



EU FOREIGN POLICY: From bystander to actor

By Steven Everts

★ If Europe's leaders want the EU to play a meaningful role in global diplomacy, they must implement a series of fundamental reforms. At a minimum, they should abolish the rotating presidency, create a new Foreign Policy Council and give a right of initiative to the High Representative for foreign policy, currently Javier Solana.

★ The EU must also learn to use its wide-ranging set of instruments – such as policies on trade, aid and migration – to support a clear political strategy. In particular, it should increasingly make its financial assistance conditional upon recipient countries respecting international standards on good governance, democratisation and non-proliferation.

Foreign Policy – broadly defined – is becoming increasingly important in the EU. While the EU is often unpopular, more than 70 per cent of EU citizens want the EU to play a bigger role in world affairs. Whether the issue is the crisis in the Middle East, rising US unilateralism or on-going instability in the Balkans, the question that echoes throughout the Union is always the same: what can Europe do? Both leaders and the public are unsatisfied with the mismatch between the EU's economic resources and its diplomatic clout. Both also instinctively understand that European countries can only influence global trends by pooling resources and putting out a united message.

So it is right for the Convention on the future of the EU to look seriously at how to improve the EU's performance in foreign policy. Some results in that field would have a positive impact on the EU's ability to tackle problems around the world and would also boost the EU's legitimacy with the public. To create a credible EU foreign policy, EU leaders need to address four inter-related challenges. They should make decision-making more effective, ensure greater coherence across the whole range of EU external relations, show

more courage in promoting EU values, and learn to set clear priorities.

1. Streamline decision-making and give the High Representative more resources, including a right of initiative

The EU must improve its ability to act. For a start, the EU should abolish the rotating presidency, which puts a different country in the EU's driving seat every six months. Javier Solana, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Mr CFSP), and his officials should take over the crucial tasks of representing the EU externally, chairing CFSP working groups and Council meetings, and providing impetus and follow-up. EU foreign policy can ill afford the harmful consequences of changing the presidency every six months.

The CFSP decision-making process also needs to become smoother, especially if the Union is to avoid total paralysis after enlargement. There is a real danger that EU decision-making will become even harder than it is today. Enlargement will bring in ten

new countries – each with its own peculiar views and domestic lobbies. There are two ways in which the Union can safeguard its ability to act with 25 or more member-states. First, the EU should learn to overcome its near-obsession with unanimity and take more implementation decisions by ‘super’ qualified majority voting (the threshold for QMV is higher for CFSP than for other policy areas). Second, the EU should use more informal leadership coalitions to prepare decisions in smaller, nimbler groups. Some smaller member-states may not like this idea, but the alternatives are either constant drift and deadlocks, or an overt *directoire* of the big countries acting outside EU structures.

By all accounts, Javier Solana has been a great success. He has put the EU on the map, in the Balkans, the Middle East and elsewhere. Some of the EU’s modest foreign policy achievements in 2002, such as the agreement between Serbia and Montenegro, are largely due to Solana’s clever political manoeuvring and negotiating skills. He clearly has the trust of all capitals – not just London, Paris and Berlin. The time has come to build on his successes. If the High Representative had a formal right of initiative, his position would be stronger. Foreign ministers acting in the Council would, of course, retain the final say. But the High Representative would be in a better position to initiate and push for new policy ideas.

CFSP also needs more resources to function effectively. Tripling the CFSP budget (to €120 million) may sound ambitious, but it would stop Solana having to beg the member-states to give him the money to do what they have already asked him to. Moreover, the number of officials working for Solana should rise substantially, both in the Policy Unit and the Directorate-General for External Relations. The Union can achieve this by stationing more national diplomats there on short-term contracts and by direct recruitment.

2. Ensure better co-ordination across the whole range of EU external actions

Most critiques of the EU’s international role focus on the divisions among the member-states. While there has been a gradual convergence in

foreign policy outlooks, it is true that on certain issues – think of strategy towards Iraq – the member-states simply do not agree. But divisions among the EU institutions are equally damaging, and receive much less attention. Existing institutional arrangements for running EU foreign policy are confusing and overlapping. Responsibilities and resources are split between the Commission, the Council and the member-states. As a result, the proverbial left hand often does not know what the right hand is doing. Worse, sometimes the policies that one bit of the Brussels machinery pursues are directly at odds with the actions of other bodies.

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Therefore, the EU should work harder to ensure that its policies on trade, aid, justice and home affairs and the environment are explicitly linked to the Union’s foreign policy objectives. As a first step, EU leaders will have to reform the overburdened General Affairs Council, which frequently gets bogged down in the minutiae of policy disputes. In its place the EU needs to set up an official Foreign Policy Council, made up of the 15 foreign ministers, with a clear focus on running EU external relations. A new body of representatives of prime ministers, based permanently in Brussels, can then concentrate on the internal EU agenda.

The EU also needs to overcome the split between the supranational and the inter-governmental sides of external policy, headed by the Commissioner for External Relations and Mr CFSP respectively. In the very long run – say 20 years – EU foreign policy should probably be run by a single foreign policy supremo, based in the Commission but answerable to the foreign ministers. Recently, Commission President Romano Prodi proposed to go even further, suggesting that this person should also have the sole right of initiative.

Clearly, most member-states are opposed to such radical ideas. Foreign policy questions are simply too sensitive. But one intermediate step that should gain wide support is for the next Commissioner for External Relations to be the deputy to the next High Representative. Mr CFSP should also take part in most Commission meetings that deal with foreign affairs, while the

Commissioner for External Relations should go to most meetings of the Political and Security Committee (the EU body of national diplomats that runs CFSP on a day-to-day basis). Moreover, the Commission delegations should expand their role in CFSP, reporting to both the High Representative and the Commission. The point of all these measures is to ensure greater coherence and consistency across the whole field of EU external policies.

3. Champion international organisations and make financial assistance more conditional

The EU is right to aim for an international system based on rules plus international institutions that foster co-operation and enforce compliance. Despite the claims of American and other sceptics, promoting international rules and robust multilateral regimes is not a sign of weakness. They are necessary to solve the world's most pressing problems, particularly those relating to failed states, terrorism, weapons proliferation, organised crime and the environment. Of course, the EU should, whenever possible, try to work with the US, because this is nearly always a precondition for effective international action. At the same time, Europe should resist superpower envy and develop its own, distinctive approach.

Concretely, the EU should learn to use its trade and aid instruments for clear political aims. It should link the granting of trade privileges and financial assistance to clear commitments from the recipient countries to promote political and economic reforms. All the EU's 'partnership' or 'association' agreements with third countries contain clauses on respect for human rights, political pluralism and standards for good governance. These agreements should give the EU considerable influence, but ultra-cautious member-states are too often reluctant to invoke these clauses. That attitude should change. The EU should have the courage to link non-compliance with concrete actions, such as the postponement of new projects, a suspension of

high-level contacts or the use of different channels of delivery (relying on independent NGOs instead of government-run organisations). Using a benchmarking process, EU foreign ministers should reward those countries that have made progress in political and economic modernisation with extra EU and national assistance, while punishing others that have failed to comply with the standards they themselves have pledged to uphold.

4. Set meaningful priorities and start with the 'near abroad'

EU foreign policy is a new and incomplete project. It badly needs clear priorities. EU politicians should therefore resist the temptation of wanting to have a policy on all issues, conflicts and regions in the world. It is too early for such a comprehensive approach. In regional terms, the EU

should be an active, outward-looking global player, and deepen its involvement in Asia, Africa and Latin America. But, with EU foreign policy still in its infancy, the EU should focus attention on the Balkans, Russia, Ukraine, the Middle East and North Africa. These regions contain many failed or failing states that together constitute an 'arc of instability' on the EU's doorstep. The EU should make it a priority to develop agile and effective policies for these countries. Tackling the security and economic problems in the Union's immediate vicinity should be a test-case for the EU's ability to deploy its wide-ranging policy instruments and programmes in a joined-up way.

Convention members and EU leaders face a clear choice. Europe can either continue with lowest common denominator policies, often complaining about America's go-it-alone tendencies, but never able to push for its own vision of how to tackle the world's problems. Or it can

decide that it really wants a credible EU foreign policy, and accept the need for significant, if sometimes painful, reforms.

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