasingly complex and contested world, European institutions and governments will have to complement their transatlantic comfort zone with more proactive engagement with emerging powers, many of which reject 'binary choices' and prefer a more fluid and flexible 'mix and match' mode of inter-State interaction.

### Analysis

Geopolitics, like the proverbial time and tide, waits for no one. As history accelerates amid massive structural shifts in a multilateral order crafted by the victors of the Second World War, the European Union faces the difficult dual challenge of adjusting and adapting to a more complex and unpredictable multipolar world and acknowledging the stronger voice, increased power and agency of African, Asian and Latin American states – often referred to as the [Global South](#).

Time is of the essence. The gap between the EU and the Global South is widening rapidly and dangerously not only because of [deep-rooted differences](#) over trade, debt relief, climate change and reform of multilateralism, but more recently, due to critical questions linked to access to vaccines following [the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and the damaging economic fall-out from Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. Most importantly, the EU's collective failure to uphold international law in Gaza by trying to stop or even forcefully call out Israel's devastation and ongoing 'plausible genocide' in Gaza has prompted [accusations](#) of double standards from the Global South, with many governments

contrasting Europe's soft stance on Israel with its [unequivocal](#) condemnation of the [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#).

Additionally, the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement has brought to the fore questions of Europe's colonial legacy, its engagement in the trade of enslaved people and enduring systemic racism mainstreamed in EU policies, including in approaches to migration. Significantly, South Africa's foreign minister, Naledi Pandor, has taken the lead in [describing Gaza](#) as the last manifestation of the conflict against colonialism and imperialism.

As the geopolitical re-ordering picks up pace, countries of the Global South, which were often lectured by the West on abiding by the rules-based order, are now in the forefront of trying to enforce international law either through resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza in the United Nations or by pursuing [legal action](#) against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), as South Africa has done. [Nicaragua's case against Germany](#) at the ICJ is the latest powerful example of the new activism of Global South governments and the unprecedented political impact that the Gaza conflict is having around the world.

### [An impressive network across the Global South, but ...](#)

Developing countries are the focus of an important part of the EU's foreign, trade and development policies and activities. Over the years, the bloc has constructed an impressive network of partnerships with emerging powers, which cover not only trade and aid but also climate change, security, cyber security, connectivity and migration. This outreach has been important in improving the EU's visibility in the Global South, but has also prompted the EU to think of itself as a champion of multilateralism, a force for global good and a benign international actor. The so-called [Brussels effect](#) has given added weight to EU aspirations of being able to shape the world in its image.

Yet such perceptions are not backed up by reality. Even as they continue to trade and seek aid from the EU – and receive funding for egregious [cash for migrant control deals](#) – governments in the Global South often [see](#) the EU as 'hypocritical, self-serving, and post-colonial'. For them, the EU's outreach has often gone hand-in-hand with simplistic and reductive [Eurocentric](#) 'us and them' narratives that, despite the rhetoric about 'equal partnerships', relegates developing nations to little more than attractive markets, investment destinations and raw-material suppliers – and increasingly as [gatekeepers to Fortress Europe](#). Stern lectures on human rights are part of the EU's template of engagement with the Global South.

#### [1. Outdated vision](#)

Not only do these bilateral conversations reflect an outdated, often [Orientalist](#), vision of the world, they are also being fragilised by stress across the EU caused by a situation of '[permacrisis](#)' or poly-crisis, a combination of long and increasingly egregious wars, the economic and societal fall-out of the COVID-19 pandemic, swift technological change and environmental degradation. Additionally, these major systemic transformations are taking place amid a dangerous US-China rivalry as well as the nightmarish prospect for Europe of another confrontational Donald Trump presidency. Growing [fears](#) of Russian

aggression, which are compounded by Europe's under-investment in military capabilities, are also cause for concern.

Alignment with Washington comes with its own geopolitical risks. For many Global South countries, the EU's soft stance on Israel's relentless destruction of Gaza is a reflection of an ever-closer collective EU alignment with Washington's longstanding pro-Israel stance. As EU policymakers adopt a more US-like confrontational stance on China, discarding plans to craft their own autonomous 'third way' in relations with Beijing, governments in the Global South also fear becoming entangled in a new and damaging Cold War.

It is not too late to correct course. This will however require hard work to repair an EU reputation that has been deeply damaged by its stance on Gaza and its neglect of Global South interests during the pandemic and in the Russia-Ukraine war. More global awareness and a clear-eyed scrutiny of the EU's geopolitical strengths and weaknesses will be needed. In order to elevate the EU's role in a changed and increasingly complex and contested world, European institutions and governments will have to complement their transatlantic comfort zone with more pro-active engagement with emerging powers, many of which reject 'binary choices' and prefer a more fluid and flexible 'mix and match' mode of inter-State interaction.

Replacing the EU's hitherto slow, confused and awkward response to the new geopolitical realities between the status quo Western powers and what many condescendingly refer to as 'the rest' means that the bloc will have to become less Eurocentric and more receptive to Global South arguments, abandon old reflexes and explore a new mode of pro-active and more inclusive diplomatic engagement. As the EU collectively falters on questions like Gaza, there will also be room for individual EU Member States to fashion their own Global South outreach initiatives and work with emerging powers on issues of common interest.

None of this will be easy. Not only has the EU, like other Western geopolitical actors, grown accustomed to the post-War international environment, the current system has also served its interests well. The shift from rule-makers to co-creators of global norms and standards will be difficult. Some EU member states will want to cling to America's coattails rather than forge an autonomous path, prompting others to focus on national rather than collective EU initiatives. Despite ongoing efforts to build up a more muscular global profile based on security and defence, such disarray will invariably erode the EU's aspirations to becoming a more powerful geopolitical actor.

Still, EU discussions on 'strategic autonomy', a new 'strategic compass', the new economic security strategy and adoption of initiatives like the Global Gateway demonstrate a strong European awareness of the need to grow and change to tackle new geopolitical realities. What is lacking however is a lucid and coherent reflection on what sort of actor the EU wishes to be, how it wants to define and pursue its foreign, security and trade policies, and the best way to balance the transatlantic alliance with outreach to the new power centres. The EU's damaged global reputation resulting from its Gaza policy will make such introspection even more difficult.

It is also fair to point out that despite the rhetoric of a 'Geopolitical EU', the Union – as a collection of 27 independent States that have agreed to pool their sovereignty in only a limited number of sectors – is not a fully-fledged geopolitical actor and so will always be perceived to be failing if it is judged by the same yardstick as nation States.

## *2. Is multipolarity real?*

German Chancellor Scholz and France's Emmanuel Macron have made sporadic references to the need to adapt to global changes, with Scholz recently highlighting the 'multipolar character of the world'. Significantly, multipolarity as the new geopolitical normal has also been recognised by Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who describes it as a combination of a wider distribution of wealth in the world, the willingness of States to assert themselves strategically and ideologically and the emergence of an increasingly transactional international system, based on bilateral deals rather than global rules. For others, however, accepting multipolarity is difficult because of the false assumption that it implies accepting Russian and Chinese narratives and is therefore inherently anti-American.

Yet even Europeans who acknowledge the need to adapt to change keep getting entangled in theoretical and ultimately futile discussions about whether or not multipolarity really exists and the true significance and geopolitical impact of what many continue to describe as the 'so-called' Global South. Both debates may be intellectually fascinating but are wasteful and irrelevant.

The truth is that multipolarity is here to stay. The US is undoubtedly still the dominant military power and also has command of many multilateral agencies. American soft power is unmatched and potent. Yet instead of looking only to America or the EU, many Global South countries are picking and choosing among an array of partners, including China. Many prefer not to talk about permanent 'alliances', opting instead to focus on issue-based cooperation.

Examples of 'mix and match' partnerships abound. India may be on the side of the West when it comes to bashing China — but it is certainly not embracing US and EU demands to stop buying oil from Russia or sanction Moscow. Japan is trying to keep its relations with China on a stable footing, despite developing closer links with the US, Europe and NATO. Arch-adversaries Saudi Arabia and Iran have signed on to a Chinese-brokered diplomatic deal even though Riyadh isn't giving up its long-standing US ties. The greenback reigns supreme, but many States are trying to move away from the US dollar as the international reserve currency.

Multipolarity is also a numerical fact. In 1990, the G7 accounted for 67% of world's GDP; today, that share has fallen below 40%. In 1990, China's share of world GDP was 1.6%, today it stands at 18%. The military balance is also starting to change. While the G7 represented some 70% of military expenditure in the world 30 years ago, the ratio dropped to around 50% in 2022, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

### 3. *So what about the 'so-called' Global South?*

Coined by American activist Carl Oglesby in 1969, the concept of the 'Global South' was initially used mainly by non-governmental organizations and development agencies after the term 'third world' had become obsolete with the end of the Cold War. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, the **Global South** broadly comprises Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania minus Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. In the last two years, use of the term has rocketed as a catch-all for countries that prefer to remain neutral in the Russia-Ukraine war. The **United Nations' Finance Centre for South-South Cooperation** maintains arguably the world's most reputable and reliable list of Global South countries. As of early 2022, the list includes 78 countries in all, which are referred to as the "Group of 77 and China."

The numbers may differ and the **Global South** may not represent a coherent, organized grouping, with a leader and a secretariat, but it is a **geopolitical fact**. The term provides a unifying identity for many of the countries which share a history of colonialism, imperial exploitation and are now joined by a common desire to have a stronger say in the management of world affairs through a reform of the UN bodies set up in the aftermath of the Second World War. As illustrated at recent meetings of the expanded **BRICS** group, the Global South also wants its economies to 'catch up' with those of wealthy States and many share the perception that the West is engaged in a game of double standards.

Similarities in outlook however do not mean Global South countries act as one. Arab officials tend to present their interests as separate from those of the Global South because of their countries' oil-generated economic growth. The **Gulf States**, for instance, have collectively expressed strong criticism of Israel and the US but are hesitant to risk their own national interests and relations with the Washington over the issue. While Israel's offensive in Gaza has sparked an unprecedented wave of public **mobilisation** in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have strictly **controlled** protests and displays of Palestinian symbols, from flags to keffiyehs.

### 4. *EU's geopolitical 'tone deafness'*

Global South countries have been trying to reshuffle the geopolitical cards for several years through negotiations at the World Trade Organisation, in UN discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals and in various COP meetings on climate change. However, the tone and content of the relationship between the West and the Global South has changed dramatically in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Perceptions of the EU changed during COVID-19, when Europe was **perceived** as pursuing insular strategies including the hoarding of COVID-19 vaccinations and opposing vaccine waivers. The EU's geopolitical tone-deafness was most visible when, along with the US, European leaders took Global South countries to task for their **rejection** of Western demands to publicly condemn Russia's brutal war in Ukraine and impose economic sanctions on Moscow.

French President [Macron](#) accused developing countries of complicity and ‘contemporary cynicism’ and warned that they were standing on the wrong side of history. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [raged](#) against Russian atrocities and instructed EU diplomats in the United Nations and Global South capitals to ensure that all recalcitrant nations voted with the EU at the UN and other international fora.

Adding fuel to the fire, in an [October 2022 speech](#) to young European diplomats, Borrell compared Europe to a garden which is ‘the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that humankind has been able to build’. In contrast, he claimed that ‘most of the world is a jungle and the jungle could invade the garden’.

At the time, few paid heed to the resentment being voiced by angry Global South leaders, who said their focus was on issues that were vital for their countries, namely the negative economic fall-out of the Ukraine war on their economies, the need to speed up economic development amid geopolitical uncertainties, the impact of [rising debt levels](#) on their ability to provide food and health for their citizens and ensure climate justice while coping with an energy crisis caused by rising prices for oil and gas.

The former [Senegalese president, Macky Sall](#), was ignored by the EU and the US when he [warned](#) that Africa’s ‘burden of history’ meant the continent did not want to become the breeding ground for a new Cold War; as was the Indian foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, when he [urged](#) Europe to ‘grow out of the mindset that its problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems’.

### *5. The tables have turned - dramatically*

The tables have now turned – dramatically. The EU’s collective failure to stand up for its much-vaunted values and longstanding commitment to a multilateral rules-based order in the face of Israel’s devastation and ‘plausible genocide’ in Gaza has shredded the bloc’s reputation among most governments of the Global South. More seriously and consequentially, the EU’s Gaza policy has also damaged the bloc’s credibility among pro-democracy and human rights activists, which the EU [sees](#) as ‘unique partners’ and ‘engines of change, the ones on the frontlines, fighting for equality and justice.’ Gaza is tearing through the EU’s ‘[huge reserves](#)’ of soft power, [according](#) to the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Today, the boot is on the other foot, with Malaysia’s prime minister, [Anwar Ibrahim](#), [slamming](#) Western nations for their inconsistent application of international law and calling out their hypocrisy in condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but not supporting a ceasefire in Gaza. At a meeting of the [Indo-Pacific Forum](#) in Brussels in February, the Indonesian foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, insisted on the need for ‘consistency’, saying that ‘ASEAN and the EU should be at the front line in respecting values and principles of international law, the respect should also be applied to Palestine, to Gaza.’ Ali Sabry, Sri Lanka’s foreign minister, echoed the sentiment, saying ‘we represent the sentiment of the Global South, that there’s double standards when it comes to the Middle East. The credibility of the Western world is at stake unless you treat all equally.’

There is shock at the disconnect between the West's show of compassion for the victims of war in Ukraine and their indifference to the suffering of those elsewhere, including in Gaza. African and Asian countries have also drawn attention to Europe's warm welcome of Ukrainian [refugees](#) and the very strict implementation of 'Fortress Europe' policies towards those fleeing other wars.

South Africa has gone beyond the issuing of statements by bringing a legal case against Israel under the Genocide Convention before the International Court of Justice, a move that has radically reshaped international debates about the war in Gaza. For the country's fearless foreign minister, Naledi Pandor, the struggle of Palestinians 'reminds us of our experiences as Black South Africans living under apartheid.'

### **Conclusions: The way ahead**

EU policymakers must learn crucial lessons from their missteps and mistakes and look reality in the face. Criticisms of EU double standards and the loss of EU credibility over Gaza is not a mere bump in the road or the illustration of a tougher, less naïve Europe. Despite the ongoing efforts of Spain, Ireland and Belgium to take a more active role in trying to correct the EU's course on Gaza, the bloc's collective unwillingness to uphold international law in the conflict will continue to be a blight on its reputation and a serious long-term threat to its global normative and diplomatic influence.

Many governments in the Global South will continue to buy EU goods and weapons or, like Egypt and Tunisia, dip into the 'EU's ATM' as part of the bloc's much-criticised cash-for-migration control deals. However, the EU's stance on Gaza means that 'rarely will anyone soon in the Global South listen when Western politicians insist on international law', [in the words of](#) Middle East analyst Amro Ali. Many human rights activists in the Global South also feel betrayed by an EU that they believed was a global standard-bearer on human rights for all, but now see as acting very selectively.

Salvaging the EU's credibility and global reputation will entail tougher action against Israel, including an embargo on arms sales and the suspension of the EU-Israel agreement on human rights grounds. The funding of UNRWA will have to be fully restored. If the EU cannot move forward collectively, it will also require national initiatives on recognising Palestinian statehood and pro-active participation in negotiations on a two-state solution. The same will also need to apply to other issues of interest to the Global South. In other words, if the EU is stuck collectively, Member States will have to break free of EU frameworks and engage with emerging powers through bilateral or plurilateral actions.

The internal is external. Rising racism, the increased popularity of Europe's far right parties and the presence of populists in power in EU States are making a mockery of Europe's claims to be a Union of values and equality. EU leaders can hardly call out discrimination against minorities abroad if they are ready to accommodate racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism at home.

There is also an important need for the EU to revisit the longstanding assumption that it only matters on the global stage when it is seen to be working hand-in-glove with the US,

an argument that appears to underlie statements by certain EU leaders such as Sweden's Ulf Kristersson, who **insisted** recently that 'transatlantic unity is key and is a fundamental value in itself'.

Despite the challenges and the complexities of dealing with an empowered Global South in a multipolar world, the EU can actually flourish and thrive in the new international environment. Working as they do for a collection of disparate, diverse and often squabbling States, EU policymakers have experience in dealing with complexity and know a thing or two about the art of compromise and negotiation. European diplomats are mostly talented people with their finger on the global pulse. Most also maintain good contacts among the intellectuals, business leaders and young people in the countries where they serve. There is truth in the argument that the EU needs to adopt **a humble approach** and position itself as a genuine force for reform of the international order.

These realities are acknowledged by some in Brussels and other EU capitals, but others remain reluctant to step outside their comfort zones. Yet if the EU is serious about expanding its influence and healing rifts in relations with the Global South, EU policymakers will have to change the tone and substance of their interactions with emerging powers. There will have to be a shift from trying to speak the 'language of power' to learning new diplomatic skills. Self-soothing and self-promoting narratives about Europe's 'leading' role in the world will need to be toned down. Europe's influence and credibility in the Global South does not depend on slick public relations videos, speeches with rhetorical flourishes or fictional narratives crafted for foreign audiences. It is the EU's actions that will count, not just its words.