

A Partnership Under Pressure: Making EU–CELAC Cooperation Work in a New Global Order

Authored by: *Maurico Bôhl (IDOS) and María Santillán O'Shea (Elcano)*

Key message: *EU-LAC bi-regional cooperation needs to articulate tangible ways of addressing the current development problems – including the crisis of the traditional multilateral system and the energy transition – in a context of uncertainty. It should be based on common objectives that are actively and explicitly identified and communicated by each partner. The sustainability and impact of this partnership beyond political cycles of either side will depend on the benefits of these joint efforts truly reaching all concerned populations and responding to their needs and priorities. The energy transition agendas pursued in both regions offer an ideal opportunity for collaboration in a new multilateral global order.*

1. Introduction

A month has passed since the fourth EU-CELAC Summit in Santa Marta, Colombia. This has been the second of such Summits since their biennial periodicity was reinstated in 2023 – eight years after the previous one in 2015 –, under the Spanish Presidency of the EU Council. Unlike in 2023, however, this year's Santa Marta Summit appears to have generated less political traction, as the attendance of heads of state has been remarkably lower than two years ago – only 12 out of the 60 heads of State attended, with notable absences from both sides of the Atlantic, amid claims of clashing agendas and widespread trade tensions with the US.

The EU and CELAC represent two very different regions, with considerable physical distance between them, and with great diversity within them, including in terms of political priorities and ways of cooperating. Yet, the two regions also share great potential for effectively cooperating on a number of common agendas.

This Summit took place at a time of deep and structural transition in the multilateral cooperation system. Concerns over its effectiveness and legitimacy in its current form force countries and regions to decide how they want to update their relations with each other, as well as what kind of multilateral system they want to construct together. What still seems uncertain is how principles and values will coexist with interest-based pragmatism in a new cooperation model.

The challenge of promoting shared values and principles in times of greater uncertainty and completion also applies to the specific area of the energy transition. This is one key shared agenda that is vital for the credibility and impact of bi-regional development efforts, as well as for the economic and political goals of both regions in a changing global order.

2. The two regions in the midst of the crisis of multilateral cooperation – what kind of partnership?

In this [moment of change in multilateral cooperation](#), the right combination of values and interests in each shared agenda among international partners will be key to ensuring both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of development cooperation efforts.

The [conclusions of the recent EU-CELAC Summit](#) assertively restate the values shared across both regions as a key commonality between them. In fact, these values are concretised as those included in the UN Charter, such as human rights, democracy, rule of law or freedom. This comes at a time when the general trend seems to be moving away from normative common grounds among partners and towards more transactional bilateral, bi-regional and multilateral cooperation. While this is a relevant political signal, it also coexists with the absence of other previously present joint norms – in the 2023 EU-CELAC Summit – such as a stronger mention of ensuring women and girls' full participation or labour standards.

In any case, these multilateral values are restated in the 2025 summit conclusions, alongside an explicit need to reform the multilateral system – in 2023 it simply had to be “strengthened” -, which has become a central demand of a Global South that demands a more representative and fair distribution of decision-making power globally. In line with that, the joint declaration explicitly reiterates the relevance of updating the international financial architecture and the UN Security Council, and it acknowledges ongoing UN-based efforts to that effect, namely the UN80 initiative and the Pact for the Future.

This is not to say that pragmatism is not also clearly present in the outcome of the Summit. There are certain historically-relevant areas in the bi-regional development cooperation that received little space in the Summit's conclusions, given their limited political traction at the moment, such as social inclusion, education and research, in contrast to other politically popular agendas, like trade and investment. Other cooperation areas that spark political disagreement were also only tangentially touched upon, like migration. These less present agendas were rather addressed through ad-hoc initiatives among willing actors – the Bi-Regional Pact on Care is an example -, following the logic of minilateralism that is becoming more frequent in international relations (these smaller tracks or agendas parallel to the core shared outcome were also very present during the recent [Fourth Financing for Development Conference](#) (FfD4) in Sevilla).

The evolving nature of the bi-regional partnership is also visible in the mainstreaming of the EU's Global Gateway strategy, which permeates most of the themes addressed in the Summit – either explicitly or implicitly -, in the growing discussion on private sector participation (although the importance of ODA was also reiterated) and in the emphasis on the beyond GDP agenda or on addressing debt sustainability. Importantly, the latter is a key priority for LAC and a requirement for unleashing the potential of Global

Gateway, and was also extensively discussed at the recent FfD4 Conference, yet it has so far received little European support beyond the declaratory level.

The disclaimers included at the end of the Summit's declaration also shed additional interesting information on the nature of the bi-regional partnership in today's world. There are numerous specifications of certain countries dissociating from specific paragraphs, starting with the Argentinian dissociation from the gender and 2030 Agenda mentions. What is revealing of the process is that these concrete disagreements do not prevent all countries from signing the same document as long as the corresponding disclaimers are included. This shows a growing acceptance of the fact that political agendas can be fragmented and partners can choose to work on selected issues (in 2023, the country who did not abide to one paragraph withdrew from signing the declaration altogether), be it based on shared values or on common interests. This could be relevant political grounds for bi-regional cooperation in the reform of the multilateral system in the coming years as well.

3. The bi-regional partnership in terms of energy transition – progress, potential and challenges

The energy transition remains a crucial strategic pillar of the EU–CELAC partnership. While political attendance at the recent Summit was limited compared to 2023, the agenda showed continuity: both regions view clean energy as a vehicle not only for decarbonisation but for strengthening economic sovereignty, industrial capacity, and technological autonomy. For the European energy transition, the CELAC has become increasingly more critical, as the region hosts some of the world's highest-quality renewable resources, essential minerals, and fast-growing green industrial ecosystems — all of which Europe needs to meet its own net-zero objectives and reduce external dependencies, including China and the USA. On the other hand, Latin American and Caribbean economies are eager to take the next step in their development, further building their domestic high-tech sectors.

Nevertheless, [Europe's role in Latin America is weakening, while China has rapidly expanded its presence](#), not only through commerce but via long-term strategic investment channels. Between 2007 and 2023, China increased its trade with LAC by 9.6 percentage points compared to Europe, which lost 2 percentage points in the same period. Over 20 LAC countries have joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Beijing's state-led financing, infrastructure speed and vertically integrated energy firms give it an advantage the EU struggles to match. In May 2025, China announced a USD 9 billion investment credit line for the region, complementing record-high trade flows that surpassed USD 518 billion in 2024. The U.S., meanwhile, has shifted toward more defensive and unilateral economic measures, creating additional room for China to consolidate influence.

Against this geopolitical backdrop, the [Global Gateway Investment Agenda offers the EU a framework to remain a relevant and credible partner, but only if its ambition is operationalised](#). Several energy-related flagship initiatives announced or expanded around the Summit show what is possible:

- Hydrogen and green industrialisation projects in [Argentina](#) demonstrate Europe's willingness to co-invest in new value chains, from green ammonia production to H2 storage and shipping corridors.
- Electricity market integration in [Central America](#) and [Peru–Chile](#) illustrates support for regional energy connectivity, grid resilience and cross-border trade.
- Green shipping corridors and renewable energy parks in northeast [Brazil](#) signal interest in supply chains that benefit both regions. Europe secures clean molecules and inputs for green industries, while CELAC countries gain jobs, infrastructure and long-term industrial upgrading.
- Smaller-scale initiatives, such as green hydrogen storage in [Barbados](#) or support to [Panama's](#) energy transition agenda, show how Global Gateway can combine investment, regulatory advice and capacity building.

But these initiatives remain fragmented relative to the scale of the opportunity. Suppose the EU wants to offer CELAC a meaningful alternative to China's BRI and the increasingly transactional U.S. approach. In that case, [it must elevate Global Gateway investments from project-by-project to strategy-driven engagement](#). This requires three shifts:

First, with clarity of strategic intent, the EU must articulate how bi-regional energy cooperation contributes to its own industrial and climate goals, and how it supports CELAC countries' priorities, including national planning, social inclusion and local value creation. Second, greater mobilisation of private capital, through de-risking instruments, guarantees and blended finance, that accelerates technology adoption. Third, joint innovation ecosystems, including shared R&D facilities, EU–LAC hydrogen testbeds, battery value chain partnerships, and incubators for AI and green technologies, to ensure that LAC countries can develop technological capabilities rather than remain commodity suppliers.

The energy transition offers a key stepping stone, as bi-regional interests align strongly, and where Global Gateway can generate visible, shared benefits. Delivering at scale would anchor the EU–CELAC partnership in tangible cooperation, reduce strategic dependencies and show that Europe can be a reliable long-term partner in a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape. Meanwhile, LAC could benefit from a development boost that supports the transformation of its economies without creating new dependencies on another global player.

4. Conclusion

The EU–LAC partnership stands at a critical juncture. To remain credible and impactful in an uncertain global environment, the EU must move beyond declaratory commitments and produce tangible, mutually beneficial results. For the EU, the partnership becomes ever more important, as the trade environment becomes more hostile and LAC can choose its partners more variably. The effectiveness of this cooperation will depend on translating shared principles into concrete joint actions, in line with the adopted 2025-2027 EU-CELAC Roadmap, which requires clear monitoring and action plans to ensure positive effects for both regions. A focus on the energy transition would be beneficial, as it offers concrete outcomes to advance the EU-LAC partnership and sets clear priorities that enable a structured approach. Only by ensuring that the benefits of bi-regional cooperation reach citizens in both regions can this partnership sustain legitimacy and relevance beyond changing political cycles.