

A new European agenda for international climate adaptation

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Summary

In an interconnected world, economic prosperity, stability and security depend on climate resilience. This briefing note argues for positioning international climate adaptation more explicitly within Europe's evolving strategic agenda. It proposes *shared resilience* as a way to connect the EU's strategic interests with partner countries' priorities.

This repositioning stems from a changing European political context. Faced with a fragmenting multilateral order, intensifying geopolitical competition and growing domestic political pressures, the EU's political agenda is increasingly shaped by a discourse centred on strategic resilience, preparedness, economic security and competitiveness. In Europe's global engagement, this reflects a broader shift from narratives centred on solidarity, equity and development towards more interest-driven approaches rooted in strategic autonomy.

This strategic shift creates both risks and opportunities for Europe's international climate adaptation agenda. On the one hand, it risks making EU support more selective, favouring countries and investments that align most closely with European strategic interests. On the other hand, it creates opportunities to strengthen the political relevance of climate adaptation and broaden the coalition of actors and sources of finance supporting it. This is why a *shared resilience* approach must remain grounded in equity and international solidarity, ensuring that urgent climate adaptation needs are not sidelined.

Introduction

For the past decade, the EU's climate narrative has been shaped by the ambition to become the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050, as set out in the [European Green Deal and enshrined in the European Climate Law](#). Today, however, the EU's climate agenda operates in a fundamentally altered political context, marked by domestic pushback, heightened geopolitical tensions, declining ODA and a new set of priorities centred on [defence spending, economic security and competitiveness](#). Rather than simply displacing climate objectives, these changing priorities are reshaping how climate action is politically framed. The EU increasingly connects climate adaptation to strategic resilience, economic security and preparedness, as reflected in the [2025 EU Preparedness Union Strategy](#). This framing was particularly visible in the [2026 State of the Union address](#): while reaffirming that Europe would “stay the course” on its climate targets, von der Leyen linked climate adaptation explicitly to resilience and preparedness, while also presenting climate adaptation technologies as an emerging economic opportunity for Europe.

Reflecting a [wider shift in development policy thinking](#), climate adaptation is increasingly being framed as a contributor to the EU's strategic resilience. This marks a shift in emphasis from earlier approaches, which situated European international climate adaptation more explicitly within [development cooperation](#) and implementation of the [Paris Agreement](#), with an emphasis on solidarity, equity and developing countries' needs and priorities. Under this new framing, climate adaptation in emerging and developing economies can also contribute to Europe's resilience by reducing climate-related disruptions to supply chains, trade, critical infrastructure and economic stability, as well as the risks of climate-related displacement. Recognising these cross-border and cascading risks can strengthen the political relevance of climate adaptation and broaden the coalition of actors and sources of finance supporting it. At the same time, there is a risk that European strategic interests become the primary basis for prioritising climate adaptation support, at the expense of partner countries' own priorities and vulnerabilities.

As these strategic priorities increasingly shape the EU's external agenda, the challenge is to reposition the international climate adaptation agenda within this evolving political context without losing sight of sustainable development, equity and international solidarity. This **briefing note argues for a narrative of shared resilience, embedding climate adaptation within Europe's emerging economic, security and preparedness priorities while extending the resilience logic beyond Europe**. It recognises that Europe's prosperity and security depend partly on the resilience of its partners and the interconnected systems they share.

1. Unpacking new climate adaptation narratives in a changing geopolitical context

Europe's approach to international cooperation has become more [explicitly strategic](#) in response to recent crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis brought Europe's strategic dependencies sharply into focus: they are increasingly viewed through a risk lens. European governments now prioritise [resilience, diversification and greater control over critical supply chains](#), alongside efficiency, [reshaping industrial, trade and investment policies](#).

Climate cooperation is evolving within this more contested geopolitical environment: climate diplomacy increasingly intersects with industrial competition, clean technology, supply chains and geopolitical influence, while international climate adaptation finance continues to fall far [short of growing needs](#). The [US retreat](#) from multilateral climate commitments has further complicated prospects for collective climate action, including on climate adaptation.

These wider shifts are reflected in the EU's external climate agenda. The [2021 EU Adaptation Strategy](#) emphasised the need to support vulnerable countries. More recently, the [2025 Joint Communication on the EU Global Climate and Energy Vision](#) placed greater emphasis on the strategic dimension, explicitly linking global climate policy with competitiveness, prosperity and security, and framing climate adaptation and resilience in partner countries partly in terms of wider European security interests.

Looking ahead, the [proposed Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\) for 2028–2034](#) suggests an even greater emphasis on competitiveness, resilience, strategic autonomy and industrial transformation across the EU's internal and external dimensions, with the new European Competitiveness Fund the MFF's central pillar. Under the proposed Global Europe instrument, whose EUR 200 billion envelope is already facing [pressure from EU member states](#), climate action remains a [cross-cutting priority](#). In this context, international climate adaptation finance may face growing pressure to demonstrate its contribution to secure infrastructure, competitive value chains and economic stability.

Taken together, these developments point to a changing strategic context for Europe's international climate adaptation agenda, shaped particularly by two increasingly prominent EU policy narratives. Table 1 summarises these two narratives and their potential implications for international climate adaptation.

Table 1: Dominant EU policy narratives: implications for international climate adaptation

Dominant narrative	How it appears in EU policy	Risks for international climate adaptation	Opportunities for international climate adaptation
Economic security and competitiveness	Domestic/EU: Draghi Report (2024); Clean Industrial Deal (2025). External/global: Global Gateway (since 2021). Both: Joint Communication – Strengthening EU economic security (2025); efforts to diversify supply chains, energy sources and access to critical raw materials.	Climate risks remain insufficiently recognised as long-term threats to competitiveness, productivity and value-chain stability. An economic-security framing may also prioritise EU interests over partner-country climate adaptation and development priorities.	Frame climate adaptation in partner countries as protecting infrastructure, value chains and investments on which European and partner-country prosperity depend, while creating incentives for businesses to strengthen the resilience of their assets and operations and building synergies with mitigation and green-transition investments.
Security, preparedness and strategic resilience / autonomy	Domestic/European: NATO 5% commitment ; ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 (2025); Niinistö Report (2024); EU Preparedness Union Strategy (2025). External/global: Global Climate and Energy Vision (2025).	Resilience and preparedness remain predominantly EU-centred. Extending a security framing to international climate adaptation also risks prioritising European security concerns over partner-country vulnerabilities and development priorities.	Extend the preparedness logic beyond Europe: frame climate adaptation in partner countries, including vulnerable/fragile countries, as reducing cross-border and cascading risks, preventing instability and strengthening the resilience of interconnected systems.

Source: Author

These emerging narratives around economic security, competitiveness, preparedness and strategic resilience also raise the question of whose resilience and priorities are being advanced. While the EU increasingly frames climate action through these lenses, many developing countries emphasise [economic transformation, equity, national ownership and reform of the international financial architecture](#). European and partner-country priorities may therefore overlap, but cannot simply be assumed to do so.

At the same time, the strategic turn creates opportunities for international climate adaptation by strengthening its relevance to economic stability, security and interconnected risks, potentially broadening both the political coalition and sources of finance for climate adaptation.

The **challenge, therefore, is neither to insulate international climate adaptation from Europe's evolving strategic interests nor to subordinate it to them, but to manage the trade-offs between European objectives and partner-country priorities.**

2. Repositioning climate adaptation within the EU's evolving strategic agenda

In this changing political context, there is a case for positioning the international climate adaptation agenda more explicitly within Europe's evolving strategic agenda, while avoiding its subordination to narrowly defined European interests. The **following sections explore two key entry points: climate adaptation as an economic investment and as a preparedness and security priority.**

2.1. Climate adaptation as an economic investment

Europe's evolving political discourse strengthens the case for understanding climate adaptation not simply as an environmental concern, but as an [economic imperative](#). Recent evidence using the '[triple dividend of resilience](#)' approach further strengthens the investment case. An [analysis](#) of 320 climate adaptation investments across 12 countries found that every \$1 invested could generate more than \$10 in benefits over ten years, with average annual returns of 20–27%. Economic, social and environmental co-benefits were often twice the value of avoided losses, meaning that many investments create value even when climate shocks do not occur.

Realising this value requires moving climate adaptation into mainstream economic and financial decision-making. A '[whole-of-economy approach](#)' would integrate [climate resilience into macroeconomic, fiscal and debt policy](#) and engage finance ministries and other central economic actors. This includes addressing debt distress and limited fiscal space, which constrain many climate-vulnerable countries' ability to invest in resilience, including through instruments such as [debt-for-climate swaps and climate-resilient debt clauses](#). This economic rationale is gaining traction beyond climate policy circles. The [2026 G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors' communiqué](#) recognises the fiscal and financial risks associated with extreme weather, including those

transmitted through cross-border spillovers, value chains and trade disruptions, and highlights preparedness and investment in longer-term resilience. Strengthening domestic financial systems and reducing the cost of capital will be essential to unlock investment. Yet, many climate adaptation measures, particularly in vulnerable countries and communities, will not generate commercial returns or immediate benefits for Europe and will therefore continue to require public, grant-based and highly concessional finance, consistent with developed countries' commitments under the Paris Agreement. Public development banks and development finance institutions can [crowd in private investment](#) where appropriate, but cannot substitute for concessional finance where commercial returns are limited. A [broader financial toolkit](#) is therefore needed, combining multilateral development bank (MDB) lending reforms, sovereign debt instruments, blended finance and risk-sharing mechanisms.

The challenge now is to translate this economic case into EU investment policy. Global Gateway, the EU's flagship external investment strategy, is the obvious entry point. As the EU increasingly structures partnerships around [mutual strategic interests](#), climate adaptation could be more centrally positioned as an enabler of resilient infrastructure, secure value chains and long-term economic resilience. So far, Global Gateway has focused largely on flagship investments (Cf. 2025 [EU Global Gateway flagship portfolio](#)) in [energy, connectivity and strategic value chains](#), as well as on mobilising private finance. However, many of these investments provide entry points for climate adaptation, including in agriculture, water and nature-based solutions. The opportunity lies in [embedding climate adaptation and resilience targets](#) more systematically across Global Gateway investments.

For EU policy, positioning climate adaptation as an economic investment need not come at the expense of equity, solidarity or developing countries' climate adaptation priorities. Rather, the economic rationale can complement these objectives by demonstrating the wider economic value of climate resilience.

2.2. Climate adaptation as a preparedness and security priority

Climate shocks increasingly generate cascading impacts across critical infrastructure, energy networks, transport, food systems, water resources and supply chains. As these risks intensify, European decision-makers increasingly recognise climate change as a [risk multiplier](#) whose impacts can spread across [interconnected systems](#). **Climate adaptation should therefore be treated as a core component of European preparedness and long-term security, reducing the likelihood that climate shocks escalate into infrastructure failures, economic disruption or wider instability.**

The renewed emphasis on ‘European preparedness’ provides an opportunity to reposition climate adaptation within this broader agenda. This agenda is gaining strategic and fiscal weight: under [NATO’s 2025 commitment](#) to invest 5% of GDP in defence and security by 2035, up to 1.5% can cover broader defence- and security-related investments, including critical infrastructure, civil preparedness and resilience. The Niinistö Report, although primarily internally focused, advanced an ambitious ‘[all-of-society resilience](#)’ approach that recognised climate change as a driver of systemic, cascading risks requiring coordinated action across government, business and society. The subsequent [Preparedness Union Strategy](#) incorporates elements of this vision through an integrated ‘all-hazards’ approach, but gives less prominence to climate change as a structural driver of systemic risk (see Table 1). Anchoring climate adaptation more explicitly in the preparedness agenda could help connect short-term crisis preparedness with longer-term resilience, while encouraging investment in climate-resilient infrastructure and systems.

Yet, translating this logic into practice remains difficult. [Governance structures remain poorly equipped](#) to manage systemic climate risks. Responsibilities are organised around sectoral mandates and short planning cycles, meaning risks that cut across infrastructure, energy, food, finance and security often fall between institutional boundaries. Gaps also remain in the [data and methodologies](#) needed to assess cascading climate risks and their implications for preparedness, security and investment decisions.

The forthcoming [Integrated Framework for European Climate Resilience and Risk Management](#) (Q4 2026) and [second European Climate Risk Assessment](#) (Q3 2028) offer a chance to translate this shift into practice by [embedding systemic, cross-border and cascading climate risks](#) across infrastructure, civil protection, defence, development and foreign policy. Doing so would help move Europe from recognising climate-related insecurity to operationalising it within institutional and investment frameworks.

But **a European preparedness agenda cannot stop at Europe’s borders**. A more [coherent outward-facing approach](#) could provide a basis for partnerships that strengthen resilience on both sides, connecting European strategic interests with partner countries’ climate adaptation priorities. This could include cooperation on cross-border infrastructure and water systems, regional early warning and preparedness, resilient food and supply chains, and climate resilience in fragile and vulnerable contexts.

Towards a *shared resilience agenda*

Europe's changing strategic environment does not necessarily weaken the case for international climate adaptation, but it changes the political rationale for it. This briefing note has argued that the **climate adaptation agenda should not be treated as separate from Europe's emerging priorities around competitiveness, economic security and preparedness, but as integral to them**. Two shifts are central. First, climate adaptation should be recognised as an economic investment in productivity, competitiveness and long-term prosperity. Second, it should be treated as a strategic capability that strengthens preparedness and long-term security. Crucially, both logics must extend beyond Europe: in an interconnected world, Europe's resilience depends partly on strengthening the resilience of its partners and the systems they share.

Together, these shifts point towards a ***shared resilience agenda for Europe's international climate adaptation***. *Shared resilience* can be understood as part of a [broader shift](#) towards framing international cooperation around mutual interests and interdependence. It differs, however, from a narrowly self-interested approach: the premise is not simply that climate adaptation in partner countries should serve European interests, but that European and partner-country resilience are interconnected. In other words, ***shared resilience does not replace solidarity with strategic interest; it recognises that the two can reinforce one another where European and partner-country interests overlap, while making trade-offs explicit*** where they do not. Putting this into practice will require greater coherence across diplomacy, finance, trade, industrial policy and development cooperation, as well as among EU institutions, Member States and financial actors.

- **Mainstream climate adaptation across economic, security and foreign policy**, embedding systemic climate risk and resilience in the EU's emerging preparedness and economic-security frameworks and in relevant foreign-policy dialogues;
- **Strengthen coherence across EU external policies**, using country-led approaches and platforms to connect climate adaptation priorities with climate diplomacy, development cooperation, trade and investment, and **integrating climate adaptation and resilience into** existing transition partnerships where relevant;
- **Build mutually beneficial partnerships** by using country-led platforms and initiatives such as the [Country Platforms Hub](#) to co-design investment priorities around partner-country needs, while ensuring that vulnerable countries and climate adaptation needs with limited commercial returns continue to receive support;

- **Align finance with resilience ambitions** by embedding climate adaptation as a cross-cutting criterion in Global Gateway project appraisal and programming, and in the implementation of the forthcoming MFF's Global Europe instrument (2028–2034), including for infrastructure and strategic value-chain investments;
- **Broaden the coalition for climate adaptation** by engaging finance ministries, MDBs, development finance institutions, export credit agencies and private investors more systematically in climate adaptation planning and investment, alongside climate and development actors.

Ultimately, shared resilience is not intended to replace existing climate adaptation narratives, but to complement them with one that responds to today's geopolitical and economic realities while maintaining a commitment to partner countries' priorities, equity and international solidarity.

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