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**Article — Published Version**

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JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

John Wiley & Sons

*Suggested Citation:* Stender, Frederik; Vogel, Tim; Keijzer, Niels (2025) : Policy Coherence in the Time of Economic Insecurity: Balancing the Sustainable Trade and Development Playbook of the New European Commission, JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, ISSN 1468-5965, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 63, Iss. 6, pp. 1984-1993,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.70001>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/335534>

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# Policy Coherence in the Time of Economic Insecurity: Balancing the Sustainable Trade and Development Playbook of the New European Commission

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## Abstract

The EU's efforts to integrate sustainability into its trade policy have met with mixed reactions, particularly from developing countries. Previously, the EU has sought to promote relevant autonomous measures and the Trade and Sustainable Development chapters in its trade agreements by offering support for implementation and compliance. However, further alignment of trade and development co-operation, known as external policy coherence, faces growing challenges as the second von der Leyen Commission has made Europe's economic security a top priority. Although this new agenda has yet to translate into tangible (trade) policy actions beyond recently adopted initial measures, the shift in focus is driving increased investment in competitiveness and securing access to critical raw materials – efforts that, at times, appear fragmented rather than co-ordinated. Whilst the EU acknowledges that partnerships, including those with countries from the Global South, are essential to strengthen its position in the growing geopolitical competition with other major economies, the increasingly complex global and regional context, coupled with shifting internal priorities, challenges the Commission's ability to balance the EU's trade and development ambitions. This commentary explores new directions for a coherent EU trade and development policy in the dynamic geopolitical landscape of 2025 and beyond.

**Keywords:** development policy; economic security; European Union; policy coherence; trade policy

## Introduction

Global trade is navigating turbulent waters. With effective multilateral co-operation under the World Trade Organization (WTO) more of a distant dream than a lived reality, escalating geopolitical tensions and the renaissance of industrial policy are pushing many countries to realign their external policies, triggering a competitive rush to assert national interests. Whilst some would argue that this has long been the case, an increasingly pronounced 'dog-eat-dog' mentality is seen to prevail in today's global trade landscape. This dynamic has reached unprecedented levels under the second Trump Administration, which is actively dismantling the United States' long-standing commitment to the existing global (economic) governance framework. Such a course represents not only a direct confrontation but also a challenge to the European Union (EU) and its treaty-enshrined commitment to promoting multilateral solutions to common problems.

The EU's response to this reality is partially reflected in the expanded job title of the new EU Commissioner overseeing trade, now also responsible for 'economic security'. In the mission letter to Maroš Šefčovič, *security* features prominently as a crucial element in consolidating the EU's global economic position. Similarly, von der Leyen's (2024) Political Guidelines for her second term as Commission President stress that political

action in these turbulent times must prioritise European interests – a demand echoed in most mission letters to the other 26 commissioners.

In trade policy, several levers can be used to advance European interests whilst shaping international relations: Beyond addressing the backlog of pending trade agreements, the EU can encourage companies to diversify sources of raw materials and components, reducing reliance on specific suppliers. Incentives and subsidies for key sectors such as technology, renewable energy and medical supplies could also strengthen domestic production and reduce Europe's external dependence.

A crucial question arises regarding the compatibility of this new spirit with the EU's ambition to uphold a development-friendly trade policy. More specifically, does the security-driven paradigm risk undermining development efforts that support the EU's trade agenda? Whilst certain measures in the economic security-portfolio – from preferential trade arrangements favouring selected suppliers to trade defence measures or industrial policies that harm the competitiveness of non-EU companies – have clear direct impacts on international partners, including those in the Global South, the issue runs deeper.

A brief retrospect: In previous legislative periods, advancing a development-friendly EU trade policy had already become complex, due in part to persistent accusations that the EU leveraged its power to negotiate asymmetric trade agreements with developing countries (Plank et al., 2021; Weinhardt and Moerland, 2018). More fundamentally, the EU's promotion of trade liberalisation as a stand-alone means for economic growth and prosperity is facing growing scrutiny, due to its broader adverse socio-economic and environmental impacts. Increased trade is now also held responsible for rising global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and biodiversity loss (e.g., Lenzen et al., 2012; Sandström et al., 2018; Steinhäuser et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2021). It is also associated with growing inequality, both between high-income countries and developing countries and within the latter (e.g., Meschi and Vivarelli, 2009; Zhu and Trefler, 2005). Human rights issues such as child labour and unsafe working conditions remain significant and unresolved, further highlighting the complex challenges associated with global trade practices (see also Weinhardt and De Ville, 2024).

Recent EU legislative initiatives to make its trade policy more environmentally friendly and socially inclusive, however, have met with considerable criticism from developing countries, ranging from accusations of protectionism to mercantilism. In a similar vein, sustainability clauses, which the EU now routinely includes in its trade agreements, are not exactly popular amongst EU partners either.

The EU has previously promoted relevant autonomous measures and Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters in its trade agreements by offering support for their implementation and compliance. However, this commitment to aligning trade and development – a fundamental pillar that made EU trade policy broadly acceptable to most developing partners – now faces serious challenges.

As we argue below, financial constraints linked to a broad portfolio of economic security measures, along with the resurgence of national interest-driven policy-making, threaten this already fragile balance. With shifting political and strategic priorities, tensions are set to grow. Whilst the EU recognises its reliance on partners to strengthen its own economic security – an approach that could, in principle, also foster economic development in those countries by, for example, directing investment towards their economies as part of efforts to diversify EU supply chains – its increasingly assertive approach in

advancing this agenda does not fit seamlessly with the political realities of the Global South, where the EU's position is already precarious, not least due to the controversial embrace of sustainability in trade policy.

Drawing on the authors' own research, policy observations and practitioner discussions, this commentary explores new directions for EU trade and development policy in the evolving geopolitical landscape of 2025 and beyond.

We begin by reviewing key sustainability-focused trade initiatives of the previous EU leadership and how these were perceived in the Global South. We then analyse challenges facing the new Commission in enhancing external policy coherence amid its security agenda. On this basis, we offer four policy recommendations to make current EU trade policy more inclusive for partners in the Global South.

## I. Big Ideas, Minimal Cheers: Taking Stock of Recent Policy Measures

Whilst the rising wave of anti-globalisation sentiment – both globally and within the EU – has not gone unnoticed in Brussels, the EU's enduring market power and track record of securing new trade agreements have reinforced its confidence in overcoming or mitigating these challenges (Carbone and Keijzer, 2016; Christou and Damro, 2024). As part of its 'open, sustainable and assertive' trade policy approach outlined in the 2021 *Trade Policy Review*, the EU has addressed internal critical voices by deploying a range of autonomous policy instruments such as provisions on foreign subsidies, anti-coercion, public procurement rules and foreign direct investment (FDI) screening. This strategic toolkit aims to navigate the growing tensions in global trade and signalled the rise of *economic security* on the EU agenda.

In parallel, the EU has taken significant steps to promote sustainability in trade and project its standards and values globally. Key initiatives include the Regulations on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR), the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Whilst the EU claims these align with environmental and ethical commitments and comply with WTO rules, they have not received universal praise.

Part of these sustainability measures are important foreign policy tools for achieving EU climate neutrality by 2050 and could serve as a role model for sustainable production and consumption elsewhere. However, there are also fears that the EU's strict standards create unfair barriers for developing countries and could restrict their access to its market. In 2024, ambassadors from 17 developing countries denounced the EU's deforestation regulation as 'inherently discriminatory and punitive' in this context (Euronews, 2024a). Indeed, evidence suggests that the EU's sustainability measures may disproportionately impact developing countries (Weinhardt and De Ville, 2024).

Beyond concerns about effectiveness and enforcement, there is also unease in the Global South over the limited consultation involved in setting these standards. The CBAM, for example, is seen not only as a climate tool but as a measure to shield EU industries (Brandt, 2021). Similar concerns arise with deforestation rules, perceived by some as a de facto ban on agriculture exports to the EU and occasionally as a restriction on their industrial production base (Cesar de Oliveira et al., 2024; Euronews, 2024b; Muradian et al., 2025). These reactions reflect a growing 'outside-in politicisation' of

EU policies (Plank et al., 2021), underscoring that the design process of such policies is as crucial as their content.

The EU's approach to integrating sustainability into its trade policy is evident not only in its autonomous measures but also in its trade agreements. Recent deals increasingly feature dedicated chapters on TSD, aimed at reinforcing labour and environmental standards, thereby reflecting priorities of key EU stakeholders, including the European Parliament. Whilst the EU is committed to avoiding undue regulatory burden on partner countries, these TSD chapters can nonetheless complicate trade negotiations.

Whilst an agreement with Kenya was signed in 2023, talks with Indonesia and India remain difficult. The marathon negotiations for the EU-Mercosur agreement, spanning over 20 years of on-and-off-discussions, have only recently reached a political conclusion in 2024, following a previous deal in 2019. However, ratification remains uncertain due to unsolved reservations from France and Poland (Oxford Analytica, 2024). At the same time, China has increased its presence in the region, offering a less demanding alternative market (Stender, 2022). The EU must therefore put in sustained efforts to retain influence.

Brussels is aware of the need to boost acceptance of its trade and sustainability agenda. In May 2024, Director-General for Trade Sabine Weyand acknowledged the importance of support for partner countries and recognised that more must be done (Weyand, 2024). A similar call appears in von der Leyen's second-term political guidelines: 'We need a more systematic approach to assessing the impact of our laws on non-EU countries, and we need to provide more targeted support to help them adjust to and benefit from those laws' (von der Leyen, 2024, p. 28). A first relief for suppliers in developing countries comes through the so-called 'Omnibus' packages, which reduce or eliminate CSDDD compliance obligations for smaller EU companies, thereby easing indirect pressure on their potential suppliers abroad (European Commission, 2025a).

It should not go unmentioned that the EU also incorporates more direct support for development into its trade measures. EU trade agreements often include a variety of pro-development and flexibility-oriented provisions, such as special safeguards and longer transition periods. Prominent examples are the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. However, empirical evidence from both an *ex ante* (e.g., Perez and Karingi, 2007; Tröster et al., 2020) and an early *ex post* perspective (Stender et al., 2021) suggests that outcomes still disproportionately favour the EU. Combined with findings that economic and political transparency – which often requires considerable effort to ensure – influences the degree of flexibility in trade agreements (Baccini, 2010), this underscores the continued need for complementary aid and investment to ensure fairness and effectiveness in EU trade policy.

## II. Challenges Within and Beyond: Quo Vadis External Policy Coherence?

Strengthening external policy coherence by integrating trade, investment and development co-operation remains a challenge, however, on both internal and external fronts. Within the European Commission, the lack of co-ordination between DG Trade and DG INTPA has long been an issue, ironically perhaps because of the sheer number of support programs in partner countries. Additionally, development co-operation activities promoted by the EU and member states often pursue different objectives in supporting trade

policy (Hoekman and Shingal, 2024), which recent co-ordination efforts under the *Team Europe* label have not fully addressed (see Koch et al., 2024).

Global disruptions – from climate change to sudden crises like the COVID-19 pandemic – along with rising conflicts and geopolitical shifts have further strained key aspects of external policy coherence. Underlying this concern is the fact that pervasive global challenges have exposed the EU's economic vulnerability, prompting EU leadership to take urgent action set out in its *Economic Security Strategy*. This strategy aims to safeguard technological advancements, mitigate risks in critical sectors and strengthen supply chain resilience to foster the EU's growth and competitiveness and partnerships with like-minded countries (European Commission, 2023a).

The *Strategy* includes several points of reference for policy coherence, including *NextGeneration EU*, *EU Industrial Strategy* and the *Net-Zero Industry Act* (European Commission, 2024). It thereby shares similarities with the *EU Competitiveness Compass*, a roadmap based on Mario Draghi's recommendation to close the innovation gap with the United States and China by investing in sectors like artificial intelligence and biotech and advancing decarbonisation (European Commission, 2025b). Whilst financing is still under debate, all of these efforts clearly come at a cost.

Beyond reduced financial scope, weaker co-ordination could further hinder efficient external policy coherence. Although initially intended as a co-ordinated response, rising insecurity – illustrated by Russia's war against Ukraine – has led individual EU member states to act unilaterally. Germany, for example, is increasingly prioritising partnerships aligned with its national interests. This includes hydrogen partnerships with strategic partners like Namibia (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, 2024), as well as significant subsidies for battery cell and semiconductor factories to strengthen supply chains and enhance self-sufficiency in critical technologies (European Investment Bank, 2024). This trend may lead member states to 'invest' in bilateral ties over EU-wide co-operation in trade support measures for partner countries.

The EU has also already introduced several distinct defence measures aimed at protecting its economy. Amongst the most visible were trade actions targeting Chinese electronic vehicles imports, echoing similar US steps. Notably, some instruments under the 'open, sustainable, and assertive' trade policy approach could adversely affect developing countries. In particular, outbound FDI screening may limit technology transfer to these countries, thereby hindering deeper integration into EU-led value chains.

In today's tense global climate, however, protecting the EU goes beyond economics. Russia's aggression and doubts over long-term US security guarantees have led to increased EU support for Ukraine *and* rising own defence spending. At the same time, instability in the Middle East, including the war in Gaza, and the consequences of the recent withdrawal of USAID, along with phased but significant UK aid cuts, could prompt the EU to increase its financial commitments if it aspires to play a more active role in global politics. However, recent or planned aid reductions by major EU member states such as France and Germany suggest a reluctance to embrace this expanded international profile.

All of these budgetary considerations will shape negotiations for the EU's next Multi-annual Financial Framework, making it unlikely that funding for trade-related measures in partner countries will match the growing compliance demands imposed by EU regulations. This casts doubts on Commission President von der Leyen's claim that developing

countries will receive ample support to adapt to these regulations (von der Leyen, 2024, p. 28).

In sum, the EU faces two core trade-related challenges amid shifting global power dynamics: mounting resistance from developing countries to the content and process of EU regulations and growing difficulty competing in a polarised, high-stakes global economy. Whilst the EU seeks to ease tensions with developing partners through accompanying measures, its main response to the latter has been a strong focus on economic security.

### III. Navigating Forward

A central pillar of the EU's *Economic Security Strategy* is the promotion of economic sovereignty through deeper co-operation with international partners and greater control over strategic dependencies. As such, the EU recognises that it cannot be an island of economic security in a sea of economic insecurity – as acknowledged by von der Leyen in her speech at the 2025 EU Ambassadors Conference (von der Leyen, 2025). Rather, the EU will depend on partners, including those in the Global South, be it for access to critical resources or for upholding a functional, open and rules-based multilateral system.

To remain an attractive (trading) partner – despite the burden of its often-contested sustainability focus – the EU must proactively foster ongoing trade dialogue and present a more compelling policy offer amid growing geopolitical competition. This is particularly important as the Global South strengthens its alliances, presence and agency, illustrated by the rise of South–South initiatives such as the expanding BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group and competing offers from major global players like China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The EU has sought to enhance its offer through the *Global Gateway* initiative, which prioritises major infrastructure investments in developing countries and remains a flagship of the Commission (von der Leyen, 2024). However, with financial resources increasingly linked to a broad portfolio of economic security measures, the EU risks losing its ability to balance domestic priorities with meaningful external engagement. Put bluntly: How can the EU uphold a development-friendly trade policy, in part motivated by its own security concerns, when the practical alignment between trade and development co-operation is steadily eroding? Below, we explore several policy options the EU could consider in response:

#### 1. Prioritising technical and financial support:

To attract developing countries as partners, agreements with defined sustainability standards such as the EPAs must deliver mutual benefits. Given their complexity, effective implementation hinges on effective technical and financial support. Yet with financial space likely to shrink, trade-offs will emerge: more EU support in one area (e.g., regulatory alignment) may mean less for others (e.g., infrastructure development). Technical and financial support is, therefore, not necessarily a sure-fire success. The EU should allocate resources more strategically by identifying policy priorities and pinpointing institutional and technical capacity bottlenecks in trade policy implementation accurately and collaboratively, taking into account partner countries' national development strategies. Without such fine-tuning, the expanded scope of trade agreements and the associated

need for implementation support are at risk of reducing the effectiveness of the funds provided (Stender and Vogel, 2025).

## 2. Opening space for flexibility:

Given diverse starting points with regard to sustainability standards in partner countries, EU trade agreements could allow for greater flexibility. Where interests diverge on certain standards, modular or smaller scale agreements focused on shared priorities might offer a pragmatic path forward. This could help build trust and engagement despite differing objectives. Existing models include the Singapore-Australia Green Economy Agreement that aims to promote trade in environmental goods and services and the Clean Trade and Investment Partnership that the EU seeks to conclude with South Africa. Alternatively, sections of comprehensive agreements could be backed by joint target measures, as seen in the recently concluded agreement between India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA, consisting of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland), which includes targets for employment and investment, making not only sustainability but also economic benefits traceable. The EU could also bundle offers around technology transfer and security co-operation to increase appeal.

## 3. Enabling inclusive collaboration:

Amid criticism of the EU's autonomous regulatory measures, adopting a more collaborative approach is essential to upholding the EU's vision of promoting 'balanced partnerships of equals'. Whilst the EU's sustainability agenda remains valuable, setting and enforcing standards should involve meaningful consultation or draw from international standardisation bodies. Despite current limitations, the WTO could remain a platform for co-operation on trade-related standards and for discussions on comprehensive, multilateral solutions beyond those implemented unilaterally by the EU. Enhancing transparency in the use of CBAM revenues – particularly if they are reinvested in climate action or budget support in low-and middle income countries pursuing such goals – could strengthen credibility and counter accusations that EU trade policy is asymmetrical or exploitative.

## 4. Showcasing mutual benefits and long-term engagement:

The EU's economic security drive can create tangible opportunities for partner countries, which the EU should clearly communicate. In doing so, the EU is not starting from scratch. Recent efforts – such as the EU-Argentina memorandum of understanding on sustainable lithium value chains – highlight the EU's commitment to skills development, capacity building, and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2023b). In contrast to China's extractive 'take-and-leave' model and the United States' current pressure-driven 'deal-making', the EU has an opportunity to distinguish itself by offering long-term, sustainability-oriented partnerships. A clear and consistent narrative paired with strategic engagement and demonstrated benefits can help build trust and position the EU as a credible and desirable partner.

## Conclusion

Is this proposed menu of options just wishful thinking? Some of these elements may seem ambitious, but elements like increased flexibility in trade policy already feature in policy discussions, for instance, in the Draghi report referenced in the Trade Commissioner's mission letter (Draghi, 2024, p. 7). With tighter budgets, some form of prioritisation is inevitable; the key question is how coherently this can be aligned with trade policy. Above all, the EU must improve the inclusiveness of its trade agenda, balancing the pursuit of shared, sustainable outcomes with the demands of an increasingly competitive global economy, where economic security and competitiveness are more intertwined than ever.

## Acknowledgements

We sincerely appreciate the insightful discussions with colleagues over the past few months on the theme of this policy commentary. We are also grateful for the valuable comments and suggestions from three anonymous referees, which have greatly improved its quality.

During the writing process, the authors used ChatGPT solely for language refinement of the final draft of the manuscript before submission, and thoroughly reviewed and edited all content.

## Funding

This work is part of a research project supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

## Data Availability Statement

No data has been used.

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