

Taking the pulse Is EU too weak to be a global player?

OPINION *Beset by an increasingly hostile United States, internal divisions, and the threat of Russian aggression, the EU finds itself in a make-or-break moment. US President Donald Trump calls it a decaying group of nations headed by weak leaders. Is Europe able to prove him wrong?*



By Pol Morillas
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(CIDOB)

No, the EU is not weak. It simply refuses to act strong. By meeting US President Donald Trump at the Turnberry golf club, European leaders accepted an inappropriate setting for a trade agreement between two of the most interconnected economies in the world. They also chose not to counter Trump's trade deficit mantra — namely, the existence of a US surplus in services vis-à-vis

the EU. On defense, NATO allies, with the sole exception of Spain, accepted the five percent spending target, a move that shifted the discussion from the amount of resources spent to the capabilities needed to defend Europe. Despite a few rhetorical outbursts from the White House, little retaliation followed. On security, appeasement appeared to be the only conceivable strategy to avoid losing US support for Ukraine. Yet Washington remains uncommitted to providing future security guarantees to Kyiv. Even so, the EU hesitates to play its own cards, whether by mobilizing frozen Russian assets or by fulfilling its promise of enlargement to Ukraine, which is unlikely to happen by 2030. Trump has stated that EU leaders talk but do not deliver. Perhaps it is time for Europeans to stop fearing that they are weak and to listen to the man urging them to be strong.



By Natalie Sabanadzic
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The EU has a design problem. It was created as a trading bloc, not as a geopolitical superpower. Its success was underpinned by the United States, which provided not only a security umbrella but also strategic leadership. The features that define the union and make it attractive — cooperation, compromise, and consensus — are assets in times of peace. In the context of war, however, they become vulnerabilities,

inhibiting swift and effective responses to existing or emerging crises. When judged by traditional measures of power, such as the size of its market and population, levels of economic development, human capital, and military capabilities, the EU is not weak. It is weak, however, when it comes to deploying that power and projecting influence, not only worldwide but also in its neighborhood. As a union of 27 sovereign states, its ability to act cohesively is constrained by diverging interests and threat perceptions. The greatest challenge is not the Russian threat but the withdrawal of military and strategic US support. In an era of great power competition and multipolar fragmentation, European leaders must articulate a vision that addresses the union's structural flaws. This will demand a reconceptualization of the EU as a political and military union.



By Sinan Ülgen
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My answer is a definite yes. The reasons for this weakness are well known, starting with the requirement for unanimity on a range of critical decisions. The EU has not been able to avoid being taken hostage by member states that oppose the possibility of consensus on enlargement. With each successive wave of accession bringing in countries with divergent

domestic or foreign policies, this unanimity trap has widened to the point that today, the EU's ability to project power is severely hindered. This outcome is disastrous, not only for the prospect of the EU becoming a more influential foreign policy actor, but also for the maintenance of a multilateral, rules-based order in which Europe could have been an influential third pole to counter a Trump-dominated United States and an authoritarian China. That opportunity has, for now, been squandered. The formula is clear: As demonstrated by the difficulties faced in efforts to convince dissenting states to allow the use of frozen Russian assets in support of Ukraine, the EU needs to permanently establish decision-making avenues to overcome the resistance of small minorities. Otherwise, it will continue to lose prestige and influence in a geopolitical world.



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (L) listens to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech in the European Parliament.
● FREDERICK FLORIN/AFP



By Riccardo Alcaro
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Structurally, the EU has vulnerabilities, but weakness is more the result of political and institutional constraints. The union's position is deteriorating fast. Technological lag and declining relative economic weight are compounded by acute shocks: Russia's war in Ukraine, risks of US disengagement, and China's unwillingness to meet European concerns

about the effects of its export-oriented model on competitiveness, industry, and jobs. Institutional inertia and weak political cohesion further constrain the EU's ability to pursue transformative change. Reliance on the United States persists and has, in fact, been consolidated in areas like defense, energy, and technology — even as the union seeks to hedge its bets against unreliable partners. There have been moments of real daring. The decision to indefinitely immobilize the Russian Central Bank's frozen assets marked a qualitative break in EU statecraft. But credibility now hinges on follow-through. Unless those frozen funds are ultimately used to support Ukraine, boldness will remain symbolic rather than strategic. The EU's challenge is not the absence of tools, but the failure to convert them into sustained power. Strategic autonomy will remain a slogan unless it is backed by a long-term political investment — an epochal project to turn capabilities into genuine capacity for independent action and halt Europe's strategic decline.



The illustration shows US President Donald Trump over a map of Europe.
● JOAN WONG/FOREIGN POLICY



By James C. O'Brien
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The Trump administration's criticism of the EU is both a statement of its belief and a negotiating bid to see whether Brussels will bow to American pressure in several policy areas. These include rules for service industries, artificial intelligence, digital services, trade, and energy transition — both in the maritime sector and concerning new technologies — as well as keeping Europe uncertain on China and

giving nationalist parties willing to disrupt European initiatives more freedom to act. These US interests lay out a full agenda for the union: It can either accept them and pay up, or it can build capabilities on these issues, by investing in itself with streamlined decision-making and the gradual integration of new members. If the European Council decides to use frozen Russian assets to guarantee Ukraine at least two years of funding, peace will be more likely and Kyiv more resilient. Delay on this will make the EU a target. Europe, including the UK, is already a global player on tough issues, as demonstrated by the continent's involvement in forging security arrangements in Trump's Gaza peace plan. Brussels can decide whether to improve the EU as it is, or to resort to smaller coalitions. That would make a multi-speed Europe a reality.



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No. The EU is an enormous market that represents one-sixth of the global economy and a population of 450 million people. Those two facts alone mean that it has the strength to be a global player. The questions that Brussels has been struggling to answer are whether it has the will to do so and whether it can organize itself internally to flex its muscles constructively

on the world stage. This is partly a question of institutional structure — particularly the need for coordination and consensus among member states. But while this is a hurdle, it shouldn't be an excuse. Fundamentally, Europe faces an urgent collective action problem that can only be solved by politics. Internally, its members have to make the case to each other that smaller and larger countries alike benefit from the EU's global perception as a force to be reckoned with rather than sidelined. Externally, the union, empowered by its member states, must selectively take on a task which it has historically been reticent to confront: leveraging its asymmetric dependencies. The Trump administration has alarmed Europeans, but they might usefully take a couple of pages from his book.



By Steven Blockmans
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The EU is a global actor, but its influence is increasingly concentrated in a limited number of areas where member states have transferred regulatory power to the supranational level. Any assessment of the EU's role in terms of foreign and security policy must begin by recognizing that as a union of 27 states built on rules and compromise, it is not a sovereign actor with centralized authority. This fundamentally shapes the union's

strengths and its vulnerabilities. External actors delay and fragment European action by exploiting imbalances between member states across trade, energy, and security. This increasingly confines the EU's influence to the regional level, where it enjoys the power of attraction and where its security interests are most acutely felt and widely shared among member states. Absent unity at 27, smaller groupings can step up to pioneer solutions, as seen in the negotiations over a peace plan for Ukraine. European countries that pack the most military punch can thus reclaim a seat at the high diplomatic table. While the EU lacks the capabilities to back up words with force, it has shown remarkable resolve in supporting member states as they adapt to deter aggressive adversaries. Cohesion, rather than coercion, remains the key to Europe's relevance.



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Undoubtedly, the EU today looks weak and powerless. President Trump's recent critiques of Europe sound like a dire reality check.

There is a good reason for this inner weakness. The union was not conceived as a geopolitical player. But if it is to survive in the new world order where power politics rules, becoming a genuine global power is not a matter of capacity but of necessity. Such a transformation requires a new drive from European nations to act swiftly by taking the lead on the international stage when the need arises. That implies upgraded governance supported by a clear leadership structure, with a more effective decision-making process adapted to international crises. Ad hoc coalitions may be a more effective option than calling time and again for the introduction of the highly contentious qualified majority voting process in foreign policy debates. Changes of this kind have slowly and pragmatically emerged throughout the current Ukrainian conflict. Yet Europe will only become a respected global player when it truly understands and accepts the new geopolitical reality, and drops its traditionally idealistic vision of world affairs. That mental shift may well be the main challenge for European diplomacy.

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