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In Search of a Single Voice? Potentials and Limitations of EU Foreign Policy

- The EU has the necessary potential to play a significant role in today's world politics;
- Despite its potential, EU foreign policy is disunited and incapable of acting decisively in world affairs;
- Better coordination among relevant actors and strengthened capacity of the EEAS may help the EU act more unitedly, viably and assertively in international affairs;
- It is important to promote a stronger sense of ownership over EU foreign policy among member states.

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Ripe Time for a REAL Common EU Foreign Policy?

The European Union finds itself at a crossroads. Time for a real Common EU Foreign Policy?

The European Union (EU) finds itself at a complicated crossroads. Not only has the euro crisis raised serious questions regarding its global role, it has also led to a massive transfer of power to the EU level and made political union a genuine possibility. (Dullien, Torreblanca, 2012) Indeed, in June 2012 German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for a political union to save euro:

“[...] And we need most of all a political union – that means we need to gradually give competencies to Europe and give Europe control.” (Czuczka, Buergin, 2012)

Likewise, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso called for a federation of nation states in December 2012:

“Let’s not be afraid of the word: we will need to move towards a federation of nation states. Today I call for a fed-

eration of nation states. Not a superstate. A democratic federation of nation states that can tackle our common problems, through the sharing of sovereignty in a way that each country is better equipped to control its own destiny. This is about the Union with the member states, not against the member states.” (Barroso, 2012)

Since then many intense debates on establishing a political union have emerged, offering far-reaching contemplation of the future of the EU. Yet, if the EU is to become a real political union, it must have a united, integrated and coherent foreign policy that speaks with a single voice (or at least a single mouth) on the international stage.¹ Also, the borderlines between national and EU foreign policy would need to become blurred. Put differently, EU foreign policy would have to become a real common policy and at the same time embody the diversity of EU member states and their diplomatic cultures. Only when acting in a concerted way, EU member states will be able to pursue their interests successfully and uphold their values in the global competition. As a result, the EU will

¹ For the purposes of this policy paper, the term “EU foreign policy” comprises both the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the external action led by the European Commission.

strengthen its act on the world scene, enhance coherence of its external action and gain more credibility.

Only when acting in a concerted way, EU member states will be able to pursue their interests successfully and uphold their values in the global competition.

To this end, the EU must take decisive steps. The necessity and urgency of these steps is well illustrated by the following quotes:

“In the global competition with other economies, ideas and models of society, the countries of Europe will uphold their values and pursue their interests successfully only if we stand united. To this end, we need a comprehensive and integrated approach to all components of the EU’s international profile. Beyond CFSP and CSDP, it must include, among other things, issues relating to trade and external economic affairs policy, development aid, enlargement and neighbourhood policy, the management of migration flows, climate negotiations and energy security.” (Future of Europe Group, 2012)

“In fact, the argument in favor of an effective EU foreign policy is stronger and more urgent than ever before. It is high time to take it seriously.” (Lehne, 2013a)

“Europeans, the argument goes, will therefore increasingly be faced with a choice. They can resign themselves to a more modest role on the international stage, accepting that the decisions regarding their neighborhood and the future global order will be taken by others. Or, they can decide to combine their efforts, pool resources, and empower strong common institutions to act on their behalf.” (Lehne, 2013a)

We need a comprehensive and integrated approach to all components of the EU’s international profile.

This policy paper sets out to examine the potentials and limitations of EU foreign policy and proceeds as follows. Starting with an overview of the current state of EU foreign policy, the paper analyses main reasons for the foreign-policy weakness and EU’s long-term inability to speak and act as one on the global scene. This is followed by policy recommendations that aim at strengthening EU’s ability to make better use of its unique foreign policy tools and resources and changing the current cacophony of voices into a symphony.

Hobbled Giant? State of Play in EU Foreign Policy

The EU undoubtedly does have the potential to play a significant role in today's world politics.

The EU undoubtedly does have the potential to play a significant role in today's world politics. Representing around one fifth of the world GDP, it is the largest trading block in the world with a total population of more than 505 million. Together with its member states, EU holds the world's biggest official-aid budget and has more diplomats than any other world region. Yet, despite all its potential, the EU remains mainly an economic power with its foreign policy having a rather limited global impact. In fact, many observers talk about a palpable decline of EU's weight in global politics.

EU foreign policy is disunited and incapable of acting decisively in world affairs.

In 2008, the US National Intelligence Committee published an assessment of how the world may look like in 2025. The report concluded that the EU risks remaining a "hobbled giant, distracted by internal bickering

and competing national agendas". (National Intelligence Council, 2008) Indeed, the EU foreign policy is very often caught up in dissonances and rivalries, preventing the EU to be able to speak with one voice and hampering significant advances in this dimension. Roderick Parkes once likened EU foreign policy to jazz improvisation, denoting it as "messy and discordant and the patterns are at best obscure". (Dempsey, 2013) Bitter divisions over the 2003 invasion of Iraq remain an eloquent illustration of these dissensions, but also others may be cited, including recognition of independent Kosovo, Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 or current Syria debate. How come that EU foreign policy is so disunited and incapable of acting decisively in world affairs?

The latest example of the EU's inability to act effectively and strongly in foreign policy affairs is the recent turmoil in Ukraine. Neither of EU's attempts to solve the crisis was successful. The EU reacted to events on a day-to-day basis, often merely temporising, offering to mediate and calling on both sides to calm down. Various (and somewhat random and, as some argue, also pointless) visits of various national politicians and EU representatives per-

haps did strengthen the opposition's self-confidence, but in the end did not help solve the Ukraine crisis. The lesson from the EU's collective failure in Ukraine therefore is that a common foreign policy cannot work properly if member states are not fully behind it, backing it up by political will and power.

- First of all, the main problem lies in the institutional segmentation of the EU foreign policy. Even though the Lisbon Treaty brought substantial changes to the policy-making setup, introducing a more unified representation and a more stable leadership in order to achieve a closer alignment between EU and member states' foreign policies, it did not shift national competences in the foreign policy realm to the EU level. With some minor exceptions, decision-making by unanimity remains the prevailing rule in CFSP matters. Even those foreign policy decisions, to which qualified majority voting apply, may still be blocked by any member state on the grounds of "vital and stated reasons of national policy". Put differently, the EU's ability to speak with a single voice in the world arena is ultimately dependent on member states, as it is them who, at the end of the day, play a central role in the EU's foreign policy machinery. As a result, a cacophony of voices hitherto persist, since it

is inherently difficult to form and maintain consensus in a non-hierarchical community of 28 sovereign countries with diverging perspectives, preferences, priorities and values.

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- Another handicap undermining the EU's standing in the world stems from the sheer number of stakeholders involved in EU foreign policy and poor coordination between them (both within and among the EU institutions as well as with the EU member states). The Lisbon Treaty reforms envisaged the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (hereinafter referred to as the High Representative) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) as powerful ways to integrate the CFSP, member states' policies and the external action led by the European Commission, and in some cases the new system did indeed tangibly prove its worth (see, for example, the EU leadership role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo,

the Horn of Africa and Sahel issues or talks on the Iranian nuclear program). In other cases, however, the system has shown certain deficiencies. For example, the mutual relationship between the High Representative and Commissioners in the sphere of external action is not exactly cordial and these officials rarely meet. Also, relations between some EU foreign policy actors are contested and not clear, as illustrated, for example, by the relationship between the EEAS, EU delegations and EU Special Representatives. It can be thus argued that the Lisbon Treaty's ambition to enforce greater coordination and coherence remains largely unfulfilled, as illustrated, for example, by the EU response to the Arab Spring or the Libyan crisis. (Lehne, 2013b) This said, however, it needs to be emphasized that it is only now that EEAS – which is destined to become the dominant diplomatic representation for EU members – is starting to prove its value added to EU diplomacy.

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- Furthermore, EU foreign policy suffers from a lack of political initiative. For example, the High Representative has been criticised for passively waiting for the member states to submit their positions and only then presenting their lowest common denominator as her proposal.

Even though the “telephone number” to Europe is already in place, Europe usually does not know what to say when the telephone rings.

- Moreover, EU foreign policy lacks comprehensive strategic orientation in key areas. It can be argued – with a reference to the famous Henry Kissinger's question – that even though the telephone number to Europe is already in place (although there is more than just one connection from the EEAS switchboard), Europe usually does not know what to say when the telephone rings.
- Compounding these defining features is the fact that according to analysts, the current EU foreign policy is characterized by lack of trust, sense of ownership, transparency and sufficient information-sharing. On top of that, the constraints of the EU's external role have been impaired by the unprecedented depth and breadth of

Europe's economic crisis which served as a huge distraction factor. Not only did it reduce EU's soft power, self-confidence, credibility and resources, but also weakened solidarity among member states. (Lehne, 2013b; FIIA, 2013)

Yet, this is not to say that the EU is unable to speak as one at all. In fact, in some cases – most notably, when it comes to trade matters within the World Trade Organisation – the EU speaks confidently with one voice, negotiating and acting decisively as a single bloc. This begs the following question: Is there any way how to strengthen the EU's capacity to speak and act as on also in the foreign policy realm?

When it comes to trade matters within the World Trade Organisation, the EU speaks confidently with one voice, negotiating and acting decisively as a single bloc.



From Cacophony to Symphony: How to Play the Orchestra Right?

“Foreign policy in a globalized world requires a comprehensive approach to challenges that range from climate change, cybersecurity, and natural resource access to migration flows and state failure. A successful international actor needs to integrate various foreign policy instruments into well-coordinated external action.” (Lehne, 2013b)

What steps should the EU take to act more strongly, viably, assertively and independently in international affairs and answer the phone as one when the foreign policy challenges come calling?

It is necessary to strengthen the leadership role of the High Representative within the Commission, allowing her assume in full her position of a “conductor”.

- **Ensure better coordination among relevant actors.** It is the double-hatted High Representative and her team who should take the lead in this context. It is necessary to strengthen the leadership role of the High Representative within the Commission, allowing her assume

in full her position of a “conductor”. Systematic cooperation and coordination between the High Representative and Commissioners in the sphere of external action must be introduced, with clear rules guiding this cooperation. Alongside close bilateral contacts, the Group of External Relations Commissioners should meet at least once a month, with the meeting chaired by the High Representative.

It is advisable to strengthen the capacity of the EEAS – financially, operationally and otherwise.

- **Strengthen the capacity of the EEAS** – which is currently, in terms of resources and staff, the size of the Dutch Foreign Office (Gaebel, 2013) – financially, operationally and otherwise, so that the high expectations as to what it should deliver as a platform for smooth coordination between member states and the European Commission can be fulfilled.
- **Clarify contested relations between the different actors involved in EU foreign policy.** In this sense,

for example, the relations between the EEAS, EU delegations and EU Special Representatives should be made clearer.

Besides the institutional “hardware”, also the “software” dimension of EU foreign policy needs to be updated.

- **Develop effective strategic framework for EU foreign policy.** Besides the institutional “hardware”, also the “software” dimension of EU foreign policy needs to be updated. It is advisable to develop effective, meaningful and structured strategic partnerships with key countries such as the United States of America, Canada, Russia, India, China, Japan, Brazil and Mexico. Content of the policy needs to be sharpened and it is vital to improve its priority-setting. In this context, the High Representative should take a more proactive attitude to lead the process forward, coming up with proposals more frequently and forging common positions more authoritatively. Besides, the EU should focus more on the areas in which it can make a real difference in ways that its member countries or other international players cannot.

- **Widen the application of qualified majority voting in the CFSP sphere.**

At this moment, EU foreign policy can only be efficient and united to the extent that it is supported by the member states’ resources and influence.

- **Promote a stronger sense of ownership over EU foreign policy among member states.** As already indicated, at this moment EU foreign policy can only be efficient and united to the extent that it is supported by the member states’ resources and influence. Thus, it is necessary to cooperate more with member states and engage them in genuine teamwork. For example, to a greater extent than now, the High Representative could commission individual ministers of foreign affairs (or groups of ministers) to carry on missions on her behalf: “As many ministers would appreciate assuming such European functions, this would provide additional sources of expertise and resources and strengthen the sense of ownership among member states.” (Lehne, 2013b) Further to that, EU foreign ministers should meet more often and it is important to find ways how to effectively share information, re-

sources and expertise with national diplomacies. Besides, national diplomats should be more actively integrated in the EEAS.

- **Work more closely with civil society.** Where appropriate, it is advisable that the EEAS tasks civil society to implement elements of its work (for example, in the sphere of EU civilian expertise training) as well as specific projects in contexts in which European civil society has much expertise. This may also help in strengthening the sense of ownership over EU foreign policy.

It is important to work more closely with civil society.

- **Act more united in international organizations.** Also, the EU's position in international organizations and international negotiations should be reinforced. At the same time, it is advisable that the possibility of joint representation in international organizations should be further explored.
- **Launch a more strategic, comprehensive and pragmatic debate** between the High Representative and member states on the effectiveness of the role of EU foreign policy in the post-Lisbon era.

While some of the above-mentioned proposals could be introduced only in the long term through treaty changes, others could be implemented on the basis of the existing treaties. All of them are rather daring given the fact that foreign policy is a highly sensitive, delicate policy area and member states are reluctant to step back and surrender their sovereignty in this sphere. On the other hand, there has been an overall decline in the importance of traditional diplomacy, with the crisis having accentuated the need for a really common action. Moreover, many Europeans as well as the outer world do expect an international performance that is adequate to the EU's overall relevance and weight. Old habits die hard though and it will not be possible to implement the above-mentioned suggestions without political will and strong leadership.

Many Europeans as well as the outer world do expect an international performance that is adequate to the EU's overall relevance and weight.

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Vignette About the Author

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Think tank – Mendel European Centre About the Project: Objectives and Mission

Foundation of Think tank – Mendel European Centre has a direct link to realisation of the European Commission project Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic. The main objective of the think tank is to contribute to the discussion about advantages and disadvantages of membership in EU and eurozone. Activities of the think tank also provide suggestions for further process of deepening of integration towards fiscal and political union.

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Think tank – Mendel European Centre Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence – Economic Logic or Political Logic? Is Fiscal Union Feasible for EU?