

Give Lisbon a chance: How to improve EU foreign policy

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BACKGROUND

After almost three decades of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and a decade since the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), it is high time to assess whether EU foreign policy has indeed become “more visible, more coherent and more effective”, as stated in the Lisbon Treaty. Most media and expert commentary has been rather disdainful of the CFSP, pointing to splits over the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Iraq War to current differences over Libya and Turkey. Brexit has also been a blow to the CFSP, robbing the EU of a nuclear power with significant diplomatic and military expertise as well as a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

There have been some successes, notably the Iran nuclear deal, only for the Trump administration to pull the rug from under the EU’s feet. The geopolitical situation has also become bleaker, with nationalist leaders to the fore in the US, China, Russia, Turkey, Brazil and elsewhere, and a corresponding global decline in support for multilateral institutions. There is also a growing recognition that the EU member states must try and work together if they are to become a geopolitical actor, defend multilateralism and maximise their influence on the world stage.

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Nevertheless, this recognition – which reflects the demand of the Lisbon Treaty for member states to support the Union’s foreign policy “actively and unreservedly in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity” – has not always been on display in recent years. Member states must understand that supporting the CFSP is actually very much in their self-interest. The advent of a Biden administration in the US also provides a fresh opportunity for the EU to deliver more and secure a more effective and balanced transatlantic relationship.

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Clearly, there remain significant challenges in coordinating the foreign policies of 27 member states. Many forget, however, that the aim was never to forge a single foreign policy but rather achieve as much commonality as possible. Member states have vastly different perspectives depending on history, geography, traditions, experience and capabilities. The issue of sovereignty in foreign policy still plays an emotive role, although member states do recognise the added value of a supranational approach to trade policy. There are also different treaty and legal instruments covering the external relations of the EU, which make it difficult to achieve a swift response or a truly integrated approach.

STATE OF PLAY

The institutional framework

According to the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council is tasked with setting the strategic guidelines for the CFSP, while the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) decides and the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) implements policy. One of the main problems, however, is the gap between the FAC and the European Council. Increasingly, major foreign policy issues are decided by heads of government and foreign ministers have little say. EU leaders seem content with a president focused on finding compromises on the domestic front rather than elbowing them out of the limelight on the world stage. Herman Van Rompuy was almost totally consumed by the 2008-09 financial crisis and the subsequent 'euro crisis' and Donald Tusk by the 'migration crisis' and Brexit. Charles Michel has had to face the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent financial and economic consequences. Given the state of world affairs, EU leaders must find more time to discuss foreign policy. There should be a half-day debate on foreign affairs at each European Council meeting.

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There have been three HR/VPs since Lisbon, all socialists, from the UK, Italy and Spain. Catherine Ashton had zero foreign policy experience and was preoccupied with the bureaucratic process of establishing the EEAS. Federica Mogherini had a more substantial foreign policy background and gave the position greater visibility. However, she was criticised for travelling too much and for failing to use her 'Commission hat' or the treaty right of initiative. Josep Borrell is an experienced EU hand and is not seeking a further job, so he can arguably stretch the limits of the position. To date, he has shown a willingness to take the lead, but his freedom of manoeuvre is inevitably limited if the major member states disagree, as over Libya.

It was hoped that the creation of the HR/VP position would lead to greater visibility, coherence and effectiveness of European foreign policy. At the same time, however, the changes have lessened the buy-in of foreign ministers (and foreign ministries), as they no longer have their six months in the EU limelight (unlike their fellow ministers holding the rotating presidency). There needs to be more consideration of how to involve the member states in policy formulation and diplomatic tasking. As the HR/VP has no official deputy and thus has to spread him- or herself thinly, it is worth considering using ad hoc groups of member states to undertake specific tasks. This would then free up the

HR/VP to concentrate on the EU's strategic partners and high-level international events.

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For example, an extended troika could prepare a report on the impact of climate change, or artificial intelligence on EU foreign policy, which could then be discussed at the EU27 level. Another example is when Mogherini invited the Finnish foreign minister as a special envoy to prepare a report on Sudan, a country on which he had direct expertise while at the UN.

An integrated approach

During the 2003 Convention on the Future of Europe, there was a widespread recognition that there needed to be a more integrated approach to foreign policy to cover trade, environmental issues, energy, migration, financial assistance and such. This expertise was largely in the individual Directorate-Generals (DGs) of the Commission. However, as a result of establishing the EEAS outside the Commission, it led to walls being created and made its coordination with the Commission more difficult. As one experienced member state diplomat remarked in a private conversation with the author after his first few years in the EEAS, "we have many strategic partners around the world, but the one that is missing is with the Commission."

Successive Commission presidents, including Ursula von der Leyen, have established a group of Commissioners to ensure better coordination and coherence in external affairs. The spring 2019 China policy paper¹ was a good example of the system working. Nonetheless, the fact remains that only a small number of DGs are regularly involved in external affairs, and ad hoc groups may be a better solution. For example, the Borrell and Breton Cabinets are working closely together in framing a new European industrial policy that will impact future defence technology and improve the EU's aim of achieving strategic autonomy. Another problem is that within the EEAS, there is little contact between the security side of the EEAS (i.e. military staff, CSDP) and the geographical desks.

Majority voting

Borrell has added his voice to those calling for the EU to move towards qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign policy. While QMV might expose differences between member states, these are rarely hidden from view, and the EU never seeks to isolate a member state when a vital national interest is at stake. Given the rapidity of world events, the EU cannot wait until the slowest is on board. It should make more use of existing

treaty provisions for QMV when implementing CFSP decisions (on e.g. renewing sanctions). The EU should also continue with the 27-1 formula, as used by EU ambassadors in Beijing in 2018 to agree on a statement on China, putting pressure on a recalcitrant state to abstain rather than block a policy decision.

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Reforming the European External Action Service

The EEAS is a sizeable institution with around 4,500 staff, including 33% from member states. There are a further 3,800 Commission officials in the 140 EU delegations. It is a top-heavy bureaucracy with too many layers and unnecessary walls between the geographical and functional services. The HR/VP also maintains over 20 Special Representatives, whose functions are not always clearly defined, and their numbers could easily be reduced. If one adds the number of diplomats from member states, the EU has over 30,000 diplomats – many more than the US.

The EEAS still struggles to make an impact in many parts of the world. Arguably, its ‘birth defects’ – especially its vague aims, separation from the Commission and lack of a serious budget – have impeded its development. This is partly due to the lack of solidarity from member states and the lack of any brand recognition. Its name sounds more like an NGO dispensing aid than a new kind of diplomatic service.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, constant travelling meant that the HR/VP had little time to manage the EEAS, set priorities or initiate proposals. Many EEAS officials moaned that the institution is just a briefing machine with little influence on EU policymaking. The regular issuing of statements expressing concern on this or that, or simply listing whom the HR/VP has met recently without any policy output, has eroded its credibility.

There is no official historian, no decent archive system, no proper international law department, no chief of protocol and no dedicated foreign policy media briefings, as opposed to the occasional door-stopping before and after Council meetings. The EEAS staff rotation system involving EU and member state diplomats has also meant that there is little continuity, and much of the knowledge and expertise of the former Commission and Council staff are lost. All diplomats coming from member states should have to undergo a mandatory three-month training course about the institutions. The post of secretary general of the EEAS should essentially be a management job.

Public support

Any successful foreign policy must be supported by the public. The HR/VP, who has introduced a regular and readable blog, should also produce a six-monthly report on CFSP, which is then debated in both the European Parliament and national parliaments in the same week. Foreign ministers would have to explain and defend what is being done under CFSP, thus helping to trigger an EU-wide policy debate. Foreign ministers should be encouraged to include references to the EU in their speeches and press releases.

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Brexit and strategic autonomy

Brexit has weakened the diplomatic clout of both the UK and the EU. The UK has now pivoted away from wishing a close relationship with the EU on foreign policy, preferring a mid-Atlantic approach. Nevertheless, it would make sense for both sides to seek a close ad hoc arrangement, as the UK will still be involved in various formats that impact EU interests, such as the Quad and the Quint.

There is also the argument that the UK’s departure may speed up the EU’s reflection on strategic autonomy and lead to a strengthened CFSP. Achieving strategic autonomy, however, will be a long-term process and will depend on the member states mustering the political will to devote adequate resources to enable the EU to act as a genuine political actor on the world stage. Time will tell.

PROSPECTS

There is no magic bullet to transform and improve EU foreign and security policy. There are inevitable problems when trying to coordinate 27 states with hugely different foreign policy traditions, capabilities and interests. This is especially true in the security sphere, where relations with the US and NATO continue to be a defining feature for all member states. The development of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) has been useful, but much more remains to be done on common threat analysis and defence, as the EEAS coordinated annual reports suggest.

The EU should thus be rather more modest in its aims. Calling for a “geopolitical Commission” is one thing, but if your shareholders do not agree on the basic strategy, then it might be wiser to keep quiet. The EU might also reflect on how its perennial calls supporting multilateralism and human rights play out in the rest of the world. The EU has been unable to agree its

representation on many multilateral bodies (e.g. dealing with the environment), and unable to sanction its member states that breach democratic norms or turn a blind eye to corruption. These domestic issues have a foreign policy impact and, as Borrell has also remarked, a sound foreign policy requires a sound economic base.

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CONCLUSIONS

The following recommendations would lead to more coherent and effective European foreign policy:

1. The President of the European Council should play a more active foreign policy role and ensure a half-day debate at each European Council meeting.
2. Use ad hoc groups of member states under a FAC mandate to ease the burden on the HR/VP.
3. Reduce the bureaucratic layers in the EEAS and break down the silo mentality.
4. Establish ad hoc groups of Commission Cabinets and DGs with the EEAS to deal with priority issues.
5. Improve the cooperation and liaison with member states, in both the elite and public domains. Organise a six-monthly, EU-wide debate involving the European Parliament, national parliaments, the media and civil society on CFSP.
6. Make more use of the treaty right of initiative.
7. Move away from unanimity in all cases, for the EU to be viewed as a credible actor and be responsive to crises in real-time.
8. Be more active and more modest in EU public diplomacy and avoid charges of double standards.
9. Invest more in the training of diplomats from member states before their postings.
10. Seek an ad hoc arrangement to deal with Brexit while taking steps to improve strategic autonomy.

There may be easy wins in promoting EU–US cooperation on climate change, trade, Russia, Iran and China. However, this goodwill will not last unless the EU demonstrates that it can take on more responsibility for its own security and contribute more to stability in its neighbourhood.

Finally, the advent of a more pro-European, Democratic administration in the US provides an opportunity for the EU to take stock of its current shortcomings and increase the attention and resources for CFSP. The senior figures in the Biden administration, such as Tony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, know and respect the EU. There may be easy wins in promoting EU–US cooperation on climate change, trade, Russia, Iran and China (despite some current differences over the EU–China investment deal). However, this goodwill will not last unless the EU demonstrates that it can take on more responsibility for its own security and contribute more to stability in its neighbourhood. This is why a stronger CFSP is so important, and it is high time that the ambitions of the Lisbon Treaty are finally fulfilled.

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¹ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: EU-China – A strategic outlook](#), JOIN(2019) 5 final, Strasbourg: European Commission.

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