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BLOG
— **POST**

A European Parliament keen to strengthen its role on the international stage



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• Introduction

As the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is essentially an intergovernmental matter, the European Parliament's role in this area is strictly limited by the Treaties. However, it does manage to exert real influence on the international stage, through the areas in which it intervenes as co-legislator and through various players and instruments that enable it to develop its own diplomacy, which both competes with and complements executive diplomacy. As the only supranational parliament in the world, it is attracting real interest outside the EU, at the risk of becoming a prime target for foreign interference.

I • Powers strictly governed by the Treaties

The CFSP, which is enshrined in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), is subject to a special legal regime and is governed by specific rules and procedures. It is defined and implemented by the European Council and the Council, which act unanimously - except in cases where the Treaties provide otherwise, and excluding decisions with military or defence implications - and is executed by the High Representative and the Member States. Legislative acts may not be adopted.

The role of the European Parliament is mainly defined in Article 36, which stipulates that the High Representative shall consult it regularly on the main aspects and basic choices of the CFSP and CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy), inform it of developments in these policies and ensure that its views are duly taken into consideration. Using its power of scrutiny, Parliament may put questions or make recommendations to the Council and the High Representative, and holds a plenary debate twice a year on the progress made in implementation. As co-holder with the Council of the budgetary authority, it must also approve the annual CFSP budget, which gives it a say over the priorities selected.

Although it remains largely excluded from the decision-making process on Common Foreign and Security Policy *stricto sensu*, the European Parliament plays an important role as co-legislator on international issues. On the one hand, through development cooperation, humanitarian aid and questions relating to trade and investment, which come under the heading of external action; its approval is required, for example, for international trade agreements. Secondly, through internal policies with a strong external dimension, such as industry, public health, energy, the environment and asylum and immigration policy, where, unlike the CFSP, it has normative powers.

II • External action supported by a wide range of tools and players

When it comes to external action, the European Parliament has developed its own toolbox. Substantive work is carried out by a number of committees and sub-committees. At the top of the hierarchy, the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) carries out intense diplomatic activity but, unlike other committees, manages virtually no legislative dossiers. The European Parliament also wishes to work with its counterparts in third countries, and to this end relies on its permanent delegations (45 in the 2019-2024 term), which cover relations throughout the world and are of three types: delegations to official inter-parliamentary committees, delegations to multilateral parliamentary assemblies and delegations for relations with another country or group of countries - by far the most numerous. Finally, the Rules of Procedure state that the European Parliament is represented by its President in international relations; this function is expressly recognised, and the wording is sufficiently vague to allow for different types of action. There is one element that disturbs this fine edifice, and that is the friendship groups. These informal bodies, often secretly funded, can hinder the work of the European Parliament's official bodies, damage its reputation and the coherence of its action, and even be used maliciously by third countries. Their operation was clarified following the Qatargate scandal.

Despite its meagre legal powers in this area, the European Parliament attaches great importance to foreign policy, which is the subject of numerous debates in plenary. As a guarantor of transparency and democratic accountability, it monitors the executive, consults and is consulted, and represents a point of contact with international structures, EU institutions and national parliaments. It also raises the profile of the CFSP through its numerous missions, hearings and conferences in third countries, and has succeeded in developing its own form of diplomacy that both complements and competes with executive diplomacy. As the EU has enlarged, it has also played a key role in promoting mutual understanding between European countries, particularly between Western and Eastern Europe.

III • A predilection for human rights and values

If there is one thing that characterises the European Parliament in its external action, it is its predilection for human rights and values, and the prominent place it gives to the defence of public freedoms and fundamental rights. To this end, it has a wide range of instruments at its disposal, such as emergency resolutions and the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought. Acting as a mouthpiece is one of its most essential roles, and it has no hesitation in shaking up the Member States. The Member States are not always happy about this, but sometimes use him to raise awareness or break a deadlock. While its action on human rights is primarily declaratory, it sometimes succeeds in influencing the political agenda: it was following its mobilisation on the tragedy of the Uyghurs that the European Commission presented a proposal for a regulation to investigate the use of forced labour in corporate supply chains.

Another aspect concerns the various activities aimed at supporting democracy in third countries: electoral observation, which is the traditional pillar; assistance in building the capacity of parliaments; mediation and conflict prevention, both within a country and between two countries. During accession negotiations, the European Parliament also pays close attention to issues relating to respect for the rule of law and human rights, and to everything to do with institutional reform and democratic standards. By influencing the governance of the candidate countries, enlargement policy helps to impose high standards.

The European Parliament is also keen to assert its position on defence issues, even though the Member States are still jealous of their sovereignty. Although it has little room for manoeuvre, it can count on a very active SEDE sub-committee. It is also trying, through co-decision programmes, to obtain a say in matters with a strong geopolitical dimension. The real power in this area lies with the sectoral committees, mainly ITRE (Industry, Research and Energy), which has sole responsibility for the European Defence Fund, for example. But as co-leader on instruments adopted under the co-decision procedure -EDIRPA, aimed at encouraging joint procurement in the EU defence industry, and ASAP, the action to support the production of munitions in Europe - the SEDE subcommittee has had its legislative baptism of fire. Discussions are currently underway with a view to setting up a defence committee that could include everything to do with the European defence industry.

IV • A Parliament that needs to reform in order to carry more weight on the international stage

Third countries are primarily interested in the European Parliament as a co-legislator on texts that not only apply to the whole of the EU and therefore affect trade and investment within the single market, but are often imposed on a global scale by the force of European normative power. Third countries also watch what happens in Strasbourg for its resonance effect, likely to create a majority opinion on one subject or another. Every Thursday of the plenary session, the European Parliament adopts three urgent resolutions on specific cases of violations of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, which can cause reputational damage in the countries concerned. Some of them do not hesitate to intervene upstream to try to prevent the adoption of these texts or to soften their wording.

The European Parliament is subject to extensive lobbying and is not immune to attempts at foreign interference or corruption, as demonstrated by the Qatargate corruption scandal that broke in December 2022. Following these revelations, the European Parliament adopted a number of resolutions and drew up a 14-point reform plan, which includes strengthening the rules on the transparency of MEPs' declarations of private interests, conflicts of interest and declarations of meetings with representatives. Further reforms will undoubtedly be necessary to address the remaining problems.

Consideration should also be given to ways of strengthening the European Parliament's international role. One way could be to combat certain perverse effects of media coverage and politicisation, even though the Institution benefits from a high level of expertise and a valuable variety of origins and points of view. The European Parliament would also like to be part of *Team Europe* (initially designed to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic) to have more solid and effective mechanisms for consultation on foreign policy. Finally, the European Parliament will have a role to play in future institutional debates. It could try to obtain a greater role in defining foreign policy priorities and have a greater right to information on trade policy. Another option would be to abolish the current unanimity rule for CFSP.

• Conclusion

Although its role in foreign policy remains closely circumscribed by the Treaties, over the years the European Parliament has succeeded in establishing itself on the international stage, making full use of the tools at its disposal and not hesitating to develop genuine diplomatic action. The future will tell whether and how it will succeed in bridging the gap between its still limited powers in this area and its international ambitions. The next European elections will also have an international dimension, and will largely determine whether or not a truly powerful Europe is put in place. Faced with these challenges, the future European Parliament will have to make a choice: to become a player with real influence on the external scene, at the risk of no longer giving the same priority to defending values, or to remain a voice of dissent that is certainly strong but not always audible. •

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