The EU's international roles

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The Lisbon Treaty sets out clearly what should guide the European Union internationally.

"The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law."

Here are a few examples of the roles the EU plays beyond its borders:

Contributor to peace

Internationally, the EU has led and supported peace talks around the world to facilitate solutions in conflicts worldwide such as for example:

In July 2015, following years of EU-led diplomacy, a historic international agreement was reached on Iran's nuclear programme. The EU, together with China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, brokered the agreement. Iran pledged that under no circumstances would it ever seek, develop or acquire nuclear weapons. The EU now chairs the Committee overseeing the implementation of this agreement.

Colombia, the EU is supporting peace talks between the Government and the FARC movement to end decades of civil war through the appointment of a special peace envoy -former Irish Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore.

In Mali, the EU has been helping the country emerge from a profound political crisis through co-mediated the the Malian Peace agreement which was signed in June 2015. The EU is also helping to train the Malian armed forces to fight terrorism and through substantial development aid. This is an
example of the EU's comprehensive approach which uses all its tools - diplomatic, security, financial and with development cooperation.

Through its political, practical and economic support, the EU has played a crucial role in building peace in the Western Balkans since the Yugoslav wars. One example is the dialogue facilitated by the European Union between Serbia and Kosovo, which led to a landmark deal in April 2013 and which is currently being implemented with the support of the EU.

A responsible neighbour

To the east and south of the European Union lie many countries which have undergone – or are still undergoing – dramatic political change. To accompany their transition to fully-fledged democracy, the European Neighbourhood Policy aims to maintain solid and friendly relations with countries at the European Union's borders. Promoting democracy, good governance and human rights while opening trade and cooperating in many policy areas, including on migration and visa issues are some of the Policy's aims.

Development partner

The EU is the largest single donor of development aid. Together, the EU and its member states provide more than half of official development assistance (ODA) globally. This contribution makes a huge difference to millions of people's livelihoods around the world. Against this background, the EU has been a major supporter of the new UN Sustainable Development Goals agreed in 2015 and is committed to their implementation.

Human rights policy

The EU has made human rights a central aspect of its foreign relations and expresses this focus in political dialogues with third countries, in its development policy and aid, and in its participation in multilateral forums, such as the United Nations. The EU also has human rights policy guidelines covering areas such as the death penalty, torture and freedom of expression offline and online. The EU's Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) enhances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in countries and regions where they are most at risk. The right to vote is a human right. Election observation is a vital EU activity which aims to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law worldwide.

Partner to the United Nations

The EU works closely with the United Nations on a host of issues. The EU's belief in multilateralism reflects an attachment to negotiated, binding rules in international relations. The EU's relation with
the United Nations is explicitly spelled out in the Treaty of Lisbon.

Contributing to global security

Under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU operates civilian and military missions worldwide. These missions carry out a variety of tasks, ranging from managing borders to training local police. The EU Naval Force Operation "Atalanta" off the coast of Somalia, for example, tackles piracy and protects humanitarian shipments of the World Food Programme. In the Mediterranean, the EU has launched Operation "Sophia" as part of the wider EU efforts to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean and prevent the further loss of life at sea.

Crisis Response & Humanitarian Aid

The EU and its member states are the world's largest donor of humanitarian aid. They provide life-saving aid to the victims of disasters, refugees and others in dire need. Humanitarian aid is provided according to vulnerability criteria and needs assessments. This work is coordinated by the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO).

The European Union responds in a coordinated way to international emergencies of all kinds such as for example the recent earthquake in Ecuador, or refugees fleeing the war in Syria, where the EU has been the largest donor of humanitarian aid to the victims of the conflict in Syria. For such emergencies, it can bring together the EU's emergency tools, namely humanitarian aid and civil protection. In 2015, the EU provided food, shelter, protection, healthcare and clean water to more than 120 million people affected by natural disasters or conflict in over 80 countries.

Advocate of action on climate change

The EU has been at the forefront of international efforts to combat climate change and was instrumental in securing the first-ever universal, legally binding global climate deal adopted at the Paris climate conference (COP21) in December 2015. The EU engages strategic partner countries in dialogue and cooperation to secure ambitious follow-up on Paris commitments. In addition, the EU and Member States together are the largest contributor of climate finance to developing countries.

Trading bloc

The European Union is the world's largest trading bloc. Trade is a common policy, which means that international trade agreements are negotiated and signed by the EU rather than by individual member states. This allows the EU to speak with a single voice with international partners as it works to promote a free and fairer international trading system.
An expanding union

Since 1957, when the EU's forerunner formed with six countries, the EU has expanded significantly, with the largest increases occurring after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The attractiveness of EU membership and the political and economic stability it brings have meant that many countries aspire to join – although they must first pass tough EU membership tests, including on democracy and the rule of law.

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