

Policy Paper

How the coronavirus pandemic affects the EU's geopolitical agenda

24 April 2020

Dr. Nicole Koenig, Deputy Director
Dr. Anna Stahl, Policy Fellow

#Geopolitics
#Corona
#EUforeignpolicy



The coronavirus pandemic accelerates some of the global trends that fueled the EU's geopolitical ambition while raising the challenges that come with its enactment. This policy paper reviews the implications for the EU while focusing on three key relationships: China, the US and Africa. It argues that the pandemic represents an opportunity for EU global leadership and shows what that could look like.

Executive summary

The coronavirus pandemic has important implications for the EU's geopolitical ambition. It accelerates several global trends that led the EU to formulate this ambition and poses new challenges for its enactment. There is a real danger that an EU struggling with the economic and political consequences of the pandemic gets stuck in a **prolonged phase of introspective self-examination** well beyond the current crisis.

This policy paper reviews the implications for the EU's global role by focusing on three relationships that are at the top of its geopolitical agenda and for which major advancements were expected in 2020: China, the US and Africa. The analysis of the early stages of the global pandemic shows that:

- It opened a **new chapter of strategic and systemic rivalry with China** as an EU struggling with internal solidarity fell prey to the global war of narratives led by China and the US.
- It **broadened the strategic void in transatlantic relations** as the US failed to display global leadership and further eroded European trust through a marked "America First" approach.
- It will **enhance strategic challenges emanating from Africa** where a potential health crisis will coincide with a significant economic downturn.

In this policy paper, we argue that the pandemic could also represent an opportunity for the EU to display international responsibility and **fill the global leadership gap** that others leave. The EU should thus counteract tendencies of a myopic inward focus and adapt its geopolitical agenda for the pandemic global aftermath. It should:

1. **Defend and promote the European model** in the global battle of narratives through a well-coordinated communication strategy and a strong normative stance
2. **Double down on European strategic sovereignty** in the health, economic and defence sectors
3. **Fill the leadership gap on multilateralism** by bolstering existing and forging new alliances
4. **Engage in cooperation with China to support African recovery**

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1 EU-China relations: a new chapter of strategic rivalry	1
2 Transatlantic relations: a strategic void	3
3 EU-Africa relations: the next strategic challenge?	5
4 Policy recommendations	7
4.1 Defend and promote the European model in the global battle of narratives	7
4.2 Double down on European strategic sovereignty	8
4.3 Fill the leadership gap on multilateralism	9
4.4 Engage in trilateral cooperation with China and Africa	11
Conclusion	12
On the same topic	13

Introduction

In 2019, the EU made grand promises to enhance its strategic sovereignty, become more “geopolitical”, and speak the “language of power”.¹ These promises stand for the ambition to defend the EU’s collective interests and values in a context of great power competition. One year later, a global pandemic is severely challenging the bloc’s geopolitical ambition. It is **accelerating some of the global trends that pushed the EU to endorse this more geopolitical role**. Next to even fiercer great power competition, these include the erosion of the rules-based international order, increasing protectionism, transatlantic tensions, the rise of China and growing instability in the EU’s neighbourhood. The pandemic thus raises the case for a more geopolitical EU.

However, it also enhances the challenges that come with it. Adding to the difficulties related to the fragmented nature of the EU as a global actor,² a Europe struggling with the pandemic’s economic consequences could easily get stuck in a prolonged phase of introspective self-examination. When the EU became the epicentre of the pandemic in March, its focus rapidly turned inwards, displaying by and large uncoordinated responses to the crisis. At the time of writing, the first steps towards more European solidarity and coordination were underway. However, economic responses remain controversial and the broader political repercussions are still uncertain. There is thus a real danger that the EU’s inward focus will be retained well beyond the immediate crisis.

“There is a real danger that the EU’s inward focus will be retained well beyond the immediate crisis.”

In this paper, we argue that the **pandemic calls for more, not less global EU leadership**. It is therefore crucial to keep sight of the transition out of the immediate emergency and to start thinking about concrete articulations of the EU’s global role in a post-crisis scenario. In the following, we illustrate the pandemic’s geopolitical implications with a focus on three relationships that are at the very top of the EU’s agenda: China (1), the US (2), and Africa (3). We then draw lessons for the EU’s future steps towards more global leadership (4). The EU will have to strengthen its own strategic sovereignty in the health, economic and security spheres. At the same time, it should fill the current global leadership vacuum by cooling the war of narratives and promoting a European model, deepening multilateral cooperation, and joining forces with China to promote African recovery.

1 EU-China relations: a new chapter of strategic rivalry

The coronavirus, which originated in China in late 2019, hit at a **decisive time for EU-China relations**. The two have been working on renegotiating the terms of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership since the early 2010s and agreed to deepen cooperation on a range of issues.³ In light of the scale and speed of China’s ascent, the EU gradually shifted to adopting a more realistic tone, culminating in

¹ Von der Leyen, Ursula, *A Union that strives for more – my agenda for Europe*, Brussels, 2019; Borrell, Josep, *Hearing in the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee*, Strasbourg, 7 October 2019.

² Koenig, Nicole, *The geopolitical European Commission and its pitfalls*, Jacques Delors Centre, December 2019.

³ *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*, 23 November 2013.

its designation of China as an economic competitor and “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” in 2019.⁴ The trade war with the US and EU member state divisions on Huawei’s 5G technologies further complicated EU-China relations. There was some hope that 2020 would ease trade tensions with the US and lead to progress on the cooperative dimension of EU-China relations. Instead, the pandemic exacerbated tensions with the US and opened a new chapter of strategic rivalry.

China had a **delayed and authoritarian crisis response**. Against the background of its authoritarian political model and its system of information control, China discouraged the transparent recognition of the threat and prevented a quick international emergency response.⁵ After President Xi finally publicly acknowledged the coronavirus outbreak end-January 2020⁶, an unprecedented number of severe government measures were put in place, including the months-long lockdown of the megacity of Wuhan, monitored through electronic surveillance measures. China also imposed a drastic travel ban on all foreign nationals, preventing even foreigners with a residence permit from entering the country.

At the same time, China has started a so-called “mask diplomacy”⁷, offering support to other countries by sending equipment and medical teams. The Chinese “mask diplomacy” represents an attempt to redefine the international narrative around the pandemic and reveals China’s pretensions to global leadership. Yet, instead of fostering international collaboration, **China’s “politics of generosity” contributed to a global battle of narratives**. As outlined in a special report from the European External Action Service (EEAS),⁸ Beijing has carried out large-scale disinformation activities related to the coronavirus. The Chinese state-controlled media has not only depicted China’s approach to tackling the virus as superior, but also spread false theories about the origin of the virus. Moreover, Beijing engaged in an information war with Washington, using social media to point fingers at the US and ordering the expulsion of US journalists.⁹ In attempts to influence global public opinion, Chinese officials dramatically increased their presence on Western social media platforms while Chinese-originated information manipulation increasingly resembled Russian-style tactics.¹⁰

The pandemic opened a new chapter of “systemic rivalry” between China and the EU. Against the background of China’s attempts to depict itself as a leader in global efforts to contain the crisis, there has been a growing trend of an anti-European narrative, threatening European unity and values. The case of Italy shows that China’s “mask diplomacy” had a divisive impact on an EU struggling with its initial response to the crisis. Chinese assistance came at a time when intra-European solidarity was low and even though the EU and its member states provided more support to Italy than China, given the delay, the EU got less credit for it. At the same time, China has promoted its own authoritarian model of pandemic re-

“The pandemic opened a new chapter of “systemic rivalry” between China and the EU.”

⁴ European Commission and EU High Representative, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*, Brussels, 12 March 2019.

⁵ The Associated Press, *China didn’t war public of likely pandemic for 6 key days*, 15 April 2020.

⁶ Ma, Jian, *Xi Jinping has buried the truth about coronavirus*, The Guardian, 26 February 2020.

⁷ Wong, Brian, *China’s Mask Diplomacy*, The Diplomat, 25 March 2020.

⁸ European External Actions Service (EEAS), *Special Report Update: Short assessment of narratives and disinformation around the COVID- 19 pandemic*, Brussels, 1 April 2020.

⁹ Lee Myers, Steven, *China Spins Tale That the U.S. Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic*, New York Times, 13 March 2020.

¹⁰ See [here](#).

sponse. Most European countries have opted for a “democratic closure”¹¹ in line with the EU’s fundamental rights system. Even so, Chinese support to countries like Italy or Spain also increased calls to learn lessons from the authoritarian Chinese approach to contain the virus.¹² More importantly, the example of Hungary shows that there is an authoritarian temptation that could well outlive the crisis and put basic European democratic rights at risk.¹³

Despite mounting EU-China tensions, the pandemic could also offer some **prospects for Sino-European collaboration** in the framework of the EU-China Strategic Partnership. As outlined by Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, global leadership “will also require effectively cooperating with China, rather than getting consumed by a war of narratives”.¹⁴ As a sign of EU international leadership, European policymakers need to acknowledge China’s display of international solidarity in the current crisis and provide a unified EU response to it. The special EU-China summit – bringing together all 27 European heads of state or government – scheduled for September, could represent an opportunity to speak with a single EU voice and be a first step towards easing Sino-European frictions. However, there is also a risk that China exploits the Summit for public diplomacy purposes and that concrete measures will be postponed. The Summit should therefore focus on key deliverables, such as the comprehensive investment agreement, as well as Sino-European support for multilateral initiatives to fight the immediate health crisis and the long-term economic effects.

2 Transatlantic relations: a strategic void

The pandemic arrived after years of serious transatlantic tensions that had underlined the need for greater European sovereignty. The Trump administration dismantled key pillars of the multilateral rules-based order by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal. Trump repeatedly pressured Europeans to raise defence spending, questioning the security guarantee and threatening to withdraw the US from NATO. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has pursued an aggressive trade strategy, including not only a trade war with China, but also the imposition of significant import tariffs on the EU. The issue of 5G and Huawei shows how American pressure on Europeans to take sides in the competition with China is mounting. The pandemic highlighted **the end of US hegemony** while the “America First” approach to it led to **yet another low point in transatlantic relations**.

Trump initially downplayed the severity of the coronavirus threat describing it as “hoax”. However, when case numbers started rising turning the US into the pandemic’s new epicentre, it became clear that the country was unprepared. Faced with criticism regarding his initial crisis response, **Trump engaged in global blame shifting** and thus fuelled the global battle of narratives: Addressing American citizens on 11 March, he said that the Europeans had failed to impose the necessary

¹¹ Tocci, Nathalie, *International Order and the European Project in Times of COVID-19*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome, March 2020.

¹² Arostegui, Martin, *Chinese Virus Aid to Europe Raises Long-Term Concerns*, VOA News, 23 March 2020.

¹³ Serhan, Yasmeen, *The EU Watches as Hungary Kills Democracy*, The Atlantic, 2 April 2020.

¹⁴ Campbell, Kurt M. and Doshi, Rush, *The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order, China is Maneuvering for International Leadership as the United States Falter*, Foreign Affairs, 18 March 2020.

travel restrictions on China and that clusters of infection “were seeded” by European travellers.¹⁵ The EU’s High Representative Borrell criticised these attempts to discredit the EU and stigmatise its citizens.¹⁶ Trump also kept referring to the virus as a “foreign” or “Chinese” and later “Wuhan virus”. He downplayed criticism concerning his racialisation of the virus by claiming that he simply referred to the geographic starting point of the pandemic. However, statements such as that by Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton blaming China for purposefully spreading the virus and threatening to “hold accountable those who inflicted it on the world” show that this framing was far from objective, let alone innocent.¹⁷

Instead of leading the global response, the **Trump administration torpedoed multilateral efforts**. In February, it proposed a \$3 billion funding cut to global health programs for 2021.¹⁸ In mid-April, it froze all US funding for the World Health Organisation (WHO), accusing it of being biased towards the Chinese government. The US administration also stalled efforts in March to agree a G7 foreign ministers’ statement on the coronavirus crisis and a Declaration by the UN Security Council by insisting on the label “Wuhan virus”.

Europeans were particularly angered by some hostile expressions of an “America First” approach. One was Trump’s unilateral imposition of a travel ban on Europeans without prior consultation. The fact that it initially excluded the UK – a politically motivated measure reversed only three days later – added to the EU’s discontent.¹⁹ Another was the alleged attempt by the US to secure exclusive rights for the development of a coronavirus vaccine by the German biopharmaceutical company CureVac. It remains to be seen whether subsequent signs of goodwill, such as a shipment of medical goods worth \$100 million to Italy, can heal this wound in transatlantic relations in the medium-term.

“Europeans were particularly angered by some hostile expressions of an “America First” approach.”

The **longer-term geopolitical implications depend on the outcome of the US presidential elections** scheduled to take place in November 2020. At this stage, one can only speculate about the impact of the escalating pandemic on that outcome. A victory of the Democratic contestant Joe Biden would probably lead to a return to liberal internationalism and multilateralism. This would likely change the American course on a range of geopolitical issues such as the Iran nuclear deal and trade. However, some issues would remain sources of transatlantic tensions regardless of the election outcome. The EU’s approach to China will be closely scrutinised by any US administration. If the economic downturn leads to substantial European defence budget cuts, as many analysts predict,²⁰ we will likely see an entirely different dimension of the transatlantic burden-sharing debate.

¹⁵ Orr, Gabi, *Trump ratchets up coronavirus battle with European travel ban*, Politico, 11 March 2020.

¹⁶ Borrell, Josep, *The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating*, Brussels, 24 March 2020.

¹⁷ Cotton, Tom, *Press Release*, 12 March 2020.

¹⁸ United States Senate Budget Committee, *The Trump budget devastates global and public health programs*, 2020.

¹⁹ *Joint Statement by President von der Leyen and President Michel on the U.S. travel ban*, Brussels, 12 March 2020.

²⁰ Fiott, Daniel, *Will European defence survive Coronavirus?* Real Instituto Elcano, 17 March 2020.

3 EU-Africa relations: the next strategic challenge?

Relations with Africa are a key priority for the “geopolitical Commission”. The EU and its member states remain Africa’s biggest partners in terms of investment, trade, official development aid and security. Due to their geographic and cultural proximity, instability and fragility in Africa have direct consequences for Europe. It therefore comes as no surprise that the new Commission President von der Leyen chose Africa and the African Union’s (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa for her first official visit in December 2019. As a follow-up, the EU issued a proposal for a new strategy with Africa in March,²¹ which lays the foundation for a novel EU-Africa partnership to be adopted on the occasion of the EU-AU summit in October 2020. EU foreign ministers have thus described 2020 as a “pivotal year” for EU-Africa relations.²²

At the beginning of the global pandemic, Africa was not in the international focus as case numbers were comparatively low. However, they are rising and due to limited testing facilities, the real figure is likely to be higher. Overall, Africa might not be as badly prepared as one might think. African countries have **experience in dealing with infectious diseases** and reacted relatively quickly to the coronavirus. As a result of the 2014 Ebola epidemic, several African countries have put in place specific procedures for fighting such epidemics and pan-African structures like the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) have been established. Through the Africa CDC, the AU has taken the first steps to addressing the pandemic. It has adopted a Joint Continental Strategy and established a specific Africa Task Force for the Coronavirus (AFCOR).²³

Even so, the outbreak of the coronavirus will likely have severe longer-term ramifications for Africa.²⁴ Dense population and the inability of many to self-quarantine for economic reasons may lead to a rapid spread of the virus in some areas. The poorest countries with weak public health systems and populations, already disproportionately affected by infectious diseases, could face a **real humanitarian disaster**.

While the magnitude of the health crisis in Africa is still uncertain, the economic fallout is already being felt. Demand for African raw materials and commodities has fallen, particularly due to lower demand from China and Europe. Moreover, the pandemic has temporarily stalled talks on the completion of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which was designed to boost internal trade and alleviate some of the continent’s dependencies on Europe and China, notably in the field of pharmaceuticals.²⁵ In addition, it is estimated that Africa could need up to \$10.6 billion in unanticipated increases in health spending to stop the spread of the virus.²⁶ African

“While the magnitude of the health crisis in Africa is still uncertain, the economic fallout is already being felt.”

²¹ European Commission and High Representative, Joint Communication, *Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa*, Brussels, 9 March 2020.

²² *Foreign Affairs Council*, Brussels, 9 December 2019.

²³ African Union, *Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 outbreak*, Addis Ababa, 20 March 2020.

²⁴ Sidiropoulos, Elizabeth, *Africa after COVID-19 and the retreat of globalism*, South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), April 2020.

²⁵ Nyaira, Sandra, *Ways Africa’s Free Trade Area could help mitigate effects of COVID-19*, Africa Renewal, 25 March 2020.

²⁶ UN Economic Commission for Africa, *ECA estimates billions worth losses in Africa due to COVID-19 impact*, Addis Ababa, 13 March 2020.

governments have therefore called on the international community for the suspension of debt interest payments and an emergency economic stimulus.²⁷

As a response, the UN launched a \$2 billion global humanitarian response plan for the world's most vulnerable countries²⁸ and the G20 leaders have approved an economic aid package and debt relief.²⁹ On 13 April, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) adopted a Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT), which provides a \$500 million in grant-based debt service relief, mostly to countries in Africa.³⁰ Following the appeal by France and Germany to the international community for a special effort to boost Africa's coronavirus response³¹, the IMF announced on 17 April that it would scale-up financing and mobilise \$18 billion for Africa in 2020 to fight against the pandemic and its economic fallout.³²

The EU has tried to position itself as leader in terms of global solidarity when the Commission announced a €15.6 billion aid package to help developing countries and partners around the world cope with the humanitarian, health, social and economic consequences.³³ The package combines redirected resources from the EU, the member states and financial institutions, particularly the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Africa is to receive roughly one third of the funds and guarantees and is thus clearly a focus of the package. Announcing it, the EU stressed that “now is the time for international solidarity and leadership, not isolation” and that the “geopolitical Commission stands ready to spearhead this work”.³⁴

The magnitude of EU support for Africa contrasts with the approach of the Trump administration which, at the time of writing, had agreed a \$274 million package for emergency health and humanitarian assistance for developing countries.³⁵ This clearly shows that, unlike in the Ebola crisis when the US had led an international coalition to counter the spread of the disease, the Trump administration has refrained from taking a leading role in the coronavirus response.³⁶

Meanwhile, China is trying to position itself as a defender of the developing countries and champion of South-South cooperation. It is actively supporting African countries in the fight against the pandemic. Alongside donating supplies such as masks, testing kits and protective suits to Africa, it has a track record in training

“China is trying to position itself as a defender of the developing world.”

²⁷ UN Economic Commission for Africa, *African Finance Ministers call for coordinated COVID-19 response to mitigate adverse impact on economies and society*, Addis Ababa, 23 March 2020.

²⁸ *UN launches US \$2billion global humanitarian response to fight COVID-19*, Africa Renewal, 25 March 2020, online.

²⁹ Marks, Simon, *G20 prepares coronavirus rescue package for Africa*, Politico, 4 February 2020.

³⁰ *IMF Executive Board Approves Immediate Debt Relief for 25 Countries*, IMF, Washington D.C., 13 April 2020.

³¹ *Only victory in Africa can end the pandemic everywhere*, Op-ed, Financial Times, 14 April 2020.

³² Kristalina Georgieva, *Opening Remarks at High-Level Virtual Event on ‘Mobilizing with Africa’*, IMF, Washington D.C., 17 April 2020.

³³ European Commission and High Representative, *Joint Communication, Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19*, Brussel 8 April 2020.

³⁴ European Commission and High Representative, *Joint Communication, Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19*, Brussel 8 April 2020.

³⁵ *Coronavirus- Africa: The US is leading the Humanitarian and Health Assistance Reponse to COVID-19*, Africanews, 3 April 2020.

³⁶ Campbell, Kurt M. and Doshi, Rush, *The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order, China is Maneuvering for International Leadership as the United States Falts*, Foreign Affairs, 18 March 2020.

medical professionals in Africa.³⁷ China has not only proposed transforming its grand strategy of a “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) into a “Health Silk Road”³⁸ in order to provide technical support and share experience with Africa³⁹ in fighting against the pandemic, but it also supports the New Development Bank to help emerging and developing countries, like South Africa,⁴⁰ deal with the economic consequences of the pandemic.

4 Policy recommendations

The above examples show that the geopolitical implications of the pandemic are wide-ranging. While the EU is painfully discovering internal and external obstacles to its sovereignty, it is falling prey to a global battle of narratives led by the US and China. China’s attempts to portray itself as a champion of global solidarity have not only benefitted from the EU’s divisions, but also from the US’s complete lack of global leadership. Meanwhile, the pandemic will likely hit the world’s poorest nations – many in the EU’s direct neighbourhood – hardest. This will only aggravate existing conflicts and tensions.

The pandemic represents an opportunity for global and responsible EU leadership. More than before, the EU will have to defend the rules-based multilateral order, champion free trade and promote global solidarity. As the world’s largest trading bloc and collective donor, the EU is not only well-placed, but almost doomed to play this leading role. Even though the EU’s primary focus now rightly lies on internal solidarity and immediate economic responses,⁴¹ Europeans should adapt their geopolitical agenda and prepare for the pandemic’s aftermath. The following four paths should be explored.

“The pandemic represents an opportunity for global and responsible EU leadership.”

4.1 Defend and promote the European model in the global battle of narratives

The pandemic illustrates the power and danger of disinformation campaigns. The EU has been particularly vulnerable in this battle of narratives thanks to the lack of mutual solidarity at the outset of the crisis. So, first and foremost, more must be done to restore that mutual solidarity in the political and economic domains.⁴²

³⁷ Grande, Allison with S. Fischer and J. Sayre, *Chinese Medical Teams: Knowledge Transfer in Ethiopia and Malawi*, SAIS China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), Washington D.C., March 2020.

³⁸ Xu, Yixiang, *Reviving China’s Health Silk Road Initiative? Battle of Narrative and Challenges for Transatlantic Leadership*, AICGS, Washington D.C., 30 March 2020.

³⁹ China National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), *China and African Countries Jointly Fight Against COVID-19*, Beijing, 23 March 2020.

⁴⁰ *The BRICS bank is ready to lend SA \$1bn to fight the COVID-19*, Daily Maverick, Johannesburg, 5 April 2020.

⁴¹ For recommendations on fiscal response measures, see Grund, Sebastian; Guttenberg, Lucas; Odendahl, Christian, *Sharing the fiscal burden of the crisis: A pandemic solidarity instrument for the EU*, Policy Paper, Jacques Delors Centre, 7 April 2020.

⁴² Maillard, Sébastien; Chopin, Thierry; Koenig, Nicole, *L’UE face au coronavirus : l’indispensable incarnation politique de la solidarité européenne*, Policy Brief, Institut Jacques Delors, April 2020;

Grund, Sebastian; Guttenberg, Lucas; Odendahl, Christian, *Sharing the fiscal burden of the crisis: A pandemic solidarity instrument for the EU*, Policy Paper, Jacques Delors Centre, 7 April 2020.

To defend itself in the global battle of narratives, the EU needs a **well-coordinated communications strategy**. Countering false information with facts, as Commission President von der Leyen and High Representative Borrell have done or via fact-checking sites such as euvsdisinfo.eu, is an important starting point. Yet, there should also be more offensive, fact-based communication about the solidarity measures the EU is taking internally and externally. For these messages to reach EU and global publics, this communications strategy must be coordinated among EU Institutions and with the member states. The EU and the member states should make use of their broad network of diplomatic representations to enhance the visibility of the European contribution to global solidarity. In addition, the EU should bolster its added value in countering disinformation. This could entail strengthening the role for the EEAS East StratCom Task Force and broadening its geographic focus allowing for greater attention to Chinese disinformation campaigns.⁴³

Promoting the European model amidst systemic rivalry also entails **keeping a close eye on the emergency measures** undertaken by member states and partners. In their Joint Roadmap of 8 April, the Commission and Council Presidents called for a coordinated exit strategy from these measures. They underlined that the states of emergency, proclaimed in half of the member states, should gradually be replaced by more targeted ones to ensure democratic accountability.⁴⁴ Monitoring these measures, the EU should put its entire rule of law toolbox to work. However, the ineffectiveness of this toolbox in the Hungarian case shows that more and more explicit peer pressure is needed by the member states and Europe's political families. More than half of the member states did not sign a declaration warning Budapest to stick to the rule of law⁴⁵ while the European People's Party, once more, failed to expel Orbán's Fidesz party. Sticking to EU values internally is a precondition to credibly promoting them externally at a time when players like China promote an entirely different model.

4.2 Double down on European strategic sovereignty

The pandemic illustrates the **limitations of European strategic sovereignty in the health and economic spheres**. The resulting disruption of supply chains underlined the EU's dependence on China when it comes to medical and technological products. The attempted takeover of CureVac highlighted its vulnerability to foreign investors. More broadly, an undervaluation of Europe's stock markets could tempt external actors, notably China, to solidify their grip on Europe's strategic infrastructure. The EU has already taken other some important measures in response to the crisis. Examples include the launch of the joint procurement mechanism for medical goods, the establishment of the first ever common European reserve of medical equipment and the provision of an €80 million grant to CureVac by the EIB.

However, **more decisive measures are needed to strengthen the EU's health and economic sovereignty** in a post-crisis context. These should include the consideration of further delegation of competences in the field of health to the EU level. The EU should also bolster the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Con-

⁴³ See Kask, Maarja, *False information about coronavirus and beyond: Lessons for the EU?* Policy Brief, Jacques Delors Centre, 9 April 2020.

⁴⁴ Von der Leyen, Ursula and Michel, Charles, *Joint European Roadmap towards lifting COVID-19 containment measures*, 15 April 2020.

⁴⁵ See [here](#).

trol. The agency currently only has around 300 staff, a small fraction of the 9.000 staff employed by its US counterpart.⁴⁶ To safeguard its economic sovereignty, the EU should accelerate the establishment of the Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism that should be applicable as of October 2020. On 25 March 2020, the Commission responded to the coronavirus pandemic by issuing guidance to the member states and suggested to include healthcare-related industries in national frameworks.⁴⁷ However, there is still too much divergence among the member states. While some like Italy, Spain and Germany tightened their frameworks in light of the crisis, half of them still haven't established one. As suggested by Elvire Fabry, the Commission should issue more detailed guidance combining short-term measures regarding the inclusion of healthcare-related sectors and longer-term ones aiming at greater harmonisation and effectiveness of national systems.⁴⁸

Despite a foreseeable focus on the geo-economic dimension of European sovereignty, the EU should pursue efforts to enhance its strategic sovereignty in security and defence matters. The global challenges and dynamics that led the EU to prioritise this domain in the past few years have far from disappeared. The EU can expect a rise in requests for civil-military assistance in its broader neighbourhood. The pandemic could deepen the divergence of threat perceptions between member states focusing on classical deterrence and the East and those more interested in the South and crisis management. In addition, we could face substantial and uncoordinated defence budget cuts. In theory, these should incite greater European cooperation, but the negotiations on the next multi-annual financial framework rather suggest that EU-level funding for defence cooperation will be dramatically cut.⁴⁹ Europeans should keep defence cooperation high on the agenda, not least to contribute their fair share to NATO's European pillar and pre-empt a new escalation of the transatlantic burden-sharing debate. It should use the proposed "Strategic Compass" process to bridge member state differences on the EU's level of ambition in a context of financial constraints.

"The EU should pursue efforts to enhance its strategic sovereignty in security and defence matters."

4.3 Fill the leadership gap on multilateralism

Back in 2003, the European Security Strategy called for Europe to contribute to an international order based on "effective multilateralism". In the global coronavirus pandemic, the world is, for the first time in modern history, confronted with a **threat on a scale that only multilateral solutions can effectively solve**. Yet, over the past years the global multilateral system has come under increasing pressure, mostly because of a lack of US global leadership. Thus, the EU needs to fill this gap. As highlighted by the EU's High Representative Borrell, the EU is ready to step in.⁵⁰ To do so, the EU put forward a "Team Europe" approach. This approach provides a single framework of action for the EU's external response to the coronavirus crisis,

⁴⁶ Marchais, Isabell, *Health: a highly perfectible European added value for the EU*, Jacques Delors Institute, Paris, March 2020.

⁴⁷ European Commission, *Guidance to the Member States concerning foreign direct investment and free movement of capital from third countries, and the protection of Europe's strategic assets, ahead of the application of Regulation (EU) 2019/452 (FDI Screening Regulation)*, Brussels, 25 March 2020.

⁴⁸ See forthcoming policy paper by Elvire Fabry on foreign direct investment screening, Jacques Delors Institute, Paris.

⁴⁹ Brzozowski, Alexandra, *Europe's military mobility: latest casualty of EU budget battle*, EurActiv, 25 February 2020.

⁵⁰ Borrell, Josep, *Four Priorities for a Global Pandemic Strategy*, Project Syndicate, 30 March 2020.

by combining the contributions and resources from all EU institutions and EU member states. As part of the “Team Europe for global coordination and multilateralism”, the EU wants to position itself “as a global actor and major contributor to the international aid system to promote a coordinated global response, notably in the framework of the G7, the G20 and at the United Nations”.⁵¹

Given China’s efforts to fill the void left by the US, the EU needs to show global leadership by **promoting a rules-based multilateral order and strengthening international institutions**. For this purpose, the EU needs to closely coordinate with its member states, like Germany and France, that have launched initiatives such as the Alliance for Multilateralism.⁵² Moreover, it needs to reach out to its international partners. Given the anti-multilateralism stance of the current Trump administration, the EU should engage with China in the spirit of “principled pragmatism” that the 2016 EU Global Strategy foresees. This would also imply remaining critical of the “One-China policy” and **exploring Taiwan’s possible membership of the WHO**, Taiwan having successfully stemmed the spread of the coronavirus without resorting to the same kind of draconian measures as mainland China. At the same time, the EU and China should join forces to fill the funding gap left by the recent withdrawal of the US from the WHO.

The EU should not only support multilateral health measures through the WHO, but also **initiate economic solutions through the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the G20, the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)**. In its attempt to foster multilateral solutions, the EU should reach out to other important economic partners. As suggested by Kevin Rudd “a core group of constructive powers among the G20 should act to reform, fund, and politically defend the central institutions of global governance for the post-Covid era”⁵³. This group should be led by the EU and joined by others such as Japan, South Korea, Canada, as well as the UK and Singapore.

A first step in this direction has been the **EU’s recent initiative** to organise support to create a **temporary trade dispute settlement mechanism to bypass the WTO crises** caused by the US⁵⁴. This sends a strong signal of support for a multilateral trading system and could strengthen the WTO’s response to the pandemic as a trade facilitator for essential goods such as medical supplies, food, and energy⁵⁵. Given that several member states have joined the China-led AIIB, the EU should closely follow its new crisis recovery facility⁵⁶ for the coronavirus pandemic and make sure that it is compatible with multilateral measures decided within the G20 and other fora. Moreover, the EU should foster coordination between the AIIB and the European Investment Bank (EIB) to support a rapid economic recovery post-crisis.

⁵¹ European Commission and High Representative, Joint Communication, *Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19*, Brussel 8 April 2020.

⁵² Permanent Mission of France to the UN, *Who, if not us? An alliance for multilateralism*, New York, 14 February 2020.

⁵³ Rudd, Kevin, *Kevin Rudd on America, China and saving the WHO*, The Economist, 15 April 2020.

⁵⁴ *EU, China and 15 other agree temporary fix to WTO crisis*, Reuters, 24 January 2020.

⁵⁵ World Trade Organisation (WTO), *WTO, WCO chiefs pledge joint efforts to facilitate trade in essential goods*, Geneva, 6 April 2020, online.

⁵⁶ *China-backed AIIB proposes \$5bn financing line to deal with coronavirus crisis*, Reuters, 3 April 2020, online.

4.4 Engage in trilateral cooperation with China and Africa

The coronavirus pandemic serves as a reminder of China's expanding footprint in Africa. Since 2008, the EU has made efforts to respond to China's South-South diplomacy in Africa by engaging in so-called trilateral cooperation.⁵⁷ Despite the growing rivalry between the EU and China, the EU reiterated its call for such trilateral cooperation last year.⁵⁸ So far, African partners have been rather sceptical of these efforts, criticising the lack of African ownership.⁵⁹ Both the EU and China have, however, recognised that collaboration efforts must be demand-driven. As outlined by Stefano Manservigi, former Director-General for International Cooperation and Development at the European Commission, the unexpected scale and unique nature of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as insufficient multilateral efforts, call for "innovative forms of international development collaboration".⁶⁰ The African Union, as well as single African heads of state and government, might therefore reconsider their standpoint and welcome joint support by the EU and China to help Africa tackle the coronavirus. The EU's High Representative Borrell and State Councillor Wang Yi have already expressed their willingness to cooperate in helping Africa.⁶¹

The upcoming EU-AU summit could be an opportunity for the EU to respond to China's diplomacy of South-South cooperation and to demonstrate to its African partners that it is serious about establishing a new long-term partnership. To do so, the EU needs to show that it can live up to the expectations raised by its recent Africa strategy and start discussing how to build a strong EU-Africa partnership that can help the continent deal with the long-term challenges stemming from the pandemic. In addition to focusing on the "Partnership for Sustainable Growth and Jobs" and helping increase Africa's access to health care, the EU and the AU should explore how to integrate China into their efforts. Endeavours of trilateral cooperation, if well prepared, would come at the right time, as the EU will also hold its summit with China in autumn.

"The EU needs to show that it can live up to the expectations raised by its recent Africa strategy."

⁵⁷ Council Conclusions on trilateral dialogue and cooperation between the EU, China and Africa, Brussels, 10 November 2008.

⁵⁸ European Commission and EU High Representative, *EU-China- A Strategic Outlook*, Brussels, 12 March 2019.

⁵⁹ Stahl, Anna, *EU-China-Africa Trilateral Relations in a Multipolar World, Hic Sunt Dracones*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

⁶⁰ Manservigi, Stefano, *COVID-19: A Stress Test for International Development*, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome, April 2020.

⁶¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *China: High Representative/Vice-President speaks to State Councillor/Foreign Minister Wang Yi*, Brussels, 3 April 2020.

Conclusion

The pandemic has accelerated some of the global trends that pushed the European Commission to present itself as 'geopolitical'. At the same time, it has illustrated the key challenge the EU faces in this endeavour: the close **link between internal unity and cohesion and the ability to project power globally**. For instance, the EU needs to put in place internal solidarity if it is to influence the global battle of narratives. Moreover, the EU can only credibly undertake systemic rivalry with countries like China and Russia if it is able to defend its own values within its own boundaries. The pandemic has, moreover, underlined that the EU needs to work on its strategic sovereignty and that its global leadership is now needed more than ever.

While many observing the pandemic's global implications are pessimistic as of now, there are at least two reasons for EU analysts to be optimistic. First, EU integration has often progressed as a result of crises. Second, EU external action tends to become more cohesive and effective beyond the early phases of crisis response. Either way, examination of the triangle between the US, China, and Africa underlines that the EU's structural, regulatory, and normative power will be needed in the global aftermath of this crisis.

On the same topic

- Sébastien Maillard, Thierry Chopin and Nicole Koenig
L'UE face au coronavirus : l'indispensable incarnation politique de la solidarité européenne
Policy Brief, Jacques Delors Institute, April 2020.
- Maarja Kask
False information about coronavirus and beyond: Lessons for the EU?
Jacques Delors Centre, Policy Brief, April 2020.
- Nicole Koenig
The geopolitical Commission and its pitfalls
Jacques Delors Centre, Policy Brief, December 2019.
- Nicole Koenig
New beginnings: Bolstering EU Foreign and Security Policy in times of contestation
Jacques Delors Centre, Policy Brief, September 2019.

Hertie School gGmbH • Chairman of the Supervisory Board: Bernd Knobloch •
Chairman of the Board of Trustees: Frank Mattern • Academic Director:
Prof. Dr. Henrik Enderlein • Managing Director: Dr. Axel Baisch • Registered Office:
Berlin • Trade Register: Local Court, Berlin-Charlottenburg HRB 97018 B •
Hertie School – founded and supported by the non-profit Hertie Foundation
Image © Kaitlin Duffey, Source: Unsplash