

# Walking the Strategic Talk. A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda Conference Report

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and International Cooperation

## ABSTRACT

The report summarises the results of the final conference of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) Watch project, which was held in Brussels on 9 October 2019. The event offered the opportunity to present a recent FEPS-IAI study and expound both progress and disappointments in implementation of the EUGS. The future of a progressive EU foreign policy agenda was discussed with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini as well as with experts, European and national institutional representatives, members of the European Parliament and decision-makers. The EUGS has provided a general blueprint for how the EU is to respond to today's challenges, serving also as the framework through which this strategic vision would be put in practice. Nevertheless, the strategic reflection on the future of the EU's international role is an unfinished job, and time is ripe for the EU to express its global agency more visibly and more effectively to citizens within and outside Europe.

*European Union | EUGS | PSDC | Western Balkans | Multilateralism*



keywords

## Walking the Strategic Talk. A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda Conference Report

by Matteo Bonomi\*

Three years after the launch of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) and ahead of the 2019 institutional renewal of the EU, a clear and frank conversation aimed at expounding both progress and disappointments in implementation of the EUGS appears as urgent as ever. This was the objective of the discussion held in Brussels on 9 October,<sup>1</sup> closing the EUGS Watch project led by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). The conference offered the opportunity to discuss with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini and to gather the opinions of experts, European and national institutional representatives, members of the European Parliament and decision-makers, in order to assess the future of a progressive EU foreign policy agenda. The project as well as this final conference were supported by the European Parliament, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Compagnia di San Paolo – International Affairs Programme.

**László Andor**, Secretary General of FEPS, introduced the event, which reviewed and built upon the EUGS Watch project's final report.<sup>2</sup> **Vassilis Ntousas**, Senior International Relations Policy Advisor at FEPS, presented an overview of the findings of the report, including ten policy recommendations for the future EU foreign policy agenda. As we look forward to the next qualitative leap the Union needs to make to respond to a world that has become more tumultuous, the recent FEPS-IAI report draws from and expands on the findings of a year-long research project, in order to offer insights in three key areas: (1) outlining some of the

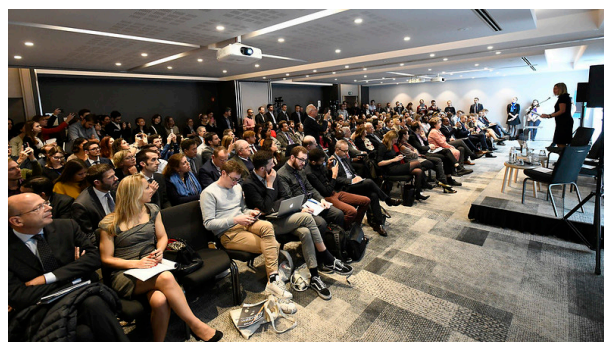
<sup>1</sup> For more details, see IAI website: <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10736>.

<sup>2</sup> Nicoletta Pirozzi and Vassilis Ntousas, *Walking the Strategic Talk. A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda for the Future*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), May 2019, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10311>.

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critical insecurity trends that have negatively impacted the EU's capacity to navigate through the emerging realities of diversified threats and multiplying conflicts, both within and beyond European borders; (2) briefly taking stock of some of the EU Global Strategy's greatest achievements and limitations in promoting a Europe that stands, speaks and acts together in its foreign policy; and (3) providing concrete recommendations in ten critical areas where the Union needs to walk the strategic talk embodied in the Global Strategy – more boldly, with more unity and in a more progressive direction.



Conference participants.

Among the main recommendations, it is worth underlining the need to *add flexibility to avoid institutional paralysis*, by introducing qualified majority voting on foreign policy matters and identifying options for differentiated cooperation and integration with candidate and partner countries. Moreover, the time has come to *get the European defence architecture right*, in particular by restructuring the current intergovernmental institutional framework with the creation of a Council of Defence Ministers chaired by the HR/VP and supported by the Steering Board of the European Defence Agency, while the European Commission should provide much-needed resources, and a defence committee in the European Parliament could exercise proper oversight on capability development and missions. In addition, the EU should *actively work to reform global governance and transform the multilateral system*, by improving all the elements that do not work through a functional yet principled approach, starting from those areas where Europe can set universal standards, e.g., climate and digital technologies.

In her keynote speech,<sup>3</sup> HR/VP **Federica Mogherini** highlighted that *the basic idea of EUGS has always been to move from vision to action, or “to walk the strategic talk”* – to use the language of the FEPS-IAI report. Still, today's challenges are multiple and evident. Whereas there is definitive need for a progressive foreign policy agenda, it appears, now more than ever, that the space for progressive ideas and multilateralism is shrinking, due to rivalry and competition between great powers. Therefore, it is imperative for the EU to offer a credible alternative to current trends. Against the temptations of looking backward at reactionary concepts or towards a purely conservative vision of international affairs, *a truly progressive foreign policy agenda should be about shaping a more cooperative international*

<sup>3</sup> See European External Action Service (EEAS), *Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Conference “Walking the Strategic Talk. A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda for the Future”*, Brussels, 9 October 2019, <https://europa.eu/!un87yp>. A video of this speech is available in YouTube: *Legacy Speech by HR Federica Mogherini*, <https://youtu.be/hVyuHpCjR8A>.

governance. It should preserve the achievements of the past, but at the same time should always try to build on them and move one step forward. In other words, the HR/VP reaffirmed that *defence and transformation of the global system should go hand in hand and work together along flexible lines*, counteracting the emergence of different scenarios and framing opportunities that can occur.

This approach can be exemplified by HR/VP's commitment and action to preserve and transform multilateralism throughout her entire mandate, despite the radically different phases experienced by the international order during the last five years. At the beginning of her five years in office, in fact, EU external action was able to contribute to an expansionary phase of multilateralism. Back in 2015 and 2016, the EU helped in building a new wave of multilateral agreements such as the Paris agreement on climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals under the UN umbrella and the nuclear deal with Iran. Within such a context, the EU tried to use the opportunity that was opened with the Iranian deal, and also to set up a new regional and global environment to address the Syrian crisis. Just a few days after the agreement with Iran was reached, the international Syrian support group was established with a fundamental contribution from the EU. This was notable for being the first time ever that the international community was able to gather all relevant actors and regional players on the Syrian front at the same table. However, after this phase of expansion, a contraction phase of multilateralism has followed. In this second phase, it was natural for Europeans to work to preserve their achievements with great investments into saving cooperation with partners and preserving the UN system that was going through a very serious crisis.

Against this backdrop, the HR/VP gave the example of *four progressive ideas that have shaped the EU's approach to global governance*:

First, *always trying to open new space for multilateral dialogue*, even when dialogue and cooperation seem to be impossible. This is what the EU has done, for instance, with the international contact group for Venezuela, but also for Afghanistan and Libya.

Second, *holding a partnership approach*. Clearly there is need for a true partnership with Africa. The EU has finally moved from the idea of working *for* Africa to one of working *with* Africa. This has helped build trust and respect, move away from the donor-recipient approach, and recognise a true political partnership with Africa. This has happened in all fields – not only in humanitarian aid, development cooperation and migration, but also in new sectors including the digital realm, women's empowerment, youth and the environment. This is the result of work



Federica Mogherini.

the EU has done with the African Union but also bilaterally with single countries and through the trilateral format among the African Union, the EU and the UN. The same logic has been applied to other partnerships in Southeast Asia and South America. A progressive foreign policy is about building partnerships and coalitions with those who share our values and our interests. In line with the Global Strategy, investing in the strength of your friends, partners and neighbours is also a way of strengthening yourself. This has never been more evident than in the world of today.



Federica Mogherini.

Third, a progressive foreign policy is about *joining our interests and our values*. Progressive EU values do not at all contradict EU strategic interests. On the contrary, they serve and support each other. Protecting human rights is – obviously – the key value for the EU, and it is also essential for sustainable peace and security. The concept of sustainable security is indeed probably the best example of how values and interests can be joined. Civil society, environment, education and women's rights should remain at the core of EU policy – not only because this is right, but also because it is what works better to achieve sustainable development and security.

Finally, there is the need for a *progressive foreign policy that is inclusive toward every sector of society*, beyond restricted groups of diplomats and foreign policy experts. Inclusivity and representativeness not only make decisions more democratic, but facilitate implementation of any agreement to better stand the test of time. Multilateralism is about bringing more voices to the table, and this ought to happen beyond governments, institutions and international organisations. For the reality on the ground to change, there is no need for two strong men to shake hands and sign an agreement, but for the plurality of actors in society to be involved. What we need is a *fully participatory diplomacy*.

Today *there is no bigger global actor than the EU to stand for and promote progressive and multilateral global policy of this sort*. A more cooperative global governance needs the EU to take responsibility as a global power and as a point of reference. This is also part of the EU's strategic autonomy, which requires the ability to act when it comes to military action – when necessary and always in a multilateral framework. But it goes beyond military action; it is also about the EU's ability to shape the rules of the international economic system, with an independent and principled trade policy. It is about raising international standards in all fields, from labour to data protection. It is about having a strong euro. These are all issues that are not traditionally foreign policy issues per se, but in the world of today no issue is

purely domestic and everything has a global projection that can be used by the EU to build a more recognisable and even more assertive role in the world. No European nation state can do it alone. Perhaps this was not the case five years ago, but it is self-evident today. *Together, as the EU, we have the power to be a global shaper.*



From left to right: Nicoletta Pirozzi, Michael Peel, Florence Gaub, Hervé Delphin, Nathalie Tocci.

The second part of the conference offered the opportunity to discuss the impact of the EUGS and the future of EU foreign policy with **Nathalie Tocci**, Director of the IAI, **Florence Gaub**, Deputy Director of the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), **Hervé Delphin**, Head of the Strategic Policy Planning Division at the European External Action Service (EEAS) and **Michael Peel**, European diplomatic correspondent for the Financial Times. The panel was chaired by **Nicoletta Pirozzi**, Head of the “EU Politics and Institutions” Programme and Institutional Relations Manager at IAI.

Regarding the *achievements of the EUGS*, four points clearly emerged:

The first, perhaps most obvious, achievement of the EUGS is in the area of *security and defence policy*. The long list of initiatives, starting from the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), that have been put in place over the last three years may sound obscure, even irrelevant, to many outside observers. However, considering Europe’s history and how difficult it has been to make even the tiniest move on defence, these have been historical steps towards building an EU defence architecture.

The second main area of achievement has to do with the *method of work*. The outgoing HR/VP emphasised strongly her role as Vice-President of the Commission. When she started office, these two heads did not work well together. Nowadays, the so called “joint approach” to foreign policy embedded in the double-hatted HR/VP and in the cooperation between institutions in Brussels plays a far greater role in how foreign policy is made within the EU.

The third area where achievements have been made is in *finding ways to combine principles and pragmatism*. In this context, the work that has been done in resilience building in the EU’s neighbourhood, from Ukraine to Africa, must be recalled.

The fourth area of progress concerns the debate about *strategic autonomy*. If we look at where Europeans were just five years ago, the kind of conversation about strategic autonomy that we have today is revolutionary. The EUGS was able to capture world dynamics and conceptualise them in a new strategic approach for the EU. This evolution was triggered by the realisation that a series of events was curving the EU’s capacity to act, including Chinese economic activism, Russia’s

interference through cyber and hybrid threats in EU territory, or indeed uneven and unpredictable trajectories in transatlantic relations. All this created the conditions for this conversation on strategic autonomy to start.

Obviously, *there is a lot more to be done*. In the area of security and defence, the very first priority should be *putting our money where our mouth is*. This means, in the context

of the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), putting 13 billion euro into funds for defence and another 6.5 billion euro into military mobility, as well as increasing the foreign policy budget by 30 per cent, Brexit notwithstanding. This is necessary, since foreign policy requires a lot of resources. We have to make sure that all the different bits and bobs that we have put in place actually work coherently. Most importantly, we really have to *make EU action in peace and security matters more visible*. This is one line where we have an incredible access to credit with the European public, which wants to see more European defence. That credit line will not be open forever.

Secondly, we need to *focus on the Western Balkans*. In the last five years, we have woken up to see a reality that is not characterised by an inexorable path toward Europeanisation, modernisation and democratisation. On the contrary, we realised that conflicts can reignite and reforms can actually reverse. And the world, including Russia, China and the Arab States, has not been sitting and watching. This is the moment for the EU to act and *offer concrete options to the states in the region*, particularly given the fragility of the achievements that have been made so far.

Thirdly, *multilateralism should be preserved and strengthened, inside and outside the EU*. At home, this means reviving multilateralism within the EU: empowering member states to act for the European Union, not only through the creation of contact groups but through the connection of such groups, which need to be varied in composition depending on issues and timing. Moreover, contact groups need to have an institutional link to the rest of the EU institutional structures, in order to include member states that could otherwise feel excluded. Externally, the EU should build on its good examples, such as the E3 on Iran or the contact group on Venezuela. The basic idea should be to forge multilateral coalitions and cash in on all the investment that has been put into building international relationships over the last five years.

Finally, *the conversation on strategic autonomy must continue*, in order to define what the EU wants to be. In fact, it would be a mistake to understand strategic autonomy as defence only. The whole debate about strategic autonomy has more



From left to right: László Andor, Maria João Rodrigues, Federica Mogherini, Nathalie Tocci, Nicoletta Pirozzi, Vassilis Ntousas.

to do with the coming of age of Europe as a strategic collective. Strategic autonomy has at least five ingredients, and defence is just one of them. There are also territorial components as well as the need for well-functioning core institutions, strengthened economic sovereignty, and the full availability of diplomatic means. Full strategic autonomy implies all these elements taken together, and there is clearly a lot of work that still has to be done.

The EUGS has provided a general blueprint for how Europe is to respond to today's challenges, serving also as the framework through which this strategic vision would be put in practice. Nevertheless, the strategic reflection on the future of the EU's international role is an unfinished job, and time is ripe for the EU to express its global agency more visibly and more effectively to citizens within and outside Europe.

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## Conference Programme

Brussels, 9 October 2019

### Introductory Remarks

**László Andor**, Secretary General, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)

### Paper Presentation

*"5 Policy Recommendations for a Europe that Walks the Strategic Talk"*

**Vassilis Ntousas**, Senior International Relations Policy Advisor, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), Stavros Niarchos Foundation Academy Fellow, Chatham House

### Keynote Speech

**Federica Mogherini**, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission

### Q&A

Moderator **László Andor**, Secretary General, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS)

### Panel Discussion

*A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda for the Future*

Chair **Nicoletta Pirozzi**, Head, EU, Politics and Institutions Programme and Institutional Relations Manager, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Panelists **Nathalie Tocci**, Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)  
**Florence Gaub**, Deputy Director, EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)  
**Hervé Delphin**, Head of the Strategic Policy Planning Division, European External Action Service (EEAS)  
**Michael Peel**, European diplomatic correspondent for the Financial Times

#### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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- 19 | 12 Andrea Aversano Stabile, *NATO's 70th Birthday: Family Matters at Stake*
- 19 | 11 Luca Barana, *EU-Turkey Cooperation on Migration Management: Going Beyond Ad-hoc Short-Termism*
- 19 | 10 Nico Frandi, *WTO and Geopolitical Changes. Multilateralism and Coalitions of Members among Crises, Adaptation to Change and Rebirth*