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# **Leading together: RECONCILING EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

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This paper argues that to provide real leadership on important global issues – from multilateral action to climate change – the European Union (EU) will need to reconcile a certain unilateralism in its global ambitions with its commitment to deepening partnerships. It argues that the EU's growing focus on improving its self-sufficiency must be accompanied by a flexible and collaborative approach to foreign and development policy, particularly vis-à-vis its neighbourhood and Africa.

Even before COVID-19, the Geopolitical Commission had begun to prioritise strengthening the EU's ability to promote and defend the single market and its own interests in an increasingly unpredictable world. The crisis provoked by the virus strengthened competing narratives around the global order and reinforced geopolitical tensions, bolstering calls to reinforce the single market, increasingly referred to as 'strategic autonomy'. EU leaders also strongly expressed their belief that the EU must lead by example, notably on a green digital and resilient post-COVID-19 economic recovery and in reforming multilateralism.

This paper examines what the pursuit of strategic autonomy might mean for the EU's partners, including both potential negative externalities and underdeveloped opportunities. It explores how the EU hopes to lead by example, looks at how the EU has tried to do this in the past by exporting its regulatory models and argues that a more flexible approach may be necessary going forward, notably in the EU-Africa partnership. Finally, it examines how the EU hopes that the 'Team Europe' banner will allow the EU and its member states to show a united front in the planning and communication of EU international cooperation, but also draws attention to the need to continue to prioritise local ownership and impact.



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## Introduction

COVID-19's dramatic and tragic impact around the world, including on European society, the resulting geopolitical struggle around controlling the narrative on COVID-19, and new crises in the European Union's neighbourhood, have all reinforced the EU's existing focus on building a stronger and more resilient European economy and society. These events also energised European leaders' declarations that the EU must show global leadership; by pursuing a green and resilient economic recovery; by forging ahead with the green transition; by developing a holistic model of digital regulation; and by leading reforms of key multilateral institutions (von der Leyen 2020a, Michel 2020). This paper will argue that to provide real leadership on some of these important global issues, the EU will need to reconcile its unilateral ambitions with a flexible and collaborative approach to foreign and development policy at all its different levels of action.

Even before COVID-19, global shifts were taking place that were likely to have long-lasting impacts on how the EU sees its place in the world. A series of crises at home and abroad – from Ukraine to the Sahel, the refugee and migrant crisis, Russia's aggressive role in the EU's neighbourhood, the 2016 Brexit vote, the presidency of Donald Trump, and the rise of China – were leading to shifts in the EU's domestic and international positioning. In this context, Ursula von der Leyen's "Geopolitical Commission" seeks to both strengthen the EU's own economy and society in a turbulent geopolitical context, while also looking outwards in the realisation that the EU must also strengthen its position in the world. This included a strong focus on defending/preserving multilateralism, the seeds of a European economic and climate diplomacy, and a focus on building partnerships, notably an upgraded continent-to-continent partnership with Africa. At the heart of the conception of the Geopolitical Commission is an emphasis on integrating a clearer analysis of the EU's interests and strategic priorities into the EU's partnerships and development policy alongside traditional development concerns, while the approach also emphasises the importance of policy coherence between domestic and external policy agendas.

This paper briefly introduces the backdrop to the EU's shifting policy framework. It then moves on to trace three key ways in which the EU's positioning is shifting and to highlight how the EU can more thoroughly integrate a partnership approach throughout its policy. Firstly, as the EU undergoes an ambitious transformation of its Single Market, the EU will need to be very clear in assessing and communicating how its domestic ambitions in key policy domains will impact its partners, notably those in low and middle-income countries in its neighbourhood and Africa. Secondly, the EU will need to show a willingness to be flexible, genuinely consult and move towards the positions of its partners on key issues, rather than focusing too strongly on externalising EU domestic positions. Only then can it build strong partnerships and multilateral coalitions allowing for wider international impact. Finally, the EU is right to try to be more strategic in how it programmes and communicates about its external spending as part of the next seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027. Yet without ownership, buy-in and a level of agreement and common purpose with local stakeholders, results will be elusive and real progress in pursuing European priorities will be illusory or even counterproductive.

## The changing nature of the EU in the world: before and during COVID-19

European policy has gone through multiple changes since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, seeking to respond to shifts and crises in the global and regional context. This included a complete shift in the direction of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) following a 2015 review of the ENP, with a more flexible country-by-country approach based on "joint-ownership" and a greater focus on "stabilisation, resilience and security" (EC 2015 and EC 2017). The 2016 EU Global Strategy similarly sought to respond to the growing turbulence in the EU neighbourhood by integrating a stronger focus on the EU's own strategic interests, and being more modest about the EU's ambitions for transforming its neighbours through its foreign policy (EEAS 2016). The 2017 European

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Consensus on Development acknowledged that EU development policy seeks to further the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also situate it within the EU's own strategic interests (EU 2017).

The combination of an uneven playing field in EU-China economic relations, the beginning of US trade wars, including against the EU, and deadlock at the World Trade Organization (WTO), also led the Commission to try to be more strategic about how it links its economic relations to its strategic political and economic interests, leading to the emergence of some efforts towards a European economic diplomacy. In response to the migration and refugee crisis in Europe, European leaders have turned increasingly to the external dimension of migration management to manage migration flows (EC 2020a).<sup>1</sup> This has played an important role in the gradual shift in the EU's approach to Africa in the latter years of the Juncker Commission. Short-term policies focused on controlling borders were gradually accompanied by efforts to build more longer-term policies to tackle the underlying issues driving migration and refugee flows from Africa. This led to efforts to develop a more comprehensive approach to peace and security in regions such as the Sahel and Horn of Africa, and through a new economic approach to Africa, evident in the External Investment Programme (EIP), that aims to use investment as a means to create jobs and ultimately drive economic development (EC 2020b).

More recently, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, introduced the concept of the Geopolitical Commission. Geopolitics – meaning simply politics as influenced by geographical factors – has, of course, always been present in the EU's external relations, but with the “Geopolitical Commission,” the concept is used to describe a vision of a stronger and more autonomous EU better able to defend its interests, a strong linkage between the EU's internal agenda and its foreign policy. Von der Leyen has also repeatedly emphasised the need to build strong strategic partnerships and reinforce multilateralism (von der Leyen 2019a; EC 2020c and Teevan 2019). However, it is clear that while there is a growing consensus amongst EU member states that the EU should play a stronger role in the world, EU member states continue

to have different strategic cultures, different threat perceptions and thus different interests. This has been very clear in recent discussions around Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean, and continues to play against the EU's effectiveness as a geopolitical actor.

While it is still very unclear what the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the global order might be, and narratives about the waning of US power are often overblown given its continued military and financial might, COVID-19 seems to have marked an inflection point that will have a long-standing impact on international relations. The rapid spread of COVID-19 in the US and many EU countries challenged a certain idea of Western invincibility, and added to the already growing divisions between the two sides of the Atlantic Alliance, notably with regard to the role of multilateral action. The scale of the initial crisis in Europe and the Trump administration's abdication of global leadership left the field open for an already increasingly confident China to engage in well publicised mask diplomacy, to contrast its own crisis management with the apparent weakness of the Western democracies, and even to question the origins of the virus (Tadesse 2020; Swaine 2020a; Swaine 2020b).

The crisis clearly demonstrated China's growing confidence, but also marked a growing cleavage in EU-China relations. At the political level, European leaders have begun to take much firmer positions on China's economic footprint, whilst also becoming more vocal on human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang (EUCO 2020b and von der Leyen 2020a). At the same time, polling data in many of the world's advanced economies demonstrates that China's reputation has deteriorated since the beginning of the crisis (albeit not as much as that of the US) (Wike. et al. 2020). It is much less clear where public opinion stands in Africa, the Middle East or elsewhere, but at the political level it appears that China's reputation and influence remains intact. For example, in June, African leaders participated in an extraordinary online summit with China, at which African leaders expressed support for Chinese positions on Hong Kong and Xinjiang alongside discussions of potential Chinese debt relief for Africa (MFA of the PRC 2020).

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COVID-19 reinforced certain shifts in the EU's global positioning that were already taking place, notably the focus on strategic autonomy – the sense that the EU must focus on strengthening and defending the Single Market amidst global geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalries. At the same time, in her State of the Union speech, Ursula von der Leyen, repeatedly made reference to the idea of the EU leading by example (von der Leyen 2020a); a theme that EU Council President Charles Michel also took up in recent interventions on the topic of strategic autonomy. (Michel 2020) This sense of EU leadership is also referred to in European discussions about the EU's global response to COVID-19, where the EU sought to show unity and international leadership under the banner of "Team Europe". In the next sections, we will focus on these different aspects of the EU's global positioning, how these shifts might affect Europe's partners, and how the EU can avoid appearing too unilateral.

## Strategic autonomy: European agency in a changing world

The concept of strategic autonomy or European sovereignty is at the heart of the evolving way the EU institutions and many EU member states think about the EU's place in the world, but it is loosely defined. The champions of the term, including French President Emmanuel Macron and European Council President Charles Michel have never precisely defined the concept, and it is clear that not all EU member states agree on the term. In recent interventions Michel sought to counter the fears of some member states that the EU was headed for greater protectionism, emphasising that it was rather about securing greater security for European citizens, guaranteeing European standards, and promoting European values (Michel 2020). At the October meeting of the European Council, leaders agreed that the combination of the "green transition and the digital transformation, together with a strong and deep Single Market" should be at the heart of the EU's economic recovery, whilst promoting cohesion and resilience. They proceeded to agree: "Achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy is a key objective of the Union." (EUCO 2020a).

The concept of strategic autonomy has been growing in relevance for a number of years, notably in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election in the United States in 2016, but also backed by the realisation that the EU's falling behind in key strategic industries of the future and was increasingly dependent on others, including China, in certain sectors. In his 2017 Sorbonne speech, French President Emmanuel Macron posed the question of what he referred to as "European sovereignty" as key to the security and sovereignty of the member states (Macron 2017). Although the term did not appear in her political programme, Ursula von der Leyen threaded the concept throughout her programme for the new Geopolitical Commission, with a strong focus on the largely economic and regulatory portfolios where it has the strongest competence. The von der Leyen Commission thus adopted a strong focus on strengthening the Single Market's competitiveness in key sectors, whilst balancing this with a socio-political agenda aimed at reinforcing certain goals and values such as tackling climate change, reinforcing internet governance and reducing inequality (von der Leyen 2019b).

The von der Leyen Commission immediately started to set out a web of strategies and regulations aimed at strengthening the EU economy, whilst decoupling EU economic growth from resource usage and better managing inequality within the EU. Significant elements included the launch of the Green Deal (December 2019), white papers on data and AI (February 2020), the EU Industrial Strategy (March 2020) and a host of other measures aimed at beginning to operationalise the Green Deal (EC 2019; EC 2020d and EC 2020e). This also includes a growing economic diplomacy, including the promotion of European economic interests internationally, taking advantage of European businesses' competitive advantage, promoting EU regulatory and standards approaches, and stimulating European foreign investment. We will dwell further on these external aspects in the next section.

Alongside a positive vision for the future of the EU economy, the EU's strategy also includes a defensive dimension, with various tools to protect the EU economy for what are viewed as predatory practices,

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to uphold certain economic values and interests the European Commission hopes to promote, at home and abroad. This includes investment screening and the possibility of a carbon border adjustment mechanism and a digital tax (Dominguez-Jimenez and Poitiers 2020; EC 2020f; EC 2020g).

The rhetoric around strategic autonomy was reinforced further by the onset of COVID-19. Macron restated many of his initial ideas, now with a stronger focus on industrial sovereignty in the health sector, echoed by HRVP Borrell and Charles Michel (Mallet and Khalaf 2020; Borrell 2020; Michel 2020). With the historic agreement to take on common debt to fund the recovery fund, the EU members demonstrated an ability to come together for the common good of the EU. Although the figures allotted to the more forward-looking proposals such as the Digital Europe programme and Horizon Europe in the new €1 trillion EU MFF and €750 billion ‘New Generation’ Recovery Fund agreed on by European Union heads of government in July were less ambitious than many hoped (EUCO 2020a). But the economic recovery strategies launched by key member states have emphasised a strong focus on the twin agenda of a green and digitally savvy recovery. These include more than one third of the €130 billion German stimulus being focused on digital, innovation and climate change (€50 billion), and €30 billion of the French stimulus of €100 billion announced on 3 September, while further stimulus packages and initiatives in these areas are still expected in the coming months (FMF-DE 2020, Walton and Jonker 2020; France Gov. 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Although unsurprisingly this focus on European sovereignty, and particularly the defensive elements, have led to some concern from the EU’s partners about what this might mean for them. In particular, the growing rhetoric of some European leaders around reshoring of strategic industries, backed up in the French case by the focus on relocation and competitiveness in its recovery plan (Mallet and Khalaf 2020, Borrell 2020; France Gov. 2020), have led to some concerns that the EU, amongst others, is headed towards increased protectionism (Financial Times 2020). Indeed during the early weeks of COVID-19, export bans on medical supplies between EU member

states gave way to a wider EU-wide ban on exports to third countries, which although quickly reversed, hurt countries in Africa that import much of their medical supplies from Europe (Tondel and Ahairwe 2020; Brown 2020). It is also unclear what the external impact of the relaxation of state-aid rules within the EU and the bailouts of European industries might have on European partners around the world. Another cause for concern moving forwards is the potential carbon border adjustment mechanism, which many fear could hurt developing countries by limiting their access to the Single Market (Zachmann and McWilliams 2020).

For some of the EU’s partners, particularly in the neighbourhood and amongst some middle-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the EU’s focus on strategic autonomy could offer opportunities if the concept is pushed further. They argue that given the cost of labour within the EU, it is unrealistic to imagine massive reshoring of European production and that nearshoring of key supply chains is more realistic, allowing the EU to develop a larger “strategic parameter” including lower-cost production sites in the EU’s periphery.<sup>3</sup> HRVP Borrell himself has made reference to the potential for nearshoring to the neighbourhood and Africa, but ambitious steps would be necessary to make such ideas a reality (Borrell 2020). The logic of a closer embrace is certainly apparent in the newly announced €9 billion EU investment package for the Balkans that seeks to: “spur the long-term economic recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with the European Union” (EC 2020h).

Moving forward, such an approach might be extended to other partners including Ukraine, Tunisia, Morocco and others. However, whereas Ukraine aspires to EU membership (Herszenhorn 2020), EU membership is unlikely for the EU’s Southern neighbours. Yet, it is increasingly clear that the EU faces a choice between much greater engagement and investment with its Southern neighbours or continued instability and migratory flows, coupled with growing Chinese investment and influence. The joint declaration by the EU and Morocco marked a move towards a much

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more comprehensive partnership (EUCO 2019), and the two sides are now negotiating a series of thematic partnerships, including on the digital economy, climate and the environment.<sup>4</sup> However, as in the Balkans, making these partnerships work in practice will require strategic use of European financial tools and sufficient investments.

Going forward it will be important for the EU to listen to partners' concerns, clarify its positions and show a willingness to engage in dialogue about those issues that fundamentally concern partner countries. At the same time, it has the opportunity to push the logic of strategic autonomy further so as to finally deliver on the promise of shared stability and prosperity with its neighbourhood.

## Leading by example or partnering with others

This vision for the future development of the European economy and its industrial base, is in turn accompanied by an evolving vision of how the EU and some of its leading member states wish to portray their role in the world. Von der Leyen spoke of it being a moment for the EU to “lead the way from this fragility towards a new vitality,” spoke of leading on various aspects of the green transition and on digital, referred to European leadership of the COVID-19 response, and aspired to lead reforms at the WTO and WHO (von der Leyen 2020a). Michel highlighted the belief that EU norms were a “vector of European power,” while European values confer “tremendous legitimacy and power of attraction” amongst Europe’s partners around the world (Michel 2020). The EU thus aspires to a leadership role as the leading proponent of market-based economies rooted in certain values.

The conception of EU soft power, traditionally articulated as being based on democracy, values and the European social model – although never entirely led by these – is gradually evolving, and as already mentioned has gradually moved towards greater modesty regarding the EU’s transformative abilities, while at the same time seeking to be more strategic, clearly rooting its foreign policy ambitions in its domestic policy priorities; including traditional

concerns like migration management and security, stability in the European neighbourhood, which increasingly includes Africa, as well as newer priorities focused on ‘leading by example’ with the Green Deal and digital governance.

In the economic and regulatory realms, the EU exerts both direct and indirect influence. Due to the size and importance of the European market, its regulatory power is an important element of how the EU conceives of its soft power in the economic realm. The EU has long sought to project this regulatory power in its neighbourhood and Africa, with closer regulatory alignment with the EU playing an important role in free trade agreements with some of its neighbours and in the negotiations around the economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with sub-Saharan African countries. EU free trade agreements also include a Trade and Sustainability Chapter (TSD), that tends to include commitments on human, labour and environmental rights (EC 2020I). In terms of indirect influence, legal scholar Anu Bradford coined the term “the Brussels effect” to argue that the importance of the European market, combined with its relatively strict regulations and standards can make it more practical for companies to apply EU standards even in non-EU markets – from an economic, legal or technical standpoint (Bradford 2020).

The EU has a long record of seeking to directly influence the regulatory frameworks of partner countries. Some of Europe’s closest partners in the Neighbourhood, notably in the East but also Morocco and Tunisia, have increasingly aligned to European standards in different fields, while the EU has pushed for further alignment under the form of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). Even though countries like Morocco and Tunisia cannot become full EU member states, the EU has promoted the idea that they could enjoy shared prosperity through alignment and free trade with the single market (EU Neighbours 2020). Nevertheless both in negotiations with its neighbours and in the EPAs in sub-Saharan Africa, many local commentators have highlighted that European regulations and standards are not necessarily desirable or achievable in very different contexts (Lefrance 2019 and Crétois 2019).



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As the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) begins to take shape, the EU has set its sights higher, trying to position itself as the African Union's closest partner with a wealth of knowledge to share on how to develop a single market and subsequently how to work towards standardising the net of regulations and standards that are an integral part of a Single Market. EU officials repeatedly voice their hopes of building a strong intercontinental partnership, with the AfCFTA forming the basis for a stronger future relationship based on technical support, trade and political partnership, slowly replacing the existing relationship. The European Commission sought to highlight its commitment to this future vision on 27 February, when 22 European Commissioners accompanied Ursula von der Leyen to Addis Ababa to meet with 9 African Union (AU) elected officials (EC 2020i). Soon afterwards, it published its joint communication, "Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa," laying out the EU's priorities for cooperation with Africa based around five rather expansive "partnerships"; green transition and energy access; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace and governance; and migration and mobility (EC 2020j).

However, the EU's existing approach to partnerships still demands a further shift away from the idea of the EU as leader, or even the idea of the EU as Africa's 'partner of preference.' As already discussed, China's influence remains strong in the wake of COVID-19, and the EU will need to adjust to being a partner of preference for certain themes, but not necessarily for all. The EU's model of pursuing comprehensive cross-cutting partnerships thus has its limits in the context of global power shifts, given the extent of current challenges, and in light of the EU's own state of evolution. It is not credible that strong partnerships can be based on externalising an EU's domestic agenda or leading by example. There is the need for a much stronger focus on crafting a joint agenda. Delivering on the external dimension of key ambitions may mean moving away from documents like the EU's vast "Africa Strategy" (EC 2020j) to a more deliberative approach to alliance building on a topic-by-topic basis with a focus on ironing out real divergences of interest. In interviews, selected EU

officials have themselves argued that ahead of the EU-AU Summit, the focus should be on really advancing on one or two initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in the context of COVID-19, the EU demonstrated the ability to lead with others through partnership and flexibility in its multilateral response to the crisis, building flexible coalitions with like-minded democracies, the African Union, and even with China. The EU and its member states played a significant role in what progress was made at multilateral fora; working with South Africa and others to spearhead a debt moratorium for low income countries at the G20 summit in April; drafting the resolution reinforcing support for the World Health Organization (WHO) that was passed at the World Health Assembly; and leading fundraising efforts to make any vaccine or cure widely available. This was a vital first step, although as the economic pain of COVID-19 continues to be felt, much more will need to be done to avoid a wider debt crisis (Van Staden 2020). The EU and its member states adopted the language of global public goods for any COVID-19 cure or vaccine early in the crisis, and led two rounds of global fundraising efforts to help finance global access to any vaccine, although there is a long road from this promising rhetoric to ensuring delivery on these promises (Veron and Di Ciommo 2020). The EU also drafted a resolution on COVID-19 at the World Health Assembly, co-sponsored by the African Union, Australia, China and others, finding the necessary compromise language so that the US did not veto it (WHO 2020).

## The emergence of "Team Europe"

After the initial shocking impact of COVID-19 within the EU and the EU's uncoordinated response in early and mid-March 2020, the European institutions and member states moved to come up with solutions that showed European unity and determination to find solutions both internally and externally. As mentioned earlier, this came at a moment of highly publicised Chinese mask diplomacy and disinformation campaigns, including within the EU itself. The EU launched its global response package to COVID-19 in



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April 2020 (EC 2020k), under the banner of “Team Europe”. The intention was to demonstrate Europe’s collective resolve to support global efforts to respond to the pandemic. This also met a longer-term need for a stronger shared European branding of European external action, pulling together the resources of the EU and its member states, including their development finance institutions. Beyond the immediate response to COVID-19, “Team Europe” is now also being deployed as a banner for European cooperation initiatives worldwide. However, it is important that this does not become just a branding exercise that is divorced from real impact and is centred on strong local ownership.

The initial “Team Europe” announcement amounted to €15 billion in reassigned aid from the EU institutions, which when combined with funding from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and of member states, brought the total to almost €36 billion as of June 2020, including €7.9 billion for the Neighbourhood (including North Africa), almost €4 billion for Turkey and the Balkans and €4.75 billion for sub-Saharan Africa. (EURO 2020c). The package was unprecedented for the EU in terms of scale and swiftness of mobilisation, and in the willingness of member states to package over €11 billion in contributions as part of a wider European response. However, it is unclear what the overall breakdown between reassigned money versus new funds was, although it appears that very little was new money. The EU figures that have been published do not identify the individual contributions of member states either (Bilal and Di Ciommo 2020). Despite the unprecedented nature of the EU’s response, it should not be ignored that this ultimately amounted to a very small proportion of countries’ needs given the scale of the global crisis. An AU study estimates that Africa alone may lose \$500 billion due to the COVID-19 crisis and as many as 20 million jobs could be lost (Ighobor 2020).

The new EU recovery instrument (Next Generation EU) was initially supposed to include €15.5 billion for external action. However, due to the domestic challenges and the interests of member states in defending existing priorities such as agriculture and

cohesion, COVID-19 did not lead to a noteworthy increase in external resources as part of the newly negotiated Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. The MFF agreed by member state leaders includes a small increase compared with the equivalent instruments from the previous budgetary cycle, but a 10% cut on the European Commission’s pre-COVID-19 proposals from 2018 (ECDPM 2020).

Team Europe’s longer-term significance may ultimately be in creating the impetus to work better together, as well as the creation of a common brand that might begin to address the EU’s lack of visibility, whereby the perceived contribution of the EU and its member states (for instance. investment, development cooperation) tends to be diminished by the lack of one overarching brand. Although “Team Europe” was hastily conceived and still needs to be elaborated further, it will now be used beyond the COVID-19 response, in an attempt to build stronger internal cohesion around the EU’s programming process and to improve the EU’s overall visibility. As part of this approach, EU delegations will develop “Team Europe initiatives that: “promote, under the ‘Team Europe’ brand, ambitious and easily recognisable European flagship initiatives with a maximum transformative impact in partner countries”. (Chadwick 2020) These hold promise for the EU and member states to increase European visibility by targeting international cooperation and aid to areas of real added-value on a country by country basis. Even so, at the country level, a lot will depend on whether there is buy-in by the member states and European development banks, and whether the EU delegations are able to effectively bring stakeholders together. It will also be important that these initiatives are not simply publicity, and that they can demonstrate real impact and strong local ownership.

Solid next steps are necessary to highlight that this is not just a branding exercise. First and foremost, more will need to be done to assess the actual impact and reception of the “Team Europe” COVID-19 response in third countries around the world and at multilateral fora. Moving forward, as “Team Europe” is expanded to brand specific flagship initiatives in the

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programming of the Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), as well as joint programming with EU member states, and multilateral initiatives, it will be important to be able to demonstrate where the EU has real impact and added-value, and to demonstrate that this process is not in fact about Europe, but about Europe and its partners working together.

## Conclusion

As the EU rethinks its own development model and role in the world, it needs to realistically reflect on what its domestic changes mean for its partners in the Neighbourhood and Africa, and how it can ensure that unilateral action designed for strengthening its strategic autonomy does not get in the way of strengthening partnerships. This will require the EU to engage with its partners on how elements of the EU's efforts to achieve strategic autonomy are affecting them, and to show a willingness to engage with their concerns and adapt, thereby showing the importance of these partnerships. It should also mean much more meaningful engagement on how aspects of the EU's strategic autonomy could also offer opportunities for more meaningful partnerships with selected countries in Europe's neighbourhood and beyond, notably through a fuller involvement in initiatives such as the Green Deal or in the proposed single data market.

At the same time, the EU's self-image is still that of a leader, even as it adopts the rhetoric of partnership. In its proposed new partnership with Africa, the EU still appears to position itself as teacher and guide, depending on development cooperation, the "Brussels effect" and wider economic and regulatory influence to tie the EU and AU together. However, the EU cannot expect a whole continent to follow the EU's lead across a whole range of issues, and wider partnerships such as that with Africa should focus on tackling the biggest divergence on an issue by issue basis. The current approach of an all-encompassing partnership appears doomed to deliver only the lowest common denominator in terms of real progress on the vital issues of our time; whether on climate, digital or migration.

Finally, over the next 12 months the EU will, with varying degrees of consultation, agree its priority areas for collaboration with countries and regions around the world through the programming of the €70.8 billion NDICI, its main financial instrument for external action. This is an opportunity to get the balance right and move to a new way of working; not only by improving how the EU and its member states work together and communicate, but also by ensuring programming in the wake of a devastating pandemic is strongly rooted in local priorities.

At ECDPM, we will explore many of these issues in more detail in the months ahead, including the external dimension of the Green Deal, the way forward for "Team Europe" and of course the EU-Africa partnership in more detail. The following are some initial ideas in terms of how to ensure that the EU adopts a truly collaborative and realistic approach in its efforts to provide international leadership:

- **Clarify external aspects of domestic agenda in specific policy domains:** The EU will need to begin to elucidate more clearly the expected direct and indirect aspects of the Green Deal and the EU's Digital agenda. This includes both clarifying how key measures such as the carbon border adjustment mechanism will work in practice, but also clarifying how increasingly tough internal regulations may affect companies in the Global South.
- **Be clear about limitations:** Whilst in the current geopolitical context, demonstrating a certain level of ambition is important, the EU could also potentially strengthen its chances of partnerships if it also makes clear that the Green Deal and Digital Agenda are not fully formed and are not simply areas where it wants to "lead by example," but also where it is willing to learn and adapt. The EU should be clear about what it is offering in these areas – both in terms of political and development partnerships – and should seek to understand the incentives and disincentives for partners to engage.
- **Building political partnerships:** There is a risk in trying to build all-encompassing political and regulatory partnerships. While such partnerships may make sense in the Balkans and

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parts of the EU's neighbourhood, more flexibility and humility will be necessary in building partnerships with an entire continent such as Africa. While there may be potential to substantially move forward with certain dossiers, that will not necessarily be true for others. The EU should therefore aim to be more ambitious in its negotiations with Africa on key thematic areas such as climate, rather than settling for the lowest common denominator across a host of different thematic areas.

- **Strategic programming of the NDICI:** The EU has promised a lot in terms of investments,

development aid and technical support across a range of different sectors. Yet there is a growing realisation in EU development circles that to show clear impact and thus have visibility the EU will need to be more strategic about how it works with partners and programmes with what are ultimately limited resources. Without a strong interest and ownership by partner countries, the most ambitious programmes are unlikely to succeed and may indeed further undermine the EU's global role.

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<sup>1</sup> See newly published EU Pact on Migration which includes a section on working with international partners: “The EU needs a fresh look at its priorities, first in terms of the place of migration in its external relations and other policies, and then in terms of what this means for our overall relations with specific partners. In comprehensive partnerships, migration should be built in as a core issue, based on an assessment of the interests of the EU and partner countries” (EC 2020a).

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<sup>2</sup> The German stimulus package is fully in addition to the EU Recovery Fund, while the French stimulus is based on the expectation that it will receive €40 billion from the Recovery Fund.

<sup>3</sup> Interview, 22 July.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews, 29 July and 3 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews, March & August 2020.

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