

# JOINT

A joined-up Union, a stronger Europe

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## A More Joined-up Union, a Stronger Europe

Riccardo Alcaro



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# A More Joined-up Union, a Stronger Europe

Riccardo Alcaro

*JOINT Coordinator and Research Coordinator and  
Head of Global Actors programme at the Istituto Affari  
Internazionali (IAI).*

At first sight, the strategic documents produced by the EU since the early 2000s make for a tedious reading. Brilliantly written as they may be (and some are), they inevitably boil down to a list of security priorities and principles for action. Still, there is more to them than just that. Especially if read in sequence, these documents tell a quite interesting story: that of a Union of states struggling to keep pace with a rapidly deteriorating environment.

## From liberal champion to would-be geopolitical power

In 2003, the European Security Strategy depicted a safe, prosperous and confident EU eager to take on greater responsibilities for bringing security and stability abroad through the promotion of liberal norms, democracy and multilateralism.<sup>1</sup>

Fast-forward thirteen years and such lofty ambitions had morphed into the more prosaic concern, espoused by the 2016 Global Strategy,<sup>2</sup> about protecting the EU from the effects of an increasingly unstable neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup> North Africa, the Middle

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union, *European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe in a Better World*, Brussels, Publications Office of the EU, 2009, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2860/1402>.

<sup>2</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, Publications Office of the EU, 2016, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2871/9875>.

<sup>3</sup> Agnès Levallois et al., "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT*

East and Eastern Europe had all experienced profound political turmoil, violence and outright conflict. “Principled pragmatism” replaced “effective multilateralism” as the ostensibly organising principle of EU foreign and security policy.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, the EU’s discourse was all about the need to “speak the language of power”<sup>5</sup> in a world in which competitive geopolitics had made a dramatic comeback.<sup>6</sup> By the early 2020s the United States and China had completed their journey from uneasy partners to systemic rivals, the Middle East was fraught with interstate enmities, and Russia’s war of conquest in Ukraine had precipitated Europe into a second Cold War. In the 2022 Strategic Compass, the prevailing theme was the reduction of EU vulnerabilities to the political use of interdependencies, including through strategic partnering with like-minded countries.<sup>7</sup>

While the international landscape darkened, the EU experienced a series of internal shocks – the Eurozone crisis (2010-12), the surge in refugee flows (2015-16) and Brexit (2016). They signalled or reinforced historically high levels of contestation of EU rules and policies, which were reflected in the growing popularity of nationalist and Eurosceptic forces.<sup>8</sup> In recognition of the scarce appetite for further integration, EU strategic documents put much emphasis on the need for the EU to rely also on the national assets of individual member states.

## The limits of EU foreign and security policy

The EU strategic documents all point to a resolve to get ahead of the curve and promote a proactive approach to international security challenges. They consequently advocate a more joined-up EU foreign, security and defence policy.

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*Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639>.

<sup>4</sup> EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Josep Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, in *Project Syndicate*, 8 February 2020, <https://prosyn.org/UZNbi12>.

<sup>6</sup> Assem Dandashly et al., “Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy: Divergent Approaches to Conflict and Crisis Response”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 6 (December 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=697>.

<sup>7</sup> Council of the EU, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 14 March 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410976\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410976_en).

<sup>8</sup> Marianna Lovato et al., “The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516>.

Yet, this goal has largely remained aspirational.

The hard reality is that the EU struggles to create greater synergies between member states, integrate EU and national assets across a variety of policy areas, and coordinate engagement with external players. Its poor record in managing conflicts and crises – from Libya and Syria to Israel-Palestine – painfully attests to that.

This is not to say that the EU has been reduced to a passive bystander of the many crises and conflicts that impinge on its security. On the contrary, over the years the EU has devised a number of measures, some quite creative, to cope with the constraints imposed on its foreign and security policy by rising multipolar competition, the fragmentation of states and regional governance, and internal divisions rooted in domestic expediency.<sup>9</sup>

For example, the promotion of multilateral formats has enabled the EU to reduce the constraining effect of multipolar rivalries on its crisis management efforts. Examples are the United Nations-sanctioned multilateral contact group on the management of the nuclear issue with Iran<sup>10</sup> or the EU's attempts at promoting international law-based solutions to territorial disputes in the South China Sea.<sup>11</sup>

Confronted with the multiple challenges emanating from fragmented states and regions, the EU has engaged conflict parties selectively on limited issues of shared concern (an example would be the deal with Venezuela's government to send in an EU election monitoring mission).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, "Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024), p. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2304028>.

<sup>10</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "Weathering the Geopolitical Storms: The Ever-elusive Success of EU Policy towards Iran", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024), p. 98-119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2273852>.

<sup>11</sup> Zachary Paikin, "Multipolar Competition and the Rules-based Order: Probing the Limits of EU Foreign and Security Policy in the South China Sea", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59 No. 1 (March 2024), p. 161-178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2280598>.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Ayuso et al., "Constraints, Dilemmas and Challenges for EU Foreign Policy in Venezuela", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024), p. 140-160, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2289647>.

To circumvent internal blockages, the EU has sometimes delegated major conflict management responsibilities to EU institutions (as was the case on Kosovo so as to avoid embarrassment to the five member countries that do not recognise Kosovo's independence to be directly involved) or to small groups of states (as was the case with the Franco-German Normandy format for managing the conflict in Ukraine until 2022<sup>13</sup> or the aforementioned group on Iran, originally promoted by France Germany and the UK).

These forms of mitigation of contextual challenges have enabled the EU to carve out room for action in spite of systemic and internal constraints. Results have been disappointing, however. Even when it made progress – brokering peace talks between Serbia and Kosovo or contributing to the multilateral deal that checked Iran's nuclear plans – its successes remained temporary and subjected to reversal. After all, Serbia is as opposed to recognising Kosovo's secession as it was sixteen years ago and the Iran nuclear deal collapsed following the unilateral US withdrawal from it in 2018.

## The case for reforming EU foreign and security policy

The measures mentioned above can counter individual contextual factors separately, but are much less effective in the face of the interplay of multipolar rivalry and regional fragmentation, which feed off each other in a vicious cycle that then impacts the ability of EU member states to find lasting consensus. The conclusion is in the absence of institutional reform, the EU's capacity for action in international security is likely to remain modest or shrink.

According to a recent poll conducted in six European countries in the context of the EU-funded JOINT project, the public is inclined to support or oppose a more integrated EU foreign and security policy based more on arguments detailing the advantages or disadvantages of it rather than political ideology or party affiliation.<sup>14</sup> It follows that a political space exists for reinforcing the widespread but

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<sup>13</sup> Kristi Raik et al., "EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024), p. 39-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>.

<sup>14</sup> Davide Angelucci et al., "Public Opinion and the European Foreign and Security Policy: Is there a Risk of Politicisation?", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 25 (April 2024), <https://www.jointproject.org>.

now still shallow support for a stronger Europe in security and defence, if political entrepreneurs manage to articulate a convincing vision that the public can share.

Provided EU leaders manage to combine personal investment with political acumen, change is achievable. To be sure, such a change would not lead to a fully unified foreign and security policy, which remains outside the realm of possibilities. Still, it would considerably strengthen the EU's capacity for international action.

## **Reforming EU foreign and security policy**

In an optimal but still plausible scenario, qualified majority voting replaces unanimity in most instances, including the adoption of sanctions and the deployment of military missions abroad (although states can still opt out).

The High Representative is given authority not just over foreign and defence policy but also neighbourhood policy, development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

The defence pillar of the EU is empowered with the formalisation of a Defence Council, the creation of a directorate general for defence within the Commission and the upgrade of the European Parliament sub-committee on defence into a fully-fledged committee. Common procurement, development and production are bolstered by greater contributions to the European Defence Fund and the European Defence Industry Programme. A military headquarters is established, capable of planning and carrying out a relatively large operation (involving up to 10,000 units from multinational joint forces) in non-permissive environments.

The enlargement process is reformed so as to keep incentivising alignment with EU policies. Candidate countries get the right to participate in EU decision-making processes in the policy areas where alignment is compliant and gain access to related EU funds, which they get proportionally to the level of compliance.

Reform also extends to energy, especially with the adoption of a special toolbox to absorb sudden supply and price shocks, which includes measures of automatic solidarity. The EU also expands its economic statecraft panoply with standardised

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inbound and outbound investment screening mechanisms and centralised oversight of compliance with export controls and sanctions.

Finally, a reformed EU has much deeper pockets thanks to at least a doubling of the EU's budget – thanks to increased national contribution and EU own resources – and an expanded borrowing authority of the Commission.

## **An autonomous actor, not a “geopolitical” power**

This reformed EU is better at facing multipolar pressures in the management of crises and conflicts because it has more assets to engage in sustained competition. It is also more able at confronting the multiple challenges emanating from regional fragmentation thanks to the fact that it has empowered the High Representative with authority over different foreign policy portfolios. Problems of internal contestation are attenuated by qualified majority voting, even though member states continue to strive for consensus. In this regard, majority voting works as an accelerator of deliberative processes: it incentivises member states to negotiate with a view to finding an agreement so as not to run the risk of being outvoted.

This reformed EU has shifted towards greater autonomy in power competition, making multilateralism more of a choice than a necessity. While still Atlanticist and reliant on NATO for territorial defence, it can act more autonomously in crises. This capability allows it to cope with a partial US disengagement from Europe.

The systemic incentives towards policy convergence among member states transforms the EU into a more homogenous actor in international security, with EU foreign and security policy taking precedence over national ones. The reformed EU, while not a geopolitical pole, has become an autonomous collective power.



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