



NON-PAPER

Strengthening the EU's Leadership in Global Digital Affairs

The EU should demonstrate technological and normative leadership in global digital affairs and show that digital transition is a central part of the EU's internal and external policy agenda. Therefore, next European Commission and the High Representative should publish a joint communication on **digital diplomacy and partnerships**. The communication should build on previous guiding documents, such as the Council Conclusions on Digital Diplomacy, and should focus on three main areas:



1. Promoting norms, standards and governance of digital technologies in line with European values and interests. Ensuring that the global standards and norms on emerging technologies are human-centric and human rights-based, and that they enhance European competitiveness, democratic values and sustainable development;



2. Fostering secure connectivity, data infrastructure and digital services globally with trusted technologies and suppliers. To achieve this, the EU needs to build upon existing partnerships with third countries while also creating new ones. Through these partnerships, the EU can promote European solutions, respond to partner countries' needs and advance sustainable investments globally, including through adequate external funding instruments;



3. Ensuring better coherence between the EU's internal and external policies through structured cooperation between the Commission, the EEAS, the Member States and the multistakeholder community. Speaking with one voice on the international stage requires seamless coordination within the Union, as well as dialogue with European businesses, research institutions and civil society in line with the multistakeholder approach.

In the face of the rapidly changing geopolitics of technology, the EU has to keep up with the pace by strongly promoting European democratic, economic and security interests globally. Our competitors are well-mobilised in international organisations, in standard-setting forums and across different regions, leveraging their foreign, trade and development instruments to advance their interests. In emerging economies, this can lead to path dependencies that have long-lasting implications not only for the national security and sustainable development of these countries, but also for the competitiveness of European businesses.

Strong digital diplomacy with like-minded partners, such as the US, Canada, Australia, Japan and the Republic of Korea, is needed to ensure that emerging technologies are secure, sustainable, reliable and come from trusted suppliers. In the Global South, the EU should strive for mutually beneficial partnerships that promote human-centric and human rights-based digitalisation, secure connectivity and sustainable development. This would empower people and bridge the global digital divide.

Fostering responsible global standards and norms

The EU should play a proactive role in shaping the agenda for digital multilateralism in line with European values and interests. The ongoing negotiations on a Global Digital Compact are a case in point, as they will define the scope of work for the United Nations for years to come, including in emerging areas such as data governance and artificial intelligence. The EU should strategically prioritise institutions and initiatives where it can promote normative convergence. Similarly, a strategic response to emerging threats is needed, for example when dealing with attempts to change the existing multistakeholder model of internet governance.

Technological leadership is strongly linked with early influence on international norms and standards for emerging technologies. Creating guiding principles, technical specifications and standards that favour European innovations will give businesses a competitive edge and pave the way for patenting and commercialising European solutions. Furthermore, now is the time to make sure that standards for emerging technologies, including wireless communication networks, artificial intelligence and quantum technology, are built on democratic values and can bridge digital divides globally.

The EU should focus on promoting European policy positions in standardisation organisations by working closely with the European research community and tech

industry. Technological neutrality, security-by-design and sustainability are central EU principles. Furthermore, for European businesses to grow internationally, negotiating international standards with global coverage will be paramount. In this regard, the EU should pay close attention to the International Telecommunications Union ITU (telecom standards incl. 5/6G). The ITU has become a forum for geopolitical and geoeconomic confrontation between different value-based approaches to technological development (democratic vs. autocratic countries).

In order to strengthen the EU's impact on standard-setting, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between technical experts, who negotiate standards, and external digital policy experts. In order to avoid pitfalls in negotiations and understand the impact of geopolitics on standard-setting, it is crucial to ensure strategic guidance and common lines to take before plenipotentiary conferences or other important decision-making fora. To this end, the EU needs to build coalitions with partner countries and regions ahead of international negotiations and take full advantage of multistakeholder fora, such as the IGF.

Promoting secure digital infrastructure

The current Commission has strengthened the EU's action in the field of digital diplomacy, launching several digital partnerships with like-minded countries and digital connectivity projects within the Global Gateway framework. There is, however, more potential for leverage thanks to the EU single market with its harmonised regulatory framework and integrated industrial ecosystems, financing instruments and common trade policy. The Commission and the High Representative should put greater emphasis on managing the EU's strategic partnerships to promote secure digital connectivity globally. They should ensure the continued "Brussels Effect" in the governance of digital technologies, but should also prioritise the EU's competitiveness in their development and deployment.

Secure connectivity and data infrastructure should become priority focus areas for cooperation within the framework of Trade and Technology Councils, digital partnerships and the Global Gateway. As concrete deliverables, the EU should seek cooperation and co-financing opportunities for secure connectivity and data infrastructure projects. The EU should also engage in export promotion and level the playing field for European businesses in the global digital economy and third-country markets. Investment in secure digital infrastructure must be matched with efforts to

strengthen digital and data governance, cyber security, services and skills. This will further enhance the sustainable digital transformation.

To support European offers in third-country infrastructure projects, the EU needs to ensure the availability of appropriate financing instruments, coupled with broader digital economy packages and technical assistance. While the EU has internal funding mechanisms for R&D and digital technologies (e.g. Horizon, DEP, STEP, EIB), it lacks export funding instruments to support European businesses in open tenders. To this end, cooperation between development finance and export funding instruments should be further enhanced. By pooling Member State and EU-level resources, European trusted vendors could make more competitive offers when exporting digital technologies such as 5G and smart data cables.

Strengthening the EU's common voice

Key factors for the EU's successful external digital policy include

- 1) building upon the strengths of the single market,
- 2) striving for complementarity between the EU's internal and external policies,
- 3) building strong operative coalitions with like-minded countries, and
- 4) learning to speak with one voice.

Ensuring better coherence between the EU's internal and external policies requires more structured cooperation between the Commission, the EEAS, the Member States and the multistakeholder community. This cooperation will be central to strengthening the EU's global voice. The EU needs better coordination structures between diplomats and regulatory experts, and should make extensive use of common lines of action.

To increase its collective capacity, the EU, together with the Member States and like-minded governments, could offer digital diplomacy training for public officials. The EU could also consider ensuring the right level of representation in policy dialogues and coalition-building in global tech affairs and, to that end, establish an EU tech envoy position. Finally, as a strong advocate for the multistakeholder approach to the digital transition globally, the EU should apply the same model internally when setting its own policies.