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NEW BEGINNINGS

BOLSTERING EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN TIMES OF CONTESTATION

Wanted: A Europe that protects and defends

The European Union (EU) is facing a challenging strategic context. In the past five years, its neighbourhood has been characterised by bloody conflicts such as those in Ukraine, Syria and Libya. Their repercussions, in terms of terrorism and migration, have been directly felt by Europe's citizens. Russia has been playing an increasingly aggressive role in the neighbourhood and has undermined the EU's internal cohesion through disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks. The foundations of the rules-based multilateral order have been under attack not only from Russia and China, but also from the EU's chief ally, the United States (US). President Trump has vocally criticised the EU's efforts at attaining greater strategic autonomy. On top of all this, the United Kingdom (UK), one of the EU's few economic, diplomatic and military heavyweights, is preparing to leave the EU.



These developments have prompted Europe's citizens to call for a stronger EU role in the world. This demand rests on stable public preferences for closer European cooperation on foreign, defence and security policy.¹ Expectations have risen given the repeated political promises of a 'Europe that protects' as well as maximalist visions such as that of an 'EU army'. The prominence of EU foreign and security policy in the campaign for the European Parliament election shows that these policy areas are increasingly moving out of official channels often hidden from view into the public domain. Protecting citizens and defending interests and values are key priorities for the EU's next legislature as witnessed by the strategic priorities of the European Council² and the Political Guidelines of the Commission President-elect.³

This briefing argues that the EU is heading towards a capabilities-expectations gap 2.0: expectations on it to boost its international role are rising, but so are domestic and international obstacles. To narrow this gap and shape a new beginning for its foreign

1. European Commission, „Eurobarometer Surveys: 1999-2018“, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index>

2. European Council, „A new strategic agenda 2019-2024“, June 2019. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>

3. von der Leyen, Ursula, “Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024”, July 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/interim_en#political-guidelines

and security policy, the EU should start with the right institutional set-up, raise the European Defence Union (EDU) to the next level and revitalise its foreign policy. This will require a joined-up effort by EU institutions and member states.

1 ■ Towards a capabilities-expectations gap 2.0

The EU is facing a paradox. On the one hand, EU foreign, security and particularly defence policy is among the few areas where there has been measurable progress in recent years. In 2016, the EU Global Strategy was published, promising strategic autonomy. The outgoing Commission, supported by France and Germany, relaunched the debate on the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).⁴ Furthermore, the EU and its member states took important steps to establish the foundations of the EDU (see Box 1).

On the other hand, the EU often failed to live up to its ambition to influence international

developments. The US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal underlined the limits of Europe's strategic autonomy. The EU did not exert decisive political influence on conflicts in its neighbourhood such as in Syria and Libya. The member states failed to speak with one voice on key international dossiers such as the crisis in Venezuela and Chinese human rights violations. The debate on extending QMV to CFSP is bogged down due to sovereignty concerns in smaller, Eastern and Southern European member states. The EDU's foundations are being built, but defence experts already deplore the lack of ambition at work. In addition, there is a risk of a disconnect between the development of joint capabilities and the political will to use them. The continuous refusal of the member states to use the Battlegroups – the EU's battalion-sized (about 1,500 personnel) rapid response force rotating since 2005 – remains a telling example.

What is new about today's capabilities-expectations gap, a long-standing characteristic of EU foreign and security policy, is how it is exacerbated by domestic and international developments. The member states failed to speak with a single voice in the past due to their different

BOX 1 ■ The foundations of the European Defence Union

- A total of 25 member states activated **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)** and agreed on legally binding commitments as well as 34 projects.
- The European Commission paved the way for the establishment of the **European Defence Fund (EDF)** projected to provide €13bn under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for collaborative defence research and development.
- The member states launched the **Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)**, a mechanism to promote information exchange and synchronisation of national defence investment planning.
- The EU established the **Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)** within the European External Action Service (EEAS) to plan and lead non-executive military operations within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
- The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) proposed the **European Peace Facility (EPF)**, an off-budget instrument that would provide €10.5bn for 2021-27. It would cover the common costs of military operations, contribute to military peace operations led by other international actors, and support third countries with military infrastructure and equipment.
- The **EU and NATO** published two Joint Declarations to give new impetus to their partnership and agreed on 74 concrete actions.

4. European Commission, "A stronger global actor: a more efficient decision-making for EU Common Foreign and Security Policy", Communication, September 2019.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-efficient-decision-making-cfsp-communication-647_en.pdf

strategic cultures and outlooks. Now, the challenge of building consensus is intensified by more populist and nationalist foreign policies in some member states as well as the elaborate divide-and-rule tactics of external actors, notably China. The EU has long since recognised the need for combining civilian and military instruments within a comprehensive approach. However, dealing with today's hybrid threats and the rise of geo-economics requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond classical EU external action and genuinely brings together internal and external policies – economic, monetary and foreign policy.

To narrow this capabilities-expectations gap 2.0, the EU should use the changing of the guard in Brussels as an opportunity to take decisive steps to shape this fresh start.

2 ■ Starting with the right institutional set-up

There are no institutional fixes to the above-mentioned challenges. Yet, starting with the right set-up is necessary to promote joint thinking, ensure coherence and build on existing progress.

According to the Treaties, the European Council should identify the EU's strategic objectives and define general guidelines for the CFSP, including defence and other areas of external action. To strengthen its ability to play this role, it could meet once per year in the format of a '**European Security Council**'. This should not be a new institution, but rather a new meeting format. As suggested by Jean-Marc Ayrault and Frank-Walter Steinmeier in 2016, the foreign, defence and interior ministers should prepare these summits.⁵ The HR/VP should make full use of his seat in the European Council and kick-start the discussion by presenting forward-looking priorities for putting the

Global Strategy into effect. This would follow logically from the retrospective discussion of the Strategy's implementation reports in the Council.

The aim of this annual meeting would be threefold: First, it would force the European Council to focus there and then on foreign and security policy alone and to agree on concrete annual priorities while implementing the EU Global Strategy. Second, its preparation would promote the promised comprehensive approach across governance levels. Third, it could be a venue for discussion with key non-EU European partners. Post-Brexit UK and Norway could, for instance, be regular invitees. The European Security Council could thus also inform European positions in NATO and within the European Intervention Initiative.

The next few years will also see a growing supranational dimension in European defence cooperation. Given the future establishment of the EDF, the Commission will take on a greater role in this field. To allow it to lead on industrial consolidation and link the EDF with related regulatory matters, a **Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space** (DG Defence) should be established. This new and relatively small DG should bring together the defence-related competences currently spread across various DGs: the management of the EDF, the Commission contribution to military mobility as well as defence-related aspects of space policy and cybersecurity. To ensure coherence within the Commission this new DG should coordinate on a monthly basis with other relevant DGs (notably GROW, MOVE, CONNECT and TRADE) within the Project Team on Defence Union. A dedicated Defence Commissioner would provide the necessary political leadership behind defence industrial consolidation and could act as a single interlocutor for the member states as well as the EU's more intergovernmental bodies.

⁵ Ayrault, Jean Marc and Steinmeier, Frank-Walter, "A strong Europe in a world of uncertainties", June 2016. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/160624-bm-am-fra-st/281702>

The member states tend to view the establishment of a DG Defence with scepticism. They fear that a powerful DG Defence could escape their control and answer more to industrial than to political and strategic considerations. To dissipate these fears and ensure a direct link between the supranational and intergovernmental, the internal and external dimensions of defence, the **Defence Commissioner should be placed under the authority of the HR/VP** in his role as Vice-President of the Commission. The HR/VP should also chair the Commission Project Team on Defence Union, the Defence Commissioner acting here as his deputy. This set-up would ensure coherence between DG Defence on the one hand, and the Council, EEAS and EDA on the other. It could also lead to new synergies such as targeted Commission contributions to PESCO projects.⁶

3 ■ Raising the European Defence Union to the next level

The European Defence Union is still in its infancy and its ability to deliver depends on the next steps towards maturity. One important next step for defence industrial consolidation will be **more convergent arms export policies**. Many of the collaborative capability projects rely on exports beyond the EU's borders to be economically viable. The unfolding bi- and mini-lateral agreements (e.g. the forthcoming Franco-German one) are necessary but could also lead to fragmentation. The EU should thus work towards a more uniform implementation of the 2008 Common Position on Arms Export Controls. This is an area where the member

states are reluctant to delegate sovereignty. However, they could establish a peer review mechanism within the Council's Working Party on Conventional Arms Exports to foster information exchange and develop more convergent risk analyses.⁷

Another important next step is strengthening the EDU's operational arm. The Council decided to **upgrade the Military Planning and Conduct Capability** (MPCC) by extending its mandate to executive military operations of Battlegroup size by 2020. The upgrade should be used as an opportunity to strengthen the MPCC's civil-military dimension, currently only reflected in a small coordination cell that connects it with its civilian counterpart, the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC). The CPCC and MPCC should be placed under one institutional and physical roof. This would facilitate more coordinated planning and thus reflect the nature of today's hybrid threats. In addition, it would underline the EU's added value vis-à-vis NATO and could dissipate fears of unnecessary duplication.

The upgrade of the MPCC should go hand-in-hand with a systematic discussion of the **usability of the Battlegroups**. This should include reflections on their potential contribution to territorial defence. According to NATO expert Jamie Shea, using a Battlegroup as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence or in the Black Sea could be imagined.⁸ It could contribute to burden-sharing and thus illustrate the added value of the EU's defence initiatives both to Eastern European member states and to the US.

Finally, the EU should **deepen cooperation with NATO**. This implies focusing on areas

⁶. For a more detailed analysis on DG Defence, see: Koenig, Nicole, "Why we need a Commission DG Defence", policy brief, Jacques Delors Institute Berlin, August 2019. https://www.delorsinstitut.de/2015/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/20190819_DGDefence_Koenig.pdf

⁷. Besch, Sophia and Oppenheim, Beth, "The EU needs an effective common arms export policy", Centre on European Reform Bulletin, June 2019. <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2019/eu-needs-effective-common-arms-export-policy>

⁸. Shea, Jamie, "Piecing Together Security for A Stronger Europe", in: "Vision for Europe Report", Friends of Europe, May 2019. https://www.friendsofeurope.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/foe_vision-for-europe_web.pdf

where potential synergies are greatest and finding pragmatic ways of working around the well-known political obstacles. Hybrid threats and cyber are key areas of cooperation where mandates increasingly overlap. EU and NATO staffs should work towards harmonising the respective hybrid playbooks to outline a division of labour and modes of cooperation in crisis prevention and response. They should closely coordinate on cyber security and defence in light of the EU's new Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox and the PESCO project on cyber rapid response teams and mutual assistance. The two organisations could also develop creative ways of sharing resources, for instance by establishing expert rosters to which they both nominate the same personnel.

4 ■ Revitalising EU foreign policy

In implementing the EU Global Strategy, there has been a strong focus on defence policy. In the coming years, the EU will have to do more to systematically build up its foreign policy muscle.

Jean-Claude Juncker, Ursula von der Leyen, and Josep Borrell have advocated the **extension of QMV to CFSP**. However, given obvious national sovereignty reflexes, progress requires persuasion and can only be gradual. It might thus be worth exploring some lower-hanging fruits. One option would be making civilian crisis management a first test case for QMV. This area is usually less controversial than others and is one where agreement does not entail participation. A second path worth exploring is the ad hoc extension of QMV via the enabling clause (Art. 31(2) TEU): the European Council (or

European Security Council) could agree on issue-specific or regional strategies to be implemented by the Council via QMV.

Taking gradual steps will not help address immediate foreign policy priorities. In an interview in May 2019, Borrell deplored the fact that the Foreign Affairs Council was “more a valley of tears than a centre of decision-making”.⁹ When faced with a crisis, it expressed concern and moved on to the next topic. It would be illusionary to think that the new HR/VP could bring about consensus on every issue. However, as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council, he should use his agenda-setting power to **focus the debate on a more limited number of strategic items** where the EU can add value through its combined civilian and military instruments. Priority items that will require the HR/VP's leadership and vision throughout the next five years include: developing a strategic agenda for the Balkans, engaging with Turkey beyond membership, and responding to China's growing strategic rivalry. Ahead of Council meetings, the HR/VP and EEAS should consult with the Commission Project Teams he steers and with the member states to produce input papers setting out clear-cut and ambitious policy options.

Bridging the widening capabilities-expectations gap and deepening institutional silos will require more than smart institutional reforms and leadership. The EU should thus use the coming years to forge a longer-term vision for developing the CFSP. The Council should establish a high-level working group given the task to produce a **visionary Report on the Future of EU Foreign Policy**. Akin to the Werner Report on the Economic and Monetary Union of 1970,¹⁰ it should sketch the longer-term objectives (10-15 years) and the necessary steps towards

⁹. Borrell, Josep and Torreblanca, José Ignacio, “Borrell returns: His vision for Europe”, Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019. https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_borrell_returns_his_vision_for_europe

¹⁰. Werner Group, “Report to the Council and the Commission on the realization by stages of economic and monetary union”, Luxembourg, October 1970. https://ec.europa.eu/archives/emu_history/documentation/chapter5/19701008en72realisationbystage.pdf

them. This group should include a diverse set of member state experts. Meetings could be jointly prepared by the Strategic Policy Planning division of the EEAS and the European Policy and Strategy Centre in the European Commission. This would ensure that the two sides of the EU's foreign policy 'brain' inform this longer-term vision and make it their own.

Conclusion

To address geo-economic competition and a growing number of hybrid threats the EU's new leadership team will have to closely integrate internal and external policies. The European Security Council should provide annual guidance on putting the Global Strategy to work. The Council should launch a process outlining the longer-term vision on how EU foreign policy should develop. The new Commission should become a driving force behind defence industrial consolidation. The role of the HR/VP as a linchpin between the intergovernmental and supranational levels should be strengthened. He should focus on a select number of priorities and push the Council towards greater effectiveness by presenting ambitious policy options. Some of the proposed steps may seem unrealistic now, but the past five years have shown that bold steps are indeed possible if external and internal pressures generate sufficient political will.

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