



# President's Take: For the EU, Plenty of Challenges to Deal With

*From Sudan to Ukraine, crises brew, calling for renewed attention and action. In her introduction to the [Watch List 2023 – Spring Update](#), Crisis Group President & CEO Comfort Ero identifies ways the EU and its member states can prevent and resolve conflict around the globe.*

Rarely has the agenda of the monthly European Union (EU) foreign ministers' meetings been as packed as the one on 24 April. As EU High Representative Josep Borrell [noted after the meeting](#): "It looks like all the crises come together, piling up". The day's [agenda](#) was indicative of the range of conflicts and challenges European policymakers have to grapple with. It included discussions of Sudan's crisis, the Ukraine war and its geopolitical fallout, and a recalibrated EU policy toward China – none of these items a small task. As of this writing, foreign ministers are continuing their conversations about these issues at an informal meeting in Sweden, and they will remain seized of the matters going forward.

The fighting in Sudan was rightly among the top issues of the day on 24 April. Crisis Group's last [Watch List, in January](#), warned that, despite the 5 December framework agreement in which the Sudanese army agreed to hand over power to civilians, real obstacles remained for the transition. Tensions brewing between the army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), under the command of Mohamed "Hemedti" Hamdan Dagalo, were all too evident

as the deadline for the handover loomed. Yet few anticipated the pace and scale of [fighting that broke out on 15 April](#). With street battles and aerial bombardment wracking the capital Khartoum, millions of civilians are caught in the crossfire, with supplies of basic necessities running out fast. Both sides appear to view the confrontation as existential. With no end to the fighting in sight, it could escalate into a devastating civil war that destabilises the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, both areas of strategic importance to the EU and many others.

While EU and European leaders have limited leverage in Sudan, they should do what they can to deter outside actors from getting sucked into the fighting, support mediation efforts under way and stand ready with humanitarian aid. In particular, with most EU nationals evacuated, it is important that European attention to the crisis not fade. Critical is to press all actors inside Sudan, in the country's immediate neighbourhood and farther afield to refrain from backing either side. Any dynamic that draws in other players – whether former rebels or other Sudanese armed groups or regional powers – would make a conflict that already looks intractable even harder to halt. For now, Europe should continue to support Saudi and

U.S. efforts to mediate a humanitarian ceasefire. (The two parties **signed an agreement** in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 11 May committing to protect civilians.) If those talks get traction, the EU should prepare to quickly provide large-scale assistance to meet what look set to be vast needs. European leaders should also encourage Washington and Riyadh to widen the mediation format beyond representatives of the two warring parties as early as possible, bringing in Sudanese civilians and diplomats from neighbouring and other regional countries and bodies. Broader participation will be crucial for achieving a lasting settlement that goes beyond a humanitarian ceasefire.

Backing Ukraine in defending itself from Russia's invasion remains Europe's top security priority. The latest EU agreement on a three-track initiative to get Kyiv artillery and ammunition, including through new procedures for joint EU arms procurement, illustrates Brussels' readiness to take unprecedented steps to make sure Ukraine has what it needs. Since Russia's all-out invasion in February 2022, European capitals have shown sensible caution in avoiding steps that run too high a risk of direct conflict between NATO and Moscow, notably by drawing a line at deploying troops in Ukraine and training Kyiv's soldiers on Ukrainian soil (as, indeed, **Crisis Group has recommended** in previous Watch Lists). Russia, too, has mostly avoided steps that could trigger direct NATO involvement. But no one should let complacency slip in about escalation risks. As Europeans ponder the potential delivery of advanced Western fighter jets and long-range missiles, they should assess carefully the added value for Ukraine of such weaponry, particularly given the long lead times for training in its use and maintenance.

Hopes in Western capitals partly hinge on a Ukrainian counter-offensive. Ukrainians from the start have bucked expectations on the battlefield as Russian forces have struggled to break through Ukrainian defences along fronts in the east and south. With a new

counter-offensive, Kyiv is surely hoping to repeat the dramatic advances of the late summer and autumn of 2022. But the Ukrainians will have their work cut out for them, with Russians dug in and the element of surprise that was decisive before hard to replicate. Even if Ukraine's counter-offensive regains territory and puts Moscow under military pressure, it seems unlikely for now to change the Kremlin's calculations about the war. Moscow has given no indication that it seeks any sort of bargain to end the war, let alone on terms acceptable to Kyiv. Indeed, the Kremlin gives every sign of settling in for a long struggle – and perhaps even sees benefits in doing so, as a means of keeping society on a war footing. Putin's goals appear to remain a pliant government in Kyiv and a West that accepts Russia's self-defined sphere of influence. Kyiv, for its part, is understandably showing no willingness to compromise either at this stage, given that doing so would involve accepting loss of its own territory and sovereignty.

As unlikely as any settlement seems right now, the EU and its member states should nevertheless prepare for a moment when calculations in Russia might change. Even as they continue to support Ukraine, they should signal to Moscow that a path toward a negotiated ceasefire or settlement remains possible. As Crisis Group has argued before, that means avoiding any measures and rhetoric that suggest the West seeks regime change in the Kremlin and making clear that some EU sanctions would be lifted in the event of a political settlement acceptable to Ukraine.

For now, and notwithstanding some differences in views and policies in Europe, there is no sign of significant cracks in the West's unity in backing Ukraine. Whether fissures will appear over the next year, as supplies run lower in Western countries and U.S. elections approach, remains unclear. For the most part, the U.S. political establishment is firmly behind the Biden White House's Ukraine policy and its commitments to the transatlantic partnership

and European security, though a small but vocal caucus in the Republican party, including former President Donald Trump, have been consistently critical. Dwindling U.S. support for Ukraine appears unlikely any time soon. But given the centrality of U.S. aid, any change would pose difficult questions for Europe. While most European policymakers realise how much trouble a change in U.S. policy could bring, **they appear unsure** about how to prepare, exposing again Europe's vulnerability to U.S. domestic politics.

Then there is Europe's response to the Ukraine war's geopolitical knock-on effects. Part of that sensibly entails increased bilateral engagement with countries in its immediate neighbourhood, Asia, Africa and Latin America – steps I have advocated for in meetings with European interlocutors. That the EU is taking such outreach seriously and has even adopted a concrete action plan to strengthen EU partnerships around the world through greater political and economic engagement, including through the use of its Global Gateway initiative, is good news. Yet some of the rhetoric from Western leaders still displays a lack of sensitivity to the concerns of capitals elsewhere.

As I have **argued** before, European leaders should be more nuanced and understanding. Inevitably, many capitals around the world prefer to define their national policies on their own terms rather than as part of a West-Russia – or for that matter West-China – contest. Few sympathise with Moscow or have any illusions about its aggression in Ukraine. Yet they do not see picking sides as serving their or their societies' interests. Few buy the notion, which still runs through much of European thinking, that the West occupies the moral high ground, given its own track record over the past few decades. More concretely, in dealings with Europe, they want to focus on their own priorities. This Watch List contains a few concrete ideas for specific regions: efforts to work with Latin American countries on reducing organised

crime and the associated violence, for example, or the importance of not closing the door on poor countries that have developed close ties to Moscow, such as Mali and Burkina Faso. Broadly speaking, framing policy solely through the prism of confrontation with Moscow or Beijing will backfire. Countries across the world will chafe at feeling forced to choose.

Globally – again as Crisis Group has **argued before** – Europe should pay even greater attention to the cumulative economic effects of the war, sanctions on Russia and the COVID-19 pandemic that are foremost in the minds of many leaders elsewhere. The fuel and food price hikes of 2022 have subsided somewhat. Still, inflation remains high and many poor countries' debt burdens look increasingly unmanageable (seventeen **low-income countries** are in debt distress). In some places, the economic toll risks aggravating instability, fueling discontent and sharpening political crises. Pakistan, in this Watch List, is one example, but many other countries could be in similar boats. Wealthy countries, including in Europe, have been slow to cough up various forms of financial relief they pledged in 2022. It is true that a much smaller fraction of debt is owed to Western countries than was the case some years ago. Any comprehensive efforts need to involve other capitals, notably Beijing, and the private sector. Still, the forthcoming G7 summit, which the EU and several member states will attend, is an opportunity for the world's richest economies to use their leverage in international financial institutions and hefty aid budgets to ease poorer countries' economic woes and bolster aid to those facing conflict risks. A Crisis Group paper, to be published next week, will lay out more in detail what the G7 can do in this regard.

Also high on the agenda of EU foreign ministers is China. A flurry of European visits to Beijing underscored the variation among EU leaders with respect to China policy and the need to resolve internal differences. Some leaders, most prominently French President

Emmanuel Macron, suggest that Europe should avoid getting too enmeshed in China-U.S. tensions. (An option paper prepared by the European External Action Service for the 12 May foreign ministers' discussion **reportedly** cautions Europe not to get drawn into a zero-sum contest between Washington and Beijing.) Others push for a more aggressive European line, seeing China as a dangerous competitor and ally to Moscow, and eager to stay on side with Washington. With European heads of state set to tackle the topic during their June summit, the days and weeks ahead are an opportunity to rethink and recalibrate.

As is often the case in the EU, the common position will probably fall somewhere in the middle. The EU seems likely to maintain its three-pronged approach that simultaneously treats China as a negotiating partner, economic competitor and strategic rival, albeit arguably with greatest emphasis on the last of these. Most EU and member state officials seem to broadly agree with the agenda laid out by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a **speech** shortly before her own Beijing trip, which points more forcefully than in the past to the many irritants that create friction in the EU's relationship with Beijing (from the closer China-Russia partnership and what European capitals view as destabilising policies in Asia to human rights violations in the Xinjiang region and disinformation and economic coercion against EU member states). That agenda also stresses the need to reduce Europe's economic dependence on China, while acknowledging the importance of engagement on issues of mutual interest.

Treading the right line in Europe's multifaceted relations with Beijing – one that is realistic about the importance of trade and global problem-solving with China while clear-eyed about the challenge a more assertive Beijing poses – is one of European policymakers' biggest tests. It is made all the harder by Washington's increasingly tough policies, accelerated by competition among leaders of both major U.S.

parties to outdo one another in assertiveness toward Beijing.

Changes are in the offing. As von der Leyen forecast, it is nearly certain that Europe will reduce its reliance on critical Chinese industries in order to limit China's economic leverage over the bloc and its members. While this move makes strategic sense, Europe should remain wary of entirely outsourcing its China policy to Washington. Although the transatlantic relationship remains crucial for regional security – as the conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated – it can withstand some back-and-forth on key matters of regional interest. Given the one-way ratchet toward hardline policies inside the U.S., Brussels may play a useful role moderating the U.S. position. For example, after Europe resisted a U.S. push to pursue economic decoupling from China and put forward its own more moderate concept of “de-risking”, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan shifted to the same rhetoric. Whether Europe and the U.S. mean the same thing by that term is unclear, but the adoption of the EU's measured tone is itself a positive step.

Given the strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing, it is also an open question how much influence Brussels will be able to wield with either on security-related issues; still, it should do what it can. For example, European leaders can and should urge both sides to resume senior and working-level dialogue and commit to communications through defence hotlines, notwithstanding the turbulence in their relations. Whether or not both sides are at fault, Europe should push equally to make clear it is being even-handed.

On Taiwan, too, the EU is not the central player it is on the Ukraine war, but clearly any confrontation over the island would be as catastrophic for Europe as it would for the rest of the world, with the economic fallout dwarfing that of the Ukraine war. Broadly speaking, the U.S. in its defence of Taiwan has to find the right balance between deterrence and reassurance. Building up Taiwan's defences and

making clear to China the broader costs of an attempt to take the island by force, notably the sanctions that such a step would trigger, is part of that. But those measures must sit alongside efforts to reassure Beijing that the status quo – ie, commitment to a one China policy that does not recognise Taiwanese independence – is solid and its opportunity to reunify is not slipping away. Thus far, the reassurance side has sometimes looked a bit neglected. Europe should focus on both aspects. It cannot undercut deterrence; indeed, its commitment to sanctions can help. At the same time, European capitals should affirm – and, whenever possible, encourage the U.S. to affirm – their own one China policies and encourage all parties to maintain the status quo.

The EU should also keep its expectations realistic about Beijing's readiness to influence Russia and potential mediating role in Ukraine. Beijing has tried to transmit an image of constructive neutrality despite its "no limits friendship" with Moscow and emphasise its readiness to mediate. There is no reason to dismiss China's offers out of hand. Indeed, European leaders could even signal to Beijing that if Russia backs away from its maximalist goals to seek a sustainable peace – which for now Moscow has given no indication of doing – it is supportive of negotiations. But European leaders should be clear-eyed about Beijing's

fundamental interests. Beijing values Moscow as a strategic ally in resisting U.S. pressure and seems unlikely to do anything that risks undercutting the Kremlin or to use any capital to nudge President Vladimir Putin toward a settlement. China's messaging on Ukraine is more about portraying itself as an honest broker to the rest of the world than making a serious attempt to reach peace.

Despite the many high-profile issues on the European agenda, the EU and its member states will need to keep an eye on other conflicts and crises that may be looming, or risk getting much worse, but are not necessarily making headlines. This Watch List Update draws attention to some of these: the crisis in Pakistan, record levels of violence in Burkina Faso and Mali, the brewing standoff over Iran's nuclear program, Latin America's wave of violent crime and the risk of fresh tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. European capitals cannot solve all these crises alone, but they do still have an important role to play in finding ways to end or reduce violence or avert the type of worst-case scenario now playing out in Sudan.

**Comfort Ero,**  
Crisis Group President & CEO  
May 2023