

The Business of Democracy

Values vs. Interests

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European governments consistently present themselves as defenders of democracy, human rights, and the rules-based international order. Yet across multiple geopolitical crises, European foreign policy has repeatedly revealed a different reality: democratic principles are often applied selectively when strategic, economic, or energy interests are at stake. This contradiction reflects a broader pattern of strategic cynicism in which moral rhetoric coexists with transactional diplomacy and economic accommodation toward authoritarian or illiberal actors.

The contradiction became particularly visible in Europe's long-standing relationship with Russia. For years, several European governments expanded energy dependence on Moscow despite repeated warnings regarding Russian aggression, cyber operations, political repression, and territorial expansionism after Crimea. Economic stability and energy security repeatedly outweighed strategic caution until the invasion of Ukraine made the costs of dependency impossible to ignore.

A similar pattern has shaped Europe's relationship with Iran. European governments have frequently condemned human-rights abuses and political repression while simultaneously preserving trade and diplomatic engagement with Tehran. Critics argue that Europe's willingness to maintain economic channels often diluted the practical consequences of its democratic rhetoric, especially during periods of internal repression and regional destabilization linked to the Iranian regime.

Europe's posture toward China and Taiwan reflects the same tension between principle and dependency. European leaders regularly express concern regarding human rights, economic coercion, and regional security, yet deep commercial dependence on Chinese markets limits the willingness of many governments to adopt stronger deterrence measures or clearer democratic alignment with Taiwan. Strategic ambiguity has become the preferred substitute for strategic consistency.

The same contradictions are increasingly visible in Latin America. Critics of European engagement with Venezuela argue that political and economic considerations have softened pressure on a regime widely accused of authoritarian practices, corruption, and links to transnational criminal and extremist networks. Spain, in particular, has faced scrutiny over its cautious diplomatic posture toward Caracas despite growing concerns regarding the Venezuelan regime's regional alliances and security implications.

Colombia reflects a similar dynamic. European governments have strengthened diplomatic and economic engagement with the Petro administration while Colombians warn about institutional deterioration, armed-group expansion, organized crime, and persistent political violence. Strategic partnerships and ideological alignment appear, in some cases, to have

reduced the intensity of democratic scrutiny that would likely exist under different political circumstances.

The broader pattern is increasingly difficult to ignore. Europe frequently promotes democratic conditionality in public discourse while maintaining flexible standards in practice whenever strategic interests are involved. Economic interdependence, energy security, migration pressures, and geopolitical caution have produced a foreign-policy model in which democratic principles are often subordinated to strategic convenience.

At the same time, Europe has increasingly externalized geopolitical risk to the United States. Washington absorbs the military, financial, and political costs of confrontation, while European governments preserve greater diplomatic flexibility and commercial room for maneuver. This allows Europe to criticize, support, or distance itself from U.S. actions according to domestic political needs while continuing engagement with actors targeted by American containment strategies.

Defenders of European policy argue that diplomacy and trade preserve leverage, reduce escalation risks, and create channels for negotiation unavailable through isolation alone. Those arguments deserve consideration. However, they do not eliminate the growing perception that Europe applies democratic standards inconsistently depending on the strategic value of the partner involved.

EU and non-EU members speaking about the UN80 initiative often reduce diplomacy to rhetoric about multilateralism, international law, and the principles of the UN Charter, while simultaneously supporting – or at least continuing to do business with – authoritarian regimes. At the same time, they criticize peoples trapped under those regimes, or living under the control of illegal armed groups and organized crime, implicitly asking them to “accept their fate.”

Yet many of these peoples continue to fight for freedom despite an unbearable cost. For them, the price has already been paid – in millions of lives lost, generations displaced, and societies shattered – and still, freedom remains out of reach.

Do they not have the right to ask for help, even if part of the international community is outraged simply because they refuse to align with a super powerful international actor?

No major power applies its values perfectly. The issue is not whether Europe pursues strategic interests, but whether it can continue claiming moral consistency while repeatedly subordinating democratic principles to economic and geopolitical calculations.

The widening gap between rhetoric and behavior is weakening Europe's credibility, undermining its democratic message, and transforming human-rights language into an increasingly selective instrument of foreign policy.

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