

# **Sustainable Development Goals & Foreign Policy**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are unprecedented in their scope and ambition for human progress. By removing or mitigating many grievances that fuel conflict, progress on the SDGs can be a critical lever to build and sustain peace and stability worldwide. Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs are the first comprehensive, global, and “silo-breaking” agenda for achieving the foundations of resilience and sustainable peace.

**Lomborg** argues that some of the SDGs absolutist targets, such as ending malnutrition, malaria, and tuberculosis, are “implausibly optimistic and inefficient,” and argues that investing in nineteen of the most cost-effective targets, instead of all 169, could produce better results.

The transformative change SDGs aim to bring about can also affect geopolitical dynamics, balances of power and interdependencies. Thus, progress on the SDGs has significant implications for foreign policy. In brief, core foreign policy priorities depend on SDG progress, and foreign policy makers also have a critical role to play in supporting implementation and managing the challenges associated with transformational change. At a time of increasing nationalism and populism, the SDGs are important symbols of the value of the transformational capabilities of multilateralism. It is a transformative agenda, beyond incremental change, and importantly, it is a global agenda – beyond development policy. This agenda resonates with fundamental foreign policy objectives such as improving international security, stability, and prosperity. In other words, because not achieving the SDGs implies severe risks for these priorities, foreign policy makers have high stakes in the SDGs’ outcomes.

SDGs also have a significant impact on geopolitics. For example, if the world is to transition to decarbonised economies as envisaged under SDG 7 on energy, this will alter the power dynamics between oil producing and oil importing economies. Also, efforts to pursue SDG 6 on sustainable water for all will affect and be affected by highly strained relations between Iraq, Turkey, and Iran over the sharing of waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

Foreign policy can and must play an essential role in ensuring that these transitions are managed peacefully. And peace, in turn, is not only an SDG in itself but also an important precondition for the successful implementation of most other SDGs. This interdependence implies a need for greater engagement between the development community - that has taken a leadership role in the SDG process until now - and the foreign policy community - that often has the mandate to ensure cross-governmental coherence in external relations.

Geopolitics can be seen to be undermining the 2030 Agenda, with the re-nationalization of politics in the Global North negatively affecting political leadership and good governance in the Global South. The shifting of power and political influence from Europe towards China and India means shifting away from former leadership to new drivers on sustainable transformation. Furthermore, we are moving away from rule-based policymaking and multilateralism. Here we need foreign policy to promote rule-based policymaking and cooperation, support regional collaboration, and help governments to improve their governance. Governance - at national and

global level - is the DNA of the 2030 Agenda (and any other transformative or multilateral agreement).

Peaceful, just and inclusive societies have other SDGs as their building blocks. **The Pathfinder Initiative** found that only one-third of targets that measure aspects of peace, inclusion or access to justice fall under SDG 16.10 For instance, peaceful societies require reducing violence against women and girls (SDG target 5.2) and addressing child labour and child soldiers (SDG target 8.7). SDGs targets in the social realm that address questions of employment, inequality, social development, etc. are the ones most identified to be the building blocks of peace.

## Sustainable Foreign Policy

- **“Sustainable Foreign Policy”** implies improving the coherence of foreign policy action under a guiding principle of promoting sustainable development and peace. The 2030 Agenda already points towards an integrated and network-oriented way of doing foreign policy. SDG 17 attests this by highlighting policy coherence and partnerships as key conditions of sustainable development. Promoting integration and partnerships is also a fundamental element of foreign policy.
- **“Sustainable Foreign Policy”** supports holistic SDG implementation and external action, to avoid adverse events such as destabilization, radicalization or forced displacement, and to promote positive developments such as prosperity, a strengthened resource base, or mutually beneficial trade and investments. It is no longer enough to talk about the interlinkages. 2030 Agenda has wide-ranging geopolitical implications and as such, has to be better embedded in foreign policy.
- When pursuing foreign policy goals, such as building up institutions, capacities, and norms in fragile states, foreign policy instruments such as bilateral trade agreements and special economic zones can help immensely. This can be done by creating incentives or establishing conditions for cooperation regarding SDG implementation, for example, promoting land reforms and participatory management, investing in land restoration, and adherence to voluntary schemes such as the EU’s Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) or the Forest Stewardship Council’s timber certification scheme.
- The six foreign policy priority areas are as follows:
  1. Preventing (forced) migration and displacement
  2. Conflict prevention and stabilisation
  3. Reducing humanitarian need
  4. Countering terrorism and violent extremism
  5. Promoting foreign trade and investment
  6. Safeguarding geopolitical stability
- The range of diplomatic tools, such as mediation or initiation of international and multi-stakeholder partnerships, available to the foreign policy community thus play a significant role in ensuring the transformative shifts do not pose any harm – particularly in fragile states. Crucially, foreign policy must consider how domestic and international efforts to achieve the SDGs will impact countries’ external relations with one another and conditions of geopolitical stability.