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Wide of the mark

The EU has a renewed interest in Latin American and demonstrated this during their recent summit. But it seems the latter have different priorities

After eight years of postponement, the leaders of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) had their bi-regional summit for the first time again this July in Brussels. Despite having already resumed the dialogue between CELAC and the EU in October 2022 with the meeting of foreign ministers from both regions, having a renewed meeting at the highest political level raised expectations about the results and progress. Whilst the meeting allowed for an exchange of ideas and perspectives between the two regions, it also showed that there was a lack of concrete agreements and projects. The different concerns of both regions became very clear.

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The EU's renewed interest in Latin America and the Caribbean can be explained by a number of systemic factors that limit the old continent's room for manoeuvre in international affairs. These include Europe's decline as a world power, manifested among other things in a decline in its economic and military might; China's advance in the region as well as the dispute between the Asian giant and the United States; the war in Ukraine; and the processes of energy transition and digital transformation. But in Latin America, issues such as the war in Ukraine or China's advance do not trigger the same concern as in Europe.

The region's leaders are focused on domestic issues such as institutional stability, economic inequality and rising insecurity. Latin America, while not keeping an eye on global power plays itself, is watching very closely how these processes affect commodity prices or which markets might open up for Latin American countries. But the greatest convergence between the two regions may lie in the negative impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, a topic that was central to the

summit's final declaration.

Europe wants to lead the global energy transition

Apart from the real commitment of European societies to neutralise global warming, one of the EU's strategies to counteract its loss of reputation as a global player is to take a leading role in the energy transition and the digital transformation. In practice, this means being in a position to determine where, how and with which technology measures against climate change should be implemented. In this strategy, Latin America and the Caribbean appear as a relevant region in two respects. On the one hand, as a supplier of resources such as lithium and green hydrogen, which make it easier for Europe to take a leading role in shaping a production structure based on renewable energies. On the other hand, as a 'recipient region' of the energy paradigm promoted by the Global North. The current President of the Council of the European Union and head of the Spanish government, Pedro Sánchez, expressed this quite aptly when he told his Brazilian counterpart that 'we [the EU] can contribute know-how in the field of ecological development'.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the idea of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' is most prominent with regard to climate change, and in some cases the concept is also postulated that the countries of the region are 'environmental creditors', meaning that it is imperative that developed (and more polluting) countries offer financing mechanisms to implement effective measures against global warming.

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As part of Europe's renewed interest in Latin America, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced €45 bn in investments under the Global Gateway, an EU investment platform focused on projects such as promoting renewable energy and digital services. In fact, more than 70 per cent of Global Gateway projects for Latin America focus on issues such as the development of minerals like lithium and copper, the promotion of clean hydrogen and the launch of green bonds.

However, the Global Gateway is not just a tool to help the EU play a leading role in the global energy transition and digital transformation. It is also a policy aimed at neutralising China's advance in Latin America as

an economic and trading partner, as China has moved in where Europe and the United States have left gaps. More than 20 Latin American and Caribbean countries have already formally joined China's Silk Road Initiative. Trade between China and Latin America also reached €437 bn in 2022 (11 per cent more than the previous year) and Beijing is now the most important trading partner of Brazil, Chile and Peru.

An ideological battlefield

The war in Ukraine was another big part of the summit's agenda, reflecting once more the different priorities of Europe and Latin America. The war is a key issue for the security and economy of European countries and has become an issue that tests the idea of Europe as a moral and normative power (as a defender of multilateralism, international law, democracy and human rights). Indeed, one of the points made by the EU in its rapprochement with Latin America is that both regions share an identity and a community of values. This aspect was also made clear in the summit declaration. Ursula von der Leyen said: 'The EU-Latin America/Caribbean strategic partnership is more important today than ever. We are important allies in strengthening the rules-based international order and in jointly defending democracy, human rights and international peace and security.'

For Europe and especially for the United States, the Russian invasion has become an opportunity to reinforce the values of the global liberal order and thus to draw a more confident line between a democratic and dialogue-oriented West and authoritarian and belligerent powers such as China and Russia. However, this construction of antagonistic poles based on incompatible ideas and values faces obstacles on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, the advance of far-right movements and parties is undermining Europe's liberal identity from within.

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In Latin America and the Caribbean, some countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are exploiting criticism of democracy and human rights to denounce Europe's colonialist and meddling attitude. In addition, relations with China transcend any ideological barriers that the North might try to erect. Both democratic, liberal and market-oriented governments and countries with authoritarian regimes see the Asian giant as a fundamental partner for their economies and do not view issues such as the 'debt trap' with concern: a topic that the United States tries to use as a

cliché to slow down Chinese investment projects in the countries of the South.

Since Lula's return to office as president of Brazil, the country's foreign policy has been characterised by an attempt to restore Brazil's international image after the retreat caused by Jair Bolsonaro's foreign policy. Hence, Brazil rejoined CELAC and resumed its commitments on environmental issues, which in turn helped restore relations with European countries. In his effort to revive Brazil's position on the world stage, Lula proposes to play a mediating role in the war in Ukraine.

In the end, the summit's final declaration merely reflects the lack of substantive agreement on this issue: there was no condemnation of Russia's actions (as intended by the EU), but rather a shared concern about the war.

Such a role, however, implies a more neutral stance towards the Russian invasion, which is at odds with the categorical condemnation proposed by the European Union. In the end, the summit's final declaration merely reflects the lack of substantive agreement on this issue: there was no condemnation of Russia's actions (as intended by the EU), but rather a shared concern about the war. A position that was not really unanimous either, as Nicaragua opposed this part of the statement.

In short, the resumption of meetings between Latin American and European leaders is a promising development in terms of strengthening dialogue and addressing issues that affect both regions, such as the fight against climate change or the pressure created by the intensification of the global dispute between China and the United States. However, the meeting also made clear that there are priorities that are not shared and that the lack of substantive agreements based on a more horizontal relationship remains a problem for the bi-regional agenda.



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