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CEPS EXPLAINER

REGIONAL ACTOR, GLOBAL PLAYER

Can the EU get the best of both worlds?

SUMMARY

The collapse of Europe's security order coincides with a period of global transformation. Both these phenomena threaten to change the international environment that the EU has grown accustomed to and that has served its interests relatively well. They also raise major questions over the sort of actor the EU wants to be – regional or global.

While the immense challenges of internal reform and breathing new life into a now-geopolitical enlargement process suggest a regional focus for the EU's core strategic priorities, the EU can still take certain measures to avoid losing sight of the rest of the world. If the EU is serious about retaining its influence as a global actor, it must rethink its traditional way of doing business with the 'Global South' and learn how to autonomously navigate an unpredictable – and often fractious – multipolar world.



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INTRODUCTION

The collapse of Europe's security order coincides with a period of global transformation. Both these phenomena threaten to change the international environment that the EU has grown accustomed to – and that has served its interests relatively well. Both also raise major questions over the sort of actor the EU wants to be.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the immediate security imperatives of the EU and its Member States have often found themselves clashing with the goal of enhancing the EU's global influence. The narrative of a struggle between democracy and autocracy, while perhaps well suited to the Russo-Ukrainian War and the EU-Russia standoff, fits less well in a diverse global order in which many states are loathe to choose sides. Admittedly, even its application in Europe has become questionable, given Poland and Hungary's struggles with the rule of law, the EU's reliance on autocracies for its energy security, and Ukraine's democratic imperfections prior to the war.

With Ukraine owing its military successes largely to American largesse, the fact that the EU depends on the US for its own security has become undeniable. When combined with persistent struggles in getting candidate countries such as Turkey and Serbia to align with its Common Foreign and Security Policy, it is questionable just how much influence the EU will be able to wield further afield.

Yet while the immense challenges of internal reform and breathing new life into a now-geopolitical enlargement process suggest a regional focus for the EU's core strategic priorities, the EU can still take certain measures to avoid losing sight of the rest of the world. While in many respects the EU appears set to become a regional actor, to ensure its own influence within the broader global order it should not allow this to result in the deepening of the EU's image as a *civilisational* actor whose liberal normative discourse does not always align with EU policies.

A RESILIENT GLOBAL ORDER...BUT A CONTINENT IN CRISIS

With war raging so close to home and the pan-European security architecture from Lisbon to Vladivostok having all but collapsed, it may seem somewhat odd when Brussels-based officials insist that the EU must play a role in upholding order in the 'Indo-Pacific'. The point here is not to question the need for European engagement in Asia, but rather to highlight the implicit assumption that guides such pronouncements – namely, that it is not just the European security order but the global 'rules-based international order' itself that is endangered today.

If one views today's international order as uniform and rooted in Western leadership, then Russian and Chinese assertiveness (or merely Russian and Chinese *power*) automatically poses a threat to the order's wellbeing. However, today's international order is in fact plural. Several sub-orders can be identified, segmented based on geography, ideology or even policy area, within the overall international order. While the foundations of the international *security* and *normative* orders may be contested for various reasons by Moscow and Beijing, the *economic* and *multilateral* orders appear much more resilient.

THE FACT THAT MANY STATES IN THE 'GLOBAL SOUTH' VIEW THE WAR IN UKRAINE AS A STRATEGIC DISPUTE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST RATHER THAN AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER IS ITSELF A TESTAMENT TO THE MULTILATERAL ORDER'S RESILIENCE.

The fact that many states in the 'Global South' view the war in Ukraine as a strategic dispute between Russia and the West rather than an existential threat to the international order is itself a

testament to the multilateral order's resilience. And while Russia may be challenging major aspects of Europe's rules-based security and normative orders, China's relationship to multilateralism and international institutions [is more nuanced](#). China has often sought to increase its influence *within* existing institutions (e.g. the United Nations and the Asian Development Bank) before creating its own (e.g. the [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#)) when these efforts were stymied. As for the international economic order, the difficulty in bringing about not only decoupling but [even mere 'de-risking'](#) points to the fact that economic openness, broadly speaking, will likely remain the norm rather than the exception.

Any Chinese plan to displace American hegemony does not amount to a desire to overturn the global order, given that US leadership and the contemporary order are not perfectly synonymous. And Russia's behaviour, while destructive, cannot cause the global order to disintegrate completely if other powers (both North and South) remain broadly committed to upholding it. By not applying sanctions, China does support Russia indirectly. But in that it is not alone – only the EU and NATO countries, and their closest partners, such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, have adopted sanctions. The rest of the world, including major democracies such as Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa, has not followed suit.

To many in the West, this came as an unpleasant surprise, and it does highlight the waning of Western influence. But it is understandable that there are many countries in the 'Global South' – that have been (and are) the victims of war and have often only received limited Western support – that do not feel the urge to choose sides in this particular conflict simply because it is one that Europeans and Americans care about. Many indeed do cringe whenever a Western leader states that in the 21st century it is



unacceptable that one state invades another as few have forgotten the 2003 US invasion of Iraq – which was as illegal then as the Russian invasion of Ukraine is today.

If Russia's invasion of Ukraine were followed by a Chinese move against Taiwan, this would present a more significant blow to the notion that agreed-upon rules and the peaceful resolution of disputes form the basis of the contemporary global order. However, any kinetic clash in the Taiwan Strait is likely to be the product of a breakdown in Sino-American relations or the balance of forces in the region, rather than the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

If one looks at the global order less through the lens of institutions and normative content, and more from the perspective of polarity, a similar conclusion can be reached. Depending on how one defines the term, multipolarity is [simply a reality](#) of today's global order, rather than an unrealised ambition pursued by Moscow and Beijing. Multipolarity – that is, the existence of several great powers that compete and cooperate in ever-changing constellations – cannot be purposely created or averted, even if the normative equilibrium in the international order can be more or less liberal. Although international relations have in many ways become [more complex](#) than in previous centuries, multipolarity is simply the normal state of international politics, resulting from the interaction between states that seek to increase their power so that they can pursue their interests more effectively.

Today's multipolarity is undoubtedly [more uneven](#) and less fluid than earlier great power concerts, given the preponderance of Washington's global alliance system and China's ability to compete with the US only in some facets of power (e.g. trade and investment, diplomacy, and military power in the Taiwan Strait but not further afield). Nonetheless, although China's rise and Russia's re-emergence from the chaos of the 1990s have made multipolarity more visible, an international order featuring multiple poles of attraction has existed since the collapse of the bipolar Cold War, [if not even earlier](#), with the postwar economic reconstruction of Europe and Japan.

Today several great powers exist which are constantly competing for markets, resources and influence, hence the balance of power between them is constantly evolving – and tensions are permanent. Some of today's powers are linked in close partnership or even a formal alliance, but they are not aligned in two exclusive rival blocs. China sees no interest in linking its fate entirely to Russia, just like in the EU there is no consensus about blindly following America's more bellicose China strategy. Rather, powers cooperate in various overlapping bilateral, [minilateral](#), and multilateral formats.

Given that it's never sure which great power will come out on top over which issue, other states naturally engage in hedging – most keep their options open and build constructive relations with all powers rather than aligning exclusively with just one of them. Artificially dividing the world into a 'good' democratic and a 'bad' authoritarian camp is therefore a

misreading of the constantly shifting dynamics of global politics. In fact, it risks being counterproductive, as it may push some states into the arms of Russia or China. The EU's interests oblige it to work with authoritarian states; Brussels has little leverage anyway to force a change in their domestic policies.

Despite the tensions inherent to it, a multipolar order can remain stable for long periods of time if the powers manage to agree on a set of core objectives and rules that they all (more or less) observe, because this allows them to pursue their interests more effectively and efficiently than the far less predictable alternative. The balance of power has obviously been shifting to the benefit of China, but for now that change is taking place *within* the system. Beijing is not attempting to overturn the institutions and rules that are meant to govern the multipolar world, but rather to gain more influence within the existing system so that it can shape its future.

The emergence of a new international order is not impossible, of course. The world notably remains at risk of being divided in two camps again. However unlikely, China might shift gears and militarily support Russia's war against Ukraine, it could itself revert to war to pursue its aims, or it might begin to seek an exclusive sphere of influence by coercing states that have joined its Belt and Road Initiative to sever relations with other powers. An internally divided and potentially more inward-looking US might limit its investment in global governance or continue to express its unease with the shift in the balance of power into an even more confrontational attitude towards China. The EU has every interest in avoiding such a new cold war-like confrontation, which would produce grave economic hardship, trigger a worldwide geopolitical race to convince or coerce other states to take sides, and end any prospect of successfully addressing the climate crisis.

In sum, while today's global order faces its fair share of challenges, the mere presence of normative contestation [is not evidence](#) of an order facing an existential crisis. And given that such contestation is only *partially* forthcoming from China – one of the world's leading powers – threats to the survival of today's global order have not yet become existential. The fact that the normative substance and various arrangements within the order are changing – as they always do to reflect evolving international circumstances – does not imply that the present system of interstate relations *as a whole* is collapsing.

Where contestation *has* already become entirely zero-sum and the security architecture *has* largely collapsed is in Europe, between Russia and the West. This can be witnessed in the OSCE's dysfunction, the demise of the continent's arms control regimes, and the presence of unconstrained competition over the security orientation of certain states, rooted in [incompatible visions](#) for how to organise the pan-European security space.



Crucially, the EU's response to the crisis of the pan-European order threatens to undermine its influence at the global level. With nascent European security competition assuming a structural form the longer the war in Ukraine continues, the misdiagnosis of a global order in crisis could bring about a vicious cycle in which the EU's influence is increasingly marginalised, even if its economic clout and partnership in multilateral contexts are still sought out when the interests of other actors align.

IS THE EU A REGIONAL OR A GLOBAL ACTOR?

Because of the aforementioned difference between the European and global orders, the EU's response in one context, if not carefully calibrated, may serve to undermine its positioning in the other. From a strategic perspective, this raises the question of whether the EU should think of itself as a regional actor or a global one – or at least privilege one foreign policy vector over another.

The [Strategic Compass](#), adopted just after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, implicitly captures this dilemma in that it appears to lay the groundwork for a form of '[strategic shrinkage](#)', highlighting the importance of the EU's immediate geographic strategic environment and thus providing a contrast with the 2016 '[Global Strategy](#)'.

Of course, this is to some extent a false binary. The EU has both continental and global interests and will continue to engage – imperfectly – in both contexts. Moreover, the EU is perhaps often judged harshly because others view it as a full-fledged actor, which is not always or entirely the case, measuring it by the same yardstick as other leading players. The EU's single actorness is more manifest in certain policy areas than in others and questions persist over whether an entity that is not a nation-state can genuinely be a pole in a multipolar system. This is especially relevant as recent events in Europe have reaffirmed the importance of military power in shaping political outcomes.

Nonetheless, the binary remains useful for framing some of the policy choices and trade-offs that the EU faces.

The EU's potential for influence in the European periphery is undoubtedly more potent than in the wider world, as in the former context it can wield the prospect of membership and the political conditionality that comes with it. Moreover, not only is the war in Ukraine more of a transformative event for the European security order than it is for the wider world, but the transition of the global order towards a more decentred structure of power has already been ongoing for some time – unlike the rapid and cataclysmic [transformation in continental relations](#) in Europe since 2022. Together, these facts suggest that the EU should prioritise Europe, not only due to the immediacy of the

challenge, but also to nourish the foundations of EU actorness that can only then be deployed more effectively at the global level.

Although US and EU interests do not always align, the US remains [an indispensable partner](#) for the EU in many contexts. However, the perception, shared in many capitals in the 'Global South', of excessive European dependence on (or alignment with) Washington has undermined Brussels' ability to be seen as a power in its own right. Any

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EU attempt to rectify this imbalance by distancing itself from the US will come with very tangible losses and far fewer tangible gains, especially for the central and eastern European Member States.

The benefits of a looser transatlantic partnership may be twofold. First, as [summed up](#) recently by French

President Emmanuel Macron, excessive dependence on the US could lead Europe to become 'entangled' in distant crises. However, the degree to which this is precisely true remains a matter of contention. Although the EU may seek to avoid becoming militarily entangled in a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, Member States would undoubtedly impose serious sanctions and take a clear political stand if Beijing were to move against the island.

Second, although the global order remains largely resilient, the degree to which the EU will succeed in shaping it to align with its norms, standards and preferences has yet to be determined. Excessive dependence – real or perceived – on Washington may undermine such efforts, minimising the global reach of the 'Brussels effect'. Irrespective of the clout that the EU brings to the table on certain policy files, shaping a multilateral order relies on sustained international partnerships built on trust and respect for one another's interests – something which is lacking when European countries appear to place their own security interests ahead of the economic and other needs of many developing countries, which [risks](#) the proliferation of political instability and crises.

The danger confronting an EU that focuses on addressing the dilemmas it faces on its continent, rather than on strengthening its influence in the rest of the world, is that Brussels will expand and even deepen the reach of its orbit in 'core Europe' (having lost Turkey and Russia but gaining Ukraine and Moldova), but that the proliferation of separate orders accelerates at the global level. In this scenario, international law and institutions might become synonymous less with the international order itself, and more with the context [within which international politics takes place](#).



References to the resolve, power and influence of the ‘Collective West’ have become a routine [talking point](#) for American and European politicians and policymakers in their interactions with non-Western states. Some attempts have been made to engage with a wider non-Western world. Japan invited a selected few non-members to the [G7 summit in Hiroshima](#). But the [final communique](#) still harked back to a Western-centric era where a ‘united G7’ could tackle all global challenges, with little or no help from emerging powers.

There are other examples of wishful geopolitical thinking. In response to Russia’s war in Ukraine, NATO is seeking to extend its outreach to Asia by opening its first-ever [office](#) in Tokyo, despite pushback by France and the fact that the plan is largely viewed [negatively](#) by many Indo-Pacific countries – and not just China – which fear territorial creep by the organisation. India, although courted by G7 nations as a ‘like-minded’ democracy, has rejected suggestions it could join a ‘NATO Plus’ initiative, [saying](#) the NATO ‘treaty construct’ template does not align with New Delhi’s worldview.

In a similar vein, EU High Representative Josep Borrell is trying to [convince](#) Indo-Pacific states that since the war in Ukraine is changing Europeans’ role in security and defence, the EU is now a more ‘capable’ and reliable partner for Asia, including as a security provider. German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has announced that Berlin will dispatch a frigate and a supply ship to the South China Sea for freedom of navigation exercises. British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has [also](#) touted his government’s permanent deployment of two warships in the region.

If they weren’t based on dangerously false assumptions of current geopolitical realities, such comments and actions could be viewed as endearingly harmless nostalgia. However, if the EU wants to be a truly ‘capable’ global actor, European politicians and policymakers must resist the temptation to live in the past. They must listen to the views of countries in the ‘Global South’ and discard the assumption that the West is back as global leader, calling the shots, setting the international agenda, and solving major global challenges through Western templates.

The EU also needs to revisit the long-standing 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 underwrite statements by certain EU leaders such as Sweden’s Ulf Kristersson, who [insisted](#) recently that *‘[t]ransatlantic unity is key and is a fundamental value in itself’*. Such thinking is anchored in the implicit belief that NATO membership gives Europe global influence far beyond what its own autonomous ‘actorness’ ever could. This, in turn, strengthens their conviction that the EU’s global role is conditional on its alignment with US policy.



For many Europeans, there is certainly comfort in the self-soothing narrative of a Western ‘comeback’ in a troubled world marked by China’s rise. Similarly reassuring is the conviction that we still inhabit a [US-led unipolar world](#) where, although the EU must tackle its external dependence in energy, tech and supply chains to enhance its strategic autonomy and sovereignty – as well as because of the pandemic and the ramifications of the war in Ukraine – global relations remain largely unchanged.

There is indeed still unity and minimal dissension in the West’s response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. NATO is back as a European security actor, defying accusations of being [‘brain dead’](#). However, such Western unity – and thinking – comes at a cost.

The war in Ukraine has further [deepened](#) an existing divide between the West and countries of the ‘Global South’ whose leaders and citizens are wary not only of choosing sides in the Russo-Ukrainian war but also in the fierce rivalry between the US and China. In the case of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, dozens of countries from the ‘Global South’ have abstained on [UN General Assembly votes](#) condemning Moscow. Even those who voted in favour (such as Brazil and Indonesia) often did so to signal their disapproval for ‘free’, refusing to join the sanctions campaign against Russia and holding decidedly different views from the West on how to end the war.

THE EU IN THE WORLD: ADJUSTING COURSE

The mostly hands-off response of the ‘Global South’ to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine should wake up EU policymakers to the fact that the world has changed. While the examples cited above present only a partial picture of current debate within the EU, they nonetheless show that officials and decision-makers often still struggle to come to terms with the emergence of key phenomena, notably the emergence of a truly multipolar world and more self-confident ‘Global South’ nations which are wary of – once again – becoming pawns in great power competition.

Yet, accept, adjust and adapt, they must. Crafting policy on misguided notions would be a huge strategic mistake. It would likely erode the EU’s global profile at a time not only of rising competition for power and influence in the ‘Global South’, but also when the EU needs access to growing markets and critical raw materials that depends on the goodwill of the ‘Global South’. Such considerations must be taken into account as the EU moves forward with its [economic security strategy](#).

As such, while they navigate the new global landscape, EU policymakers must engage in some much-needed self-reflection. Without altering the fact that Europe will need to come first in the EU’s strategic thinking and planning for some time – and this will remain



the case given the length and complexity of the enlargement process, in addition to the seemingly intractable nature of the current standoff with Russia – a measured but genuine course correction can help to avoid the worse-case scenarios of reduced EU influence in the rest of the world.

With its multiple economic cooperation agreements and millions of euros spent on development projects in poorer nations, the EU has long thought 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. Increasingly, the EU uses conditionality clauses in its trade and aid policies to secure changes in national policies in areas such as labour laws, human rights, environmental legislation and digital policies. Sanctions are used against countries which fail to abide by international conventions.

Many in the ‘Global South’, however, often [see](#) the EU as ‘hypocritical, self-serving, and post-colonial’. Instead of looking at the EU as a preferred partner, many are turning away from such paternalism and seeking out other partners and markets. For many, the EU’s talk of ‘equal partnerships’ and access to EU trade and aid benefits goes hand in hand with simplistic and Eurocentric ‘us and them’ narratives and post-colonial approaches. And although Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is also a symptom of post-colonialism, many in the ‘Global South’ also view relations with Moscow as strengthening their sovereignty and their ability to hedge against the ‘neo-colonial’ policies of Western powers.

Additionally, the EU (naturally) focuses on its own interests, not those of the ‘Global South’. EU conversations with developing nations tend to centre on stopping illegal migration, fighting corruption and stern lectures on human rights, as well as more recent efforts to secure their alignment with the West’s approach towards Russia. Less time is spent on listening and responding to their demands for quicker implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, debt relief or eliminating global inequalities.

Instead of shrugging off critical comments by Southern leaders, EU policymakers must genuinely take heed and listen to Senegalese President Macky Sall when he [warns](#) that Africa’s ‘burden of history’ means the continent does not want to become the breeding ground for a new cold war, or to Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar when he [urges](#) 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’. Most recently, during a trip to Brussels, Pakistan’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar insisted that Islamabad has no [appetite](#) to pick a side in the growing global rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

EU officials are also under the false impression that the world is watching their support for Ukraine in admiration. At the recent Shangri La discussions in Singapore, [Asian](#)

[policymakers](#) focused their comments on urging an end to the war and negotiating peace in Ukraine. However, such comments and an attempted Indonesian peace initiative (which admittedly had [not been coordinated](#) with Ukraine) were quickly dismissed by an array of EU ministers – a move hardly conducive to fostering closer Europe-Asia ties and which risks appearing at odds with the EU professing its commitment to peace.

Countries from the ‘Global South’ are increasingly stepping up the pace when it comes to pushing for an end to hostilities, highlighted most recently by the [visit](#) of a delegation of African leaders to Kyiv and Moscow earlier this month. Unlike President Zelensky’s ten-

RATHER THAN PUSHING ‘GLOBAL SOUTH’ COUNTRIES TO ALIGN WITH EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES ON THE CONFLICT, EU LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY TAKE THE CONCERNS OF SOUTHERN ACTORS SERIOUSLY.

point peace plan, which is [backed by the EU](#) and posits more strenuous conditions such as a Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory and a special tribunal to prosecute Russian war crimes, the Africans’ focus was [more squarely](#) on de-escalation and security

guarantees for all, reflecting their concerns over the impact that a prolonged war would have on their own food security.

Rather than pushing ‘Global South’ countries to align with European perspectives and priorities on the conflict, EU leaders and policymakers must demonstrate that they take the concerns of Southern actors seriously. Such an attitude is a prerequisite for a genuine relationship of equals – itself a necessary component for enhancing EU influence in the world. The recent [invitation](#) of Brazil, India and South Africa to a meeting in Denmark to ‘discuss basic principles of peace’ in Ukraine may represent a welcome step in this direction.

Moreover, while realpolitik has certainly played its part in determining the positions of certain countries on the war, these are not just about historical connections to Russia or [geopolitical manoeuvring](#). Much of the [fence-sitting](#) by ‘Global South’ countries is a symptom of anger at perceived Western double standards and frustration at stalled reform efforts in the international order.

Just some examples: Asian countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia, are angry and frustrated at the EU’s restrictive policies *vis-à-vis* imports of their palm oil which they see as driven more by the protectionist demands of European vegetable oil producers than any environmental concerns. Both have now put [on ice](#) their negotiations for a free trade agreement with the EU while Indonesian President Joko Widodo has [cautioned](#) about the disconnect between the EU’s stated goal of equal ties and its restrictive environmental and trade policies. (That said, the EU and Kenya have just signed up to an [Economic](#)



[Partnership Agreement](#) and Mercosur may finally be on the verge of finalising its own free trade agreement with the EU.)

Still, EU hopes for a '[partnership of equals](#)' with African countries have run into a brick wall given the bloc's 'Fortress Europe' migration policies and discriminatory treatment of African migrants and refugees compared to the open-arms approach to those fleeing the war in Ukraine. As further evidence of the West's disproportionate concern for Ukraine, the UN appeal for humanitarian aid for Ukraine has been 80 to 90 % funded, whereas the UN's 2022 appeals for people caught up in crises in Ethiopia, Syria, and Yemen [have been barely half funded](#).

In fact, much of Europe's legitimate concerns about the erosion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law worldwide is being undermined by its failure to put its own house in order. Rising racism, the increased popularity of Europe's far-right parties and the presence of populists in power are making a mockery of Europe's claims to be a union of values. EU leaders can hardly call out discrimination against minorities abroad if they are ready to accommodate racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism at home.

Many in the 'Global South' are dismayed at the framing of the Ukraine War as a contest between democracies and autocracies and the West's geopolitically selective outrage at human rights abuses. They [point](#) to the US-led war in Iraq to claim that the Western approach is not driven purely by a commitment to an impartial 'rules-based international order'. And US support for the Saudi-led coalition's [war in Yemen](#), which spawned a humanitarian crisis in that country, in addition to persistent drone bombings in the 'War on Terror' are pointed to as evidence of doublespeak when it comes to concern for civilians. The collapse of the pan-European regional architecture suggests that even closer to home, security relations may need to be focused on developing measures to avert another war rather than the convergence of political systems.

Last of all, it is time to bury the assumption that the EU's profile on the global stage depends on the US and that the EU is only taken seriously when it stands shoulder to shoulder with Washington. But the perception of many 'Global South' actors reveals that the reverse can be just as true – In a multipolar world, the EU can matter just as often when it crafts its own policies and works autonomously and independently.

The US remains the dominant global power and American soft power is unmatched and potent. Yet as former US Treasury Chief Lawrence Summers has [warned](#), the US is also in a 'lonely' place. Instead of looking to America, in a complex mix-and-match world many 'Global South' countries are picking and choosing among an array of partners, including China. Most of them don't like to talk about permanent 'alliances', a new geopolitical reality which is not captured by outdated references to '[swing states](#)' or even 'non-alignment'. For many actors, 'multi-alignment' is often the new reality.



CONCLUSIONS

While many would prefer Europe to keep walking in America's large shadow, the EU is rather well positioned to adapt and adjust to the global transformations – and thrive in a multipolar world. As a collection of disparate, diverse and often squabbling states, the EU can deal with complexity and knows a thing or two about the art of compromise and negotiation.

Multipolarity is here to stay and the strategic landscape is likely to get even more complicated. Getting ahead in such an environment will require the EU to move beyond the West-centric transatlantic frame and truly engage with developing countries. It means sharing Europe's knowledge, experience and wisdom with partners – but not lecturing and hectoring them.

In short, it means listening and learning, not moralising and finger-wagging.

Many in the West may still prefer life in a unipolar setup, which may have never been fully unipolar in the first place. But the world is moving on. If the EU is serious about retaining its influence as a global actor, not merely a regional one, it must rethink its traditional way of doing business with the 'Global South' and learn how to navigate an unpredictable and often fractious multipolar world autonomously.

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