

An Existential Challenge

The EU must defend multilateralism

A whole generation of scholars and practitioners presented the role of the European Union as a normative power and a rule-maker in the world. For decades, the academic and policy communities pointed to the difference in nature between the EU and other international actors: The Union being a soft or a civilian power diffusing its norms through its enlargement and neighbourhood policies, through its weight as a market power, and by championing international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, in the multilateral system. Criticism essentially revolved around the EU's shortcomings in practice: Not always did the Union live up to its normative ambitions, notably when more narrowly defined interests appeared to trump values.

The 2010s were marked by a serious pushback against this narrative. Europe had reentered a geopolitical age, with an assertive Russia challenging the European security order, the implosion of North Africa and the Middle East, an increasingly assertive China and, for the first time in history, a US administration seemingly viewing the EU more as an adversary than as a partner and ally. On top, the Union's normative values were being challenged from the inside, with the UK's decision to leave the EU, serious setbacks regarding democracy and the rule of law in Poland and Hungary, and the rise



© Tania Cristofari

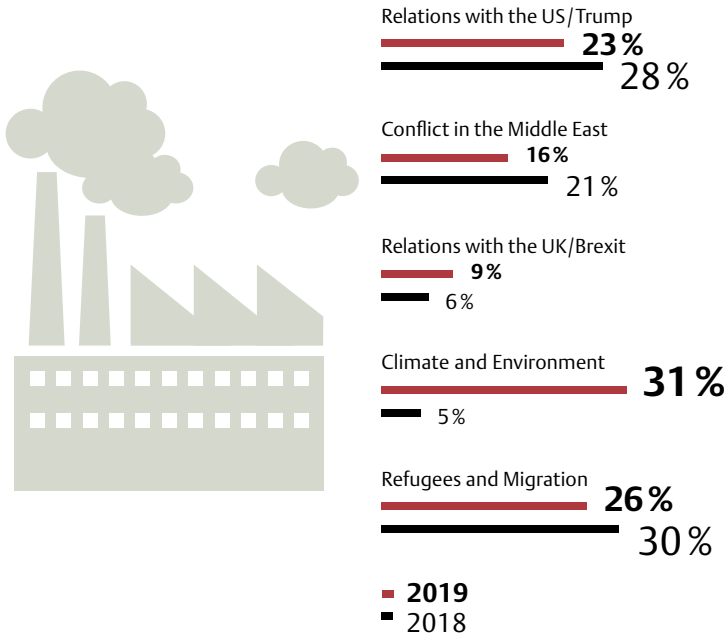
NATHALIE TOCCI

Director and President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI);
fmr. Special Advisor to High Representative Federica
Mogherini, Rome

of nationalist-populism across the Union, including in founding member states such as Italy, and to a lesser extent France and Germany. Given this rude awakening, the EU, so the narrative went, could either toughen up or it would be relegated to the dustbin of history.

Indeed, the above trends caused a slow but steady movement towards the Union toughening up. From the first building blocks of a security and defence union to the emphasis on resilience both internally and in the Union's surrounding regions, from the integrated approach to conflicts to a

What are the greatest challenges currently facing German foreign policy?



multiple answers possible

greater readiness to engage in various multilateral formats, the EU has certainly become more realistic in its foreign policy in recent years. But it has not, and cannot, become more realist.

A realpolitik European Union is a contradiction in terms. This is because whereas pragmatism has increasingly become the lens through which the EU views the world, principles continue to guide what the Union does within it. It is a difference between the “is” and the “ought” that cannot be eradicated from the DNA of the European project.

This is because of the EU’s own nature as a multilateral rules-based entity. The EU is not and will not become a nation-state, and as such remains the most radical experiment in a multilateral rules-based entity in the history of humankind. As such, it cannot exist in a broader global system in which multilateralism and rules are no longer defining features. Because of the unprecedented challenges to these principles, the Union increasingly feels a global responsibility to uphold, defend, and promote the multilateral rules-based system in a principled and pragmatic way. In a world in

which Europe’s partner of choice – the US – has temporarily turned its back on multilateralism, in which China and Russia may speak multilaterally but act unilaterally, and in which the most pressing global challenges of our age in the fields of climate, digitalization and demography are by definition transnational in nature, the EU’s global role in the multilateral rules-based system has become existential.

This requires action along different work strands:

- building a security and defence union which enables Europeans to act autonomously, when possible with partners, beginning with a post-Brexit UK, and alone when necessary;
- moving towards carbon neutrality while retaining a global leadership on a progressive climate policy;
- swimming against the tide of protectionism by continuing to promote free trade, while increasingly ensuring that such trade is fair as well;
- defending the non-proliferation regime, first and foremost the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, when one of its signatories – the US – has seriously violated it, and is generating growing incentives for Iran itself to abandon the deal;
- crystallizing its global leadership in digital policy, notably on issues such as data protection and privacy;
- upholding while continuing to spur reform of the United Nations as the core of multilateralism, while increasingly developing more agile multilateral formats – contact groups – to tackle specific crises and challenges as they arise.

Whether the EU will succeed in this endeavour is unknown. But without the EU’s active, creative and even stubborn commitment, multilateralism is all but certain to perish. Equally certain is the fact that the EU would itself struggle to survive in a transactional world in which unilateralism and bilateralism are the norm. Succeeding in the defence of a strong rules-based multilateral order is an existential quest for the Union, and one which we cannot afford to fail.

