EU's faltering stance on human rights amid armed conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine

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Abstract: The European Union faces growing criticism for inadequate response to the Ukrainian and Palestinian conflicts, especially compared to that of the United States, China and Russia. Given Donald Trump's second mandate as US president, the EU must reaffirm commitment to human rights and global stability.

The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine have put EU foreign policy under intense scrutiny. Critics argue that the EU lacks a coherent strategy and decisive leadership in addressing these crises, failing to uphold its self-proclaimed commitment to human rights. The war in Ukraine, sparked by Russia's invasion in 2022, has resulted in significant loss of life, displacement, and economic devastation. While the EU has provided substantial support to Ukraine, there are growing concerns about the sustainability and effectiveness of this support. Recent reports highlight a palpable sense of skepticism among Europeans about Ukraine's chances of winning the war, raising questions about the long-term strategy and unity within the EU.
Economically, the war has strained EU resources and led to significant disruptions in trade and energy supplies. Politically, it has exposed divisions among member states, each

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grappling with different national interests and economic pressures. The humanitarian aspect cannot be overlooked either, with millions of Ukrainians displaced and in need of assistance. These challenges collectively threaten to weaken the EU's cohesion and its ability to project power and stability in its neighborhoods.

Beyond the immediate impact on Ukraine and its citizens, the European Union faces long-term challenges in rebuilding Ukraine and integrating its economy with the rest of Europe. This reconstruction effort will require sustained investment and political will, both of which are uncertain given the current geopolitical climate.

In parallel, the situation in Palestine, particularly in Gaza, remains dire. The region has been plagued by catastrophic acts of violence and human rights abuses. Recently, some European countries have taken steps to recognise Palestinian statehood, signaling a potential shift in EU policy. However, these moves have been condemned as too little, too late. Critics argue that the EU's cautious approach towards Israel, driven by a desire not to antagonise a key regional player, has resulted in accusations of complicity in the ongoing violence in Gaza. Some EU governments have also long blocked measures against Israel's abuses against Palestinians in Gaza and in the West Bank, but recent rulings of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court make this inaction untenable and test the EU's commitment to international law and human rights.

The Palestinian emergency poses a severe problem for EU foreign policy. The European Union failure to take a firmer stance against Israeli actions undermines its commitment to human rights. This cautious approach is seen as hypocritical, given the EU's vocal stance on human rights in other contexts. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza, with severe shortages of food, water, and medical supplies, demands urgent action.

Standing in the shadows

In both Ukraine and Palestine, the European Union response is often seen as reactive and overshadowed by the actions of other global powers. The United States exerts significant influence on international affairs. China's growing presence in global diplomacy and Russia's aggressive tactics in Ukraine further challenge EU efforts to assert its own policies and leadership. Trump's recent statements suggesting Ukraine may 'be Russian someday' and ruling out a right of return for Palestinians to their homes – indicating an intent to escalate ethnic cleansing in Gaza – signal a drastic shift in US foreign policy that could undermine European efforts in both conflicts. His administration's approach, particularly its backing of Israel's horrendous Gaza proposals, has raised alarm among European policymakers, who now face the challenge of balancing transatlantic relations with their commitments to international law and human rights.

With US priorities shifting and China and Russia asserting their own geopolitical ambitions, the EU risks being sidelined unless it takes decisive, independent action. To avoid being trapped in a cycle of reaction, the EU must assert a more coherent foreign policy, strengthen its economic and diplomatic leverage, and ensure that its security commitments align with human rights principles and standards. The EU must take a more proactive and assertive leadership role.

Capitalist model of war

An often-overlooked aspect of these conflicts is the underlying economic motivations that drive them. The capitalist model of war, where conflicts are perpetuated by economic interests, plays a significant role. Arms manufacturing, resource acquisition and geopolitical control are all factors that fuel conflicts, with powerful nations and corporations profiting immensely.

To truly lead on human rights, the EU must critically examine and distance itself from the capitalist model of war. This means reevaluating its arms trade policies, ensuring that economic interests do not undermine its human rights commitments. By doing so, the EU can set a precedent for a more ethical approach to international relations, prioritising human wellbeing over profit.

Recommendations: pathways to change

For the EU to strengthen its position and uphold its values, several steps can be considered:

1. **Unified foreign policy** - the EU needs to streamline its foreign policy, ensuring that member states present a united front on critical issues. This unity would enhance its diplomatic influence and ability to act decisively.
2. **Human rights first** - prioritising human rights in all foreign policy decisions is crucial. This means taking bold stances against human rights abuses, regardless of the geopolitical consequences.
3. **Engagement and dialogue** - the European Union should foster dialogue with all parties involved in these conflicts, promoting peaceful resolutions and supporting diplomatic efforts to achieve lasting peace.
4. **Accountability and transparency** - holding states accountable for human rights violations through sanctions and other measures can demonstrate the EU's commitment to its foundational values. Transparency in these actions will build trust and credibility.
5. **Support for civil society** - enhancing support for human rights organizations and civil society groups within conflict zones can empower local actors to drive change and hold violators accountable. This grassroots approach can complement diplomatic efforts and ensure a more comprehensive response to human rights abuses.
6. **Rethink economic policies** - the EU must critically assess its economic policies, particularly those related to arms sales and trade with conflict-affected regions. By reducing economic incentives that perpetuate war, the European Union can better align its actions with its human rights commitments.
7. **Strengthening institutional capacity** - the EU should invest in strengthening its institutional capacity to respond to crises. This includes enhancing the capabilities of its foreign policy instruments and improving coordination among member states.

The EU stands at a critical juncture. To remain a credible advocate for human rights and a key player on the global stage, it must address its shortcomings in responding to the wars in

Ukraine and Palestine. By uniting its foreign policy, increasing humanitarian aid, leveraging economic power, promoting diplomacy, enhancing defense capabilities, and advocating for international law, the European Union can demonstrate true leadership and uphold its values in these turbulent times.