



ARE PRIME MINISTERS TAKING OVER EU FOREIGN POLICY?

Stefan Lehne



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About the Author

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Summary

Foreign ministers have lost influence in recent decades, and prime ministers have emerged as the central foreign policy actors. Mirroring this development, the European Council, which convenes the European Union's (EU) heads of state and government, has become the top decisionmaker on EU foreign policy. But the European Council's approach to external affairs lacks coherence, continuity, and ambition. The Brussels leadership team that took over in late 2014 should significantly upgrade the European Council's role in this area and, through that body, energize the EU's other foreign policy institutions.

Unfulfilled Potential

- Prime ministers tend to approach foreign policy from a short-term and media-driven perspective and through the prism of domestic politics. This approach often neglects substantive analysis.
- Similarly, the European Council operates under severe time constraints and handles foreign policy almost exclusively in a crisis-management context. With rare exceptions, it does not fulfill its task of giving EU foreign policy strategic direction.
- The European Council's permanent president, the EU high representative that in 2009 was given more powers, and the European External Action Service (EEAS, the EU's foreign policy arm) have considerable potential to make the council's work more coherent and effective. But this potential has hardly been tapped.

The Way Ahead

European Council President Donald Tusk and High Representative Federica Mogherini should work together to upgrade the council's external action. Its meetings need to be better prepared and tied in with the foreign policy work of other EU bodies.

The president and the high representative should build a personal record of leadership on key challenges. They should support each other in identifying suitable subjects, obtaining mandates from the European Council, and mobilizing the necessary support from member states.

The European Council should hold regular strategic debates. To assume its role in giving strategic direction to the EU's external policies, the council should convene debates on the EU's most important relationships, on regional challenges, and on horizontal issues.

The EEAS should be turned into the main source of strategic analysis to support the council. Drawing on the expertise of the EU delegations and working closely with the European Commission and member states, the EEAS should supply a steady stream of substantive analysis to the European Council and other EU foreign policy forums.

The European Council framework should be used to coordinate top-level diplomatic activities among the member states and among the institutions and the member states. This could involve sharing information on diplomatic visits and key messages as well as streamlining EU participation in international events.

Introduction

Globalization has profoundly changed the meaning and the handling of foreign policy in Europe. Foreign ministries and traditional foreign policy elites have lost ground, while the chiefs of the executive branch—prime ministers and, in some countries, presidents—have emerged as the central foreign policy actors. The separation between external and domestic policy that existed when the European Union (EU) was formed has broken down.

While necessary and inevitable, this development has also led to a certain deprofessionalization of foreign policy. Prime ministers are mostly formed by domestic politics and are preoccupied with a heavy internal agenda. Consequently, foreign policy is increasingly driven by short-term considerations, media attention, and special interests. In-depth analysis and strategic planning tend to be neglected.

At the EU level, heads of state and government meet in the European Council, which in the last decade has also become the central EU institution in the area of external relations. The European Council sits on top of a complex foreign policy machine, which since late 2014 has been under new management. The EU's 28 foreign ministers hold monthly discussions on ongoing issues. The foreign policy high representative—now Federica Mogherini—chairs these meetings but is also a vice president of the European Commission, which retains important external responsibilities such as trade and aid, and the head of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's diplomatic arm. Dozens of committees involving the institutions and the member states support the EU's work on foreign policy issues.

However, when tough decisions have to be made, it is increasingly only the European Council, now led by President Donald Tusk, that has the political authority to take charge. Unfortunately, the body suffers from similar deficits that afflict the prime ministers individually. The European Council operates under severe time constraints and frequently approaches foreign policy issues in an improvised manner. Substantive preparation based on solid strategic analysis is often lacking, and sometimes the top level is not sufficiently connected to the other parts of the foreign policy infrastructure.

At a time of unprecedented challenges for the EU's foreign policy, the European Council's current approach will no longer suffice. There are a number of steps that would make the European Council's involvement in external

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relations more inclusive and substantive, thereby providing the EU's foreign policy with stronger and more consistent leadership.

The Decline of Foreign Ministers

When foreign policy in Europe was still mainly a matter of war and peace, foreign ministers were big political beasts. They played a crucial role not only in shaping developments leading up to the two world wars, but also in the efforts to bring about a durable peace in Europe—think of France's Aristide Briand and Germany's Gustav Stresemann. Even in the 1950s and 1960s, in the early years of European integration, many initiatives came from foreign ministers like Robert Schuman of France, and diplomats carried out most of the negotiations on the new European institutions.

Those days are long gone. Foreign ministers and their ministries belong to the big institutional losers of recent decades.

The international agenda has massively expanded beyond the capacity of any single national institution, requiring the involvement of the whole government. The constituency for influencing foreign policy has broadened, and many more governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders have emerged, while the traditional foreign policy elites have lost influence.

As a result of these trends, the borders between international and domestic politics have largely disappeared. Most of the burning issues of the twenty-first century, such as climate change, energy, migration, and terrorism, have

both an internal and an external dimension.

The complexity of today's international relations also requires a great deal of specialized expertise, which normally only specialized ministries and agencies possess. This weakens the position of foreign ministries, which largely remain the preserve of generalists. At the same time, diplomats have lost their traditional comparative advantage because international experience and language skills are widespread throughout the European public sector. Moreover, modern technology and social media have revolutionized information flows, rendering much of traditional diplomatic reporting obsolete and posing entirely new challenges for managing information and public communication about international developments.

Foreign ministries have not only lost their gatekeeper role in international relations; today they are also struggling just to keep up with developments and remain in the game.¹ Many foreign ministries still aim at maintaining an overall coordination role, but frequently they lack the means and the political clout to achieve that goal effectively. Budget cuts have reduced ministries' personnel and resources, and their political capital has been depleted as well.

Foreign ministers and their ministries belong to the big institutional losers of recent decades.

Foreign ministers used to be heavyweights in most European cabinets. Today, this is usually still the case in the three biggest EU countries—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—which continue to have extensive international responsibilities. But in many other EU capitals, top politicians who can knock heads together and effectively coordinate policies are much more likely to deal with finance or home affairs.

Foreign ministries are adjusting to the new situation. Supporting trade and investment as well as ensuring the consular protection of an ever-increasing number of traveling citizens have emerged in many countries as new core tasks. Managing diplomatic networks and supporting the infrastructure of multilateral diplomacy remain important institutional roles. However, in terms of shaping foreign policy, the future influence of foreign ministries will depend on how well they can work with the real lead actors—the prime ministers.

Prime Ministers Take the Lead

The heads of the executive branch have always been important foreign policy actors. Today, they are frequently the only national politicians who can arbitrate between clashing internal interests and determine the direction of external policies. Increasingly, heads of state and government also take the lead in implementing these policies through their bilateral and multilateral interaction with their peers in third countries.

While this power shift in foreign policy corresponds to the evolution of international relations, it nevertheless has its downside. Most European heads of government have ascended through the ranks of domestic politics and are often not well versed in foreign policy. Most of them have only a few advisers on international relations. (Again, the big three are an exception: the French president's office contains a large number of officials dealing with foreign and security policy; the UK National Security Council has a considerable pool of expertise; and the German chancellor's office has roughly twenty foreign policy aides.)

Of course, prime ministers rely on advice and support from their respective foreign and defense ministries and intelligence agencies. However, the quality of that support depends on the personal relationship between the prime minister and other key actors, on coalition politics, and on the capacities of the ministries and agencies involved, which in the great majority of EU member states are quite modest.

Foreign policy has always to a large extent consisted of reacting to events, but responding intelligently to external developments is no less demanding than handling problems of internal policy. Because the traditional barriers between external and internal politics have eroded, many European prime ministers tend to approach international developments from a short-term perspective and through the prism of domestic politics. Yet, dealing with international events

involves understanding the situation and its context well, defining clearly the interests involved, and identifying the appropriate instruments to address the situation. That requires intellectual curiosity, genuine expertise, a long-term perspective, a culture of sharing information across institutions, and a clear sense of priorities.

Instead, governments' responses to international developments are often driven by short-term media attention and superficial assumptions about public opinion. Rather than seeing the full picture, governments often focus only on those aspects of a problem that generate domestic interest. The imperative of going on record on the evening news often preempts any in-depth engagement with an issue.

The shallowness of many of today's foreign policy discussions in Europe is, to some extent, a side effect of the greatest achievement of European integration. By creating a stable peace order and thus ending the Darwinian struggle for survival that had dominated Europe's history for many centuries, the EU rendered the issues of war and peace irrelevant in the relationships among the member states.

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For many of the smaller states, whose foreign policy horizon had always been limited to the European continent and which are now comfortably embedded in a durable zone of peace, this achievement took most of the urgency out of foreign and security policy. For the leaders of these countries, the EU offers a welcome opportunity to express views on issues on which they had hardly any influence in the past. While prime ministers are—at least in theory—all committed to a common EU foreign policy,

some “postmodern” leaders are quite reluctant to shoulder the costs and risks that an active EU foreign policy would entail. This often limits the EU's collective ambition and explains the preference for declarations and symbolic gestures over concrete engagement.

The situation is different for leaders of countries sitting on the fringes of the union, like the Baltic states, Cyprus, Greece, and Poland, which continue to face external threats. They remain mobilized and use their participation in EU foreign policy to obtain maximum support for protecting their particular interests.

For the leaders of the big member states—in particular the UK and France, which have strong interests and ambitions beyond the EU—involvement in the union has only limited impact on their foreign policy. The leaders of these countries tend to look at the EU as just one among several important foreign policy institutions. They go to EU meetings to obtain support for their initiatives and to have access to the EU's instruments, usually financial assistance and sanctions or military or civilian operations. Consequently, they perceive the EU less as a collective actor than as an influence multiplier and as a toolbox to support national foreign policy objectives.

However, all EU countries have in common that their individual weight in the world is declining and is bound to get smaller still. Seen from the point of view of a prime minister in any European capital, many events in distant parts of the globe seem faraway, difficult to influence, and ultimately somebody else's business (usually that of the United States). This "small state" mind-set carries over into discussions about international developments in EU forums. In the absence of a substantive common analysis, the EU's large joint capacities tend to be ignored. Therefore, the EU's fragmented consciousness regarding international developments sometimes translates into collective irresponsibility.

The diversity of member states' viewpoints and interests places a significant constraint on the development of a better EU foreign policy. In fact, given these handicaps, it is remarkable how far the EU has come since the common foreign and security policy was set up in 1992.

The current international challenges in Europe's Eastern and Southern neighborhoods, however, require the union to move to a new level of coherence and effectiveness. And this will necessitate much stronger and more consistent leadership from the very top. This is why the European Council's handling of foreign policy issues is so important.

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The Rise of the European Council

During the first decades of European foreign policy, the Foreign Affairs Council in which member states' foreign ministers discuss ongoing issues was generally recognized to be the EU's main decisionmaking body. The European Council remained—at least in theory—limited to a broad policy-shaping role. According to the Maastricht Treaty, the European Council "shall define the principles . . . and general guidelines" and "decide on common strategies to be implemented by the Union in areas where the Member States have important interests in common."²

However, over the years, the position of the European Council in the EU's institutional framework became stronger, and so did its role in foreign policy. It is hard to say whether this development was driven by the increasing prominence of the prime ministers in framing national foreign policies or whether, conversely, the rise of the European Council reinforced the position of prime ministers on the national level. The processes were probably mutually reinforcing.

The 2007 Lisbon Treaty, which aimed to streamline the functioning of the EU, confirmed that the European Council had assumed the main leadership role on foreign policy. The Treaty on European Union states that the European Council "shall adopt the necessary decisions" in this area.³ This more operational role is also reflected in another provision, which gives the president of

the European Council the right to convene extraordinary meetings if international developments so require.

Somewhat paradoxically, the European Council's assumption of a central role in foreign policy was accompanied by a decision to kick the foreign ministers out of the room. Ever since the creation of the European Council in 1975, foreign ministers have had a seat at the table, but this right was taken away in the Lisbon Treaty—a serious loss of influence and a major blow to their prestige.

The European Council's ability to deal with foreign policy is limited mainly by the fact that the body meets only a few times every year and that it deals with many other matters. In the broader area of external relations, the European Council has always made the key decisions on the enlargement of the union. Rarely, important trade policy issues are also dealt with on that level.

On foreign and security policy, the European Council has in recent years taken the lead on important structural decisions on the EU's instruments, but it has largely neglected its task of giving broad strategic guidance on substantive policies. In fact, with rare exceptions, the institution deals with foreign and security policy issues only in situations of urgent crisis.

While the European Council's role in foreign policy has become more prominent, the standing of the Foreign Affairs Council has declined. That group's monthly meetings retain some relevance as regular focal points of the union's overall foreign policy activity. However, many participants and observers express frustration with the current performance of this body. There are a number of reasons for this state of affairs, such as overcrowded agendas, insufficiently focused discussions, and often rather bland council conclusions. But the fundamental reason for the Foreign Affairs Council's unsatisfactory role is that its participants are no longer as important as they used to be ten or twenty years ago.

Moreover, the division of work between the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council is not clearly defined. In some cases, the Foreign Affairs Council acts as a preparatory body and drafts the decisions that will be adopted at the highest level. But in other cases, the European Council has detached itself from the Brussels foreign policy machine and developed its own dynamic. This was the case in the Ukraine crisis in summer 2014, when the heads of state and government took the lead in crisis management and essentially sidelined the foreign ministers.

In the context of this crisis, the European Council has also begun adopting declarations while not in session. If this trend continues, it could significantly change the body's handling of foreign policy. Such declarations are initiated by the president of the European Council and prepared through electronic communication between the prime ministers' closest advisers on EU matters, known as sherpas. Their network constitutes an alternative track for preparing European Council decisions—a situation about which foreign ministries often have considerable misgivings.

Generally, the informal leadership role of the big EU countries is even stronger at the level of the European Council than among foreign ministers. Experienced and clever foreign ministers with extensive personal networks can exert influence, even if they come from small or medium-sized countries. The heads of government of those countries, however, usually operate primarily within the context of national politics and deal only intermittently with international issues. No wonder that the leaders of France, Germany, and the UK, who are constantly involved in handling foreign policy issues, tend to dominate the European Council's work in this area.

The President of the European Council

The lack of a strategic perspective is mainly the consequence of member states' ambivalent and restrictive approach to EU foreign policy. But it also has something to do with leadership in Brussels. A more ambitious chair of the European Council could nudge the member states to take a more proactive and long-term approach to external relations.

When they adopted the Lisbon Treaty, EU member states decided to replace the rotating presidency of the European Council with a full-time president. Yet, member states gave the new chair a rather vague mandate on foreign policy. The president has the task to “ensure the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its common foreign and security policy, without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative.”²⁴

The creation of this function was controversial. France, with the support of Germany and the UK, had pushed for this, but many of the smaller member states remained skeptical. They feared that a powerful president of the European Council would diminish the influence of the European Commission, which traditionally has been perceived as an ally of the smaller member states. The vague mandate for foreign policy and, in particular, the fact that the president of the European Council has no direct authority over the high representative were meant to limit the international clout of this position.

As the highest EU official in terms of rank, the European Council president could potentially be a key interlocutor of top political actors in other parts of the globe. However, the telephone logs of figures like U.S. President Barack Obama or Russian President Vladimir Putin for the last few years show that while German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande, and British Prime Minister David Cameron received regular calls, the president of the European Council rarely appeared on these lists. The EU's single phone number that former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger famously demanded many years ago might today belong to Merkel but certainly not to the president of the European Council.

A more ambitious chair of the European Council could nudge the member states to take a more proactive and long-term approach to external relations.

In fact, Herman Van Rompuy, as the first holder of this position, displayed only modest ambitions in international relations. He mostly limited himself to participation in summits, meetings with foreign dignitaries, and relatively few visits beyond the EU. This rather low international profile was probably to some extent a matter of personal inclination. However, it is also true that the financial crisis, which dominated most of Van Rompuy's term, would have left little scope for international activism in any case.

Another factor limiting the European Council president's international role is the lack of real instruments afforded to the holder of the position. It is the high representative who sits on top of the EU's collective diplomatic machine, the EEAS, and it is the president of the European Commission who oversees the use of the EU's powerful external instruments, such as trade and assistance. As only a few officials in the European Council president's cabinet and in the council secretariat work directly for the president on international issues, he needs to rely on briefings and advice from the EEAS and the commission. While both institutions are ready to help, the lack of a chain of command from the European Council to the EEAS limits the president's ability to truly take the lead on these matters.

Still, the president of the European Council has considerable strengths. He can set the institution's agenda and frame its discussions, and he can be in permanent contact with his peers in the European Council and with global leaders.

On that basis, a strong personality with an established international profile could be an important international player, if—and that is a big if—the leaders of the large EU member states allowed him to play such a role. Yet, at the present stage of development of EU foreign policy, there is a considerable risk that those states prefer to keep top-level diplomacy on the most important issues for themselves.

The high representative could theoretically play a key linking role between the European Council, whose meetings she attends, and the Foreign Affairs Council, which she chairs. This would ensure that the two bodies work in a joined-up manner. During the term in office of the previous high representative, Catherine Ashton, this did not work well. Beginning with a presentation on strategic partners in September 2010 that was generally not seen as a great success, the high representative played only a low-key role in the foreign policy work of the European Council. Whereas the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission met every week, there was no regular consultation mechanism between Van Rompuy and Ashton. Cooperation between them tended to be ad hoc and driven by events rather than structured and systematic.

The EEAS did supply briefing materials to the president of the European Council and preparatory documents for the institution's foreign policy decisions, but these papers were often replaced by draft language emerging from parallel informal consultations among the bigger member states. Overall, there

has been a lack of a well-defined process and thus a deficit of coherence between the work of the Foreign Affairs Council and that of the European Council.

How to Make the European Council More Effective on Foreign Policy

The arrival of new presidents of the European Council and commission and of a new high representative in late 2014 offers an opportunity to review existing practices and look at ways to enable the EU to confront urgent external challenges more effectively. One key objective of this review should be to make the union's various institutional components work together more productively.

The European Council must take its role as the central institution for major foreign policy decisions seriously and devote more time and effort to this topic. Today, only the chiefs of the executive branch of the member states have the political authority to determine the course of the EU's external action. But the European Council cannot operate in isolation. Its meetings require careful preparation in the Foreign Affairs Council and should be based on substantive input from the commission and the EEAS. Solid arrangements need to be in place to ensure effective follow-up to the European Council's decisions. In this context, the EU's key actors should consider taking the following steps.

Improve the Partnership Between the President of the European Council and the High Representative

The president of the European Council has the rank and the international network at the very highest level, while the high representative has access to the diplomatic assets of the EEAS and the external relations instruments of the commission. As these two players' relative strengths are perfectly complementary, they have a lot to gain from working closely together. In tandem and with the crucial support of the president of the commission, they can ensure that the various instruments and assets of the EU can be pulled together in the service of a coherent policy.

European Council President Donald Tusk and High Representative Federica Mogherini should therefore consult regularly and set up strong liaison arrangements between their cabinets. They should consider agenda planning for the European Council on foreign policy as a joint project and involve each other at every step of the process. Their cooperation should not only concern the shaping of foreign policy but also its implementation. Whenever suitable, Tusk and Mogherini should hold joint meetings with foreign leaders and closely coordinate their visits, public statements, and messages. Just like a prime minister and a foreign minister at the national level, they should operate as one solid team.

Build a Record of Concrete Achievement

Taking over as president of the European Council or as high representative does not in itself turn you into a credible leader on EU foreign policy. Neither position is yet established enough on the international level to ensure such a profile. Chairing meetings and engaging in the rituals of high-level diplomacy will not suffice to establish one. To shore up their credibility, both Tusk and Mogherini will have to build a personal record of achievement on a few key challenges.

Their first task will be to identify suitable subjects for their direct personal engagement and to agree on a division of labor. In terms of their backgrounds, former Polish prime minister Tusk seems cut out for tackling issues relating to Eastern Europe, while former Italian foreign minister Mogherini could take on challenges in the EU's Southern neighborhood.

The second step is to convince member states to give the two leaders relevant mandates. As the governments of the big EU member states tend to monopolize top-level crisis management, this might require considerable powers of persuasion.

Next, Tusk and Mogherini will have to assemble suitable teams, develop strategies, and establish the necessary international contacts to fulfill their roles.

All this is time-consuming and difficult for people who are already extremely busy. But as former high representative Javier Solana showed through his work on the Western Balkans, the Middle East, and the Common Security and Defense Policy, and as Ashton demonstrated with her successes on the Iranian nuclear negotiations and on Serbia-Kosovo relations, there is really no alternative. Ultimately, only substantive results will secure international credibility for the new foreign policy team.

Deliver More Substance Through Better Agenda Setting

While the European Council is likely to continue its foreign policy involvement in the context of acute crisis management, it would be desirable for the European Council to also hold regular strategic discussions on important foreign policy issues. Such issues include key relationships with third countries or regions, as well as horizontal topics such as climate change or migration. These discussions should also include issues that are controversial among the member states. It is only through substantive discussions that EU governments can overcome their differences of views and find new common ground.

Because the European Council operates under extreme time constraints—realistically, only one or two hours can be devoted to such discussions every three or four months—talks need to be well prepared through preliminary meetings in the Foreign Affairs Council and in other bodies.

As is the case in other areas of EU policy, the European Council should give the impetus to the further development of key aspects of EU foreign policy. The discussion on defense in the December 2013 European Council meeting

can serve as a model. The EU should schedule such discussions well in advance and task the Foreign Affairs Council, the EEAS, and the commission with preparatory work. The president of the European Council and the high representative should monitor progress and submit the outcome to the European Council, which can then make the necessary decisions.

Such a process appears particularly necessary when common EU instruments and national assets need to be brought together, such as in developing regional strategies or international energy policy. Decisions directly involving the heads of government of the member states have a high chance of mobilizing national resources to support the EU's external action.

Use the EEAS for Strategic Planning

The lack of common analysis and of shared assessments of international developments is one of the EU's greatest handicaps as an international actor.

At present, foreign policy debates among the 28 heads of state and government or foreign ministers are often only informed by the knowledge and analysis that each country obtains using national means. This analysis is often incomplete and does not take the EU's overall potential into account. This fragmented view of the world then results in a lack of ambition and confidence.

The Lisbon Treaty provided tools for addressing this situation, but they have not been sufficiently used.

With 140 diplomatic missions, the EU has a larger network than all but the biggest member states. These delegations encompass expertise not just on political and economic matters but also in related technical areas. The EU Intelligence Analysis Center and the new EU Conflict Early Warning System are tools that provide solid assessments on current developments. The EU runs fifteen civilian and military missions, which generate substantial information about crisis regions. And the EEAS and the commission employ highly qualified experts in their various departments responsible for geographic and horizontal issues.

In the past, the EU has used these assets from time to time to produce strategic analysis for papers, in most instances when EU bodies have explicitly asked it to do so. Many of these papers have proven useful.

But such analytical work should be upgraded. The objective should be to mobilize all these resources systematically to produce an ongoing stream of strategic analysis as a basis for discussions among the 28. Such collective analysis, which would also require continuous input from member states and from the commission, should improve the understanding of risk and help identify the key interests of the union and thereby help to set clear priorities. The high representative together with the EEAS could assume analysis and coordination functions similar to those of the U.S. National Security Council in Washington.

Moving in this direction would require first and foremost a change of mindset. Ashton and the EEAS under her leadership were very reluctant to submit

papers that could become controversial. The tendency was to wait and see in what direction the views of the member states would evolve and then—if producing documents was unavoidable—to try to anticipate the lowest common denominator. This cautious attitude of the EEAS stands in sharp contrast to the role of the European Commission in other areas of the EU. In those cases, the commission sees itself as the motor of progress in European integration and often takes initiatives that will meet with considerable resistance in some member states.

The new high representative should stimulate the creative energies of the foreign policy staff and ask for working documents that steer rather than follow the evolving opinions of the member states.

The new high representative, with the support of the president of the European Council, should stimulate the creative energies of the foreign policy staff and ask for working documents that steer rather than follow the evolving opinions of the member states. Ideally, every foreign policy item discussed in the Foreign Affairs Council and in the European Council should be accompanied by some kind of written contribution from the EEAS or the commission, be it an analytical piece with policy options or a substantive proposal.

Adopt a New EU External Action Strategy

The European Council decided in December 2013 that the new high representative should in 2015 present a report on the impact of changes in the global environment and on the challenges and opportunities arising from them for the union. While the language is convoluted due to British misgivings, this decision points toward a new strategy for the EU's external action. Such a strategy could provide an extremely useful overarching framework for the analytical work done by the EEAS.

Solana's European Security Strategy of 2003 was the EU's first serious effort to develop a foreign policy strategy document.⁵ Many of its elements remain valid today, but the world and the EU have changed significantly. A multipolar world has emerged in which economic weight and power are shifting toward Asia, and new actors have increased their influence. The EU, for its part, has expanded from fifteen to 28 member states, greatly extending the scope and diversity of its foreign policy interests. The EU's external action structures provided for in the Lisbon Treaty are still at an early stage of implementation and urgently need a coherent policy orientation.

The point of such a strategy document would be to set a number of priorities and to match means and instruments to these priorities. In doing so, the EU would define the level of its collective ambition and reach a clearer understanding of what the union should do as a whole and what can be left to the member states. Done in the right way, such a strategy would not only set out medium- and long-term goals but also provide guidance for achieving those goals via the day-to-day conduct of policy.

Use the European Council for Top-Level Foreign Policy Coordination

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy co-exists with the national foreign policies of the member states. Governments should, of course, act on the basis of common EU positions where such positions have been unanimously agreed to. But national leaders also make their own statements on foreign policy developments, communicate through diplomatic missions, exchange visits with third countries, participate in international conferences, and more. This parallelism between national and EU foreign policy is one of the fundamental features of the intergovernmental approach. And as many member states remain strongly attached to their national foreign policy, this situation is unlikely to be overcome anytime soon.

However, the dichotomy between the EU and the member states weakens the union's overall effectiveness. Powerful third countries have become quite adept at exploiting divisions as well as playing member states against each other and against the EU institutions.

Some of these problems could be averted if the European Council framework were used systematically as a clearinghouse for the top-level diplomacy of the member states and the institutions. Realistically, this coordination should begin with topics on which the president of the European Council or the high representative is directly engaged. This could include coordinating visits to key capitals, harmonizing the most important messages, sharing assessments of developments, and preparing participation in international events. Eventually, such coordination should lead to a streamlined EU presence at international summit meetings. The president of the European Council and the high representative along with their staffs could steer and facilitate these coordination efforts.

Recent years have seen a tendency toward top-level meetings of a few (big) member states with third parties, such as the "Normandy format" of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine to discuss the Ukraine crisis; the "Weimar Triangle" of France, Germany, and Poland; and the G7 group of leading economies. Such meetings can undermine the coherence of the EU and alienate those member states that do not participate. This risk would be considerably reduced if the president of the European Council and the high representative were systematically involved in such meetings and if there were a functioning mechanism to provide feedback to the other member states.

Using the European Council framework as a coordination tool would allow member states to retain their freedom of action, while constant communication would, over time, result in greater coherence and discipline.

Conclusion

Just as presidents and prime ministers have assumed the leadership of the EU member states' national foreign policies, so the European Council has emerged

as the most important decisionmaking body of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. However, the European Council's present handling of issues related to foreign policy has significant shortcomings. There is often not sufficient time for substantive discussions, and preparations for the meetings are frequently improvised. Sometimes, the European Council's work is not well integrated with the relevant efforts of other parts of the EU's foreign policy machine.

The leadership of the Brussels-based institutions should aim to significantly upgrade the European Council's foreign policy action and, through that body, energize the EU's other foreign policy institutions. The closest possible cooperation between the president of the European Council and the high representative is the best way to ensure that the European Council, the Foreign Affairs Council, the European Commission, and the EEAS all operate in a joined-up manner.

The European Council should also hold regular strategic debates on the EU's most important relationships, on regional challenges, and on horizontal issues. Whereas the members of the European Council now formulate their positions mainly on the basis of national assessments, future discussions should also be based on analysis prepared by the EEAS in cooperation with the commission. During the next five years, it should become one of the core functions of the EEAS to supply a steady stream of substantive analysis not only to the European Council but also to the EU's other foreign policy forums.

Such collective efforts to understand international developments and their implications for Europe would gradually overcome the fragmented perception of world events that currently handicaps EU foreign policy. Over time, this should make it easier to develop common policies and achieve more substantive decisions.

The European Council framework should be used for coordination among the member states as well as between the institutions and the member states. Sharing information on top-level diplomatic activities, such as international visits, messages to third parties, or participation in world events, could make the EU more coherent. Exchanges among EU countries and institutions could also make it more difficult for other powers to play member states against each other.

Both tasks—ensuring a supply of high-quality analysis and maintaining effective coordination between national and EU foreign policies—require strong leadership from the top. Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, and Federica Mogherini, the EU high representative, are in a good position to persuade the members of the European Council to move in this direction. It seems evident that the EU cannot adequately handle the severe challenges it faces today, both in the East and in the South, with the existing methodology. Joint strategic analysis and closer cooperation between EU capitals and the Brussels-based institutions are essential if the EU wishes to protect its interests and contribute to stability in a turbulent world.

Notes

- 1 For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Brian Hocking, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan, and Paul Sharp, *Futures of Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the 21st Century*, Report no. 1, Clingendael, 2013, www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20121030_research_melissen.pdf.
- 2 “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union,” www.basiclaw.net/Appendices/eu_cons_treaty_en.pdf.
- 3 “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union,” <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012M/TXT&from=EN>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 “A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy,” December 12, 2003, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf.

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