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# How to Reduce the Impact of Internal Contestation, Regional Fragmentation and Multipolar Competition on EU Foreign and Security Policy

Sarah van Bentum, Caterina Bedin, Zachary Paikin, Gregor Walter-Drop, Steven Blockmans, Agnès Levallois and Tiffany Guendouz

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## Abstract

In a Union of 27 member states, differences in (geo)political interests, socio-economic realities, historical trajectories and national identity construction constantly threaten the internal unity and thus also the external coherence of EUFSP. The following three factors and their mutually reinforcing interplay appear to have a significant impact on the creation and shaping of EU foreign and security policy, especially when it comes to managing international crises and conflicts: internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. The analysis in this paper draws on the main findings from nine case studies carried out under the Horizon 2020 project JOINT. The paper first assesses the (generally negative) impact of the three factors on EUFSP in these contexts of international crises, identifies common patterns and divergent approaches. The second part identifies strategies to mitigate and/ or reduce the (negative) impact of these challenges on EUFSP and points towards windows of opportunity to take action moving forward. The aim of the research is to provide experts and officials with ideas about how EU policy decision-making processes can enable greater coherence among EU institutions and member states in their response to international crises and conflicts.

# Introduction

EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP) is a critical component for shaping the Union's role in the international arena. While the EU is often depicted as a single entity, it is in fact a composite foreign policy player. Indeed, the fact that it has grown in size and complexity and now consists of 27 member states has influenced its ability to develop and implement a coherent foreign policy, which has become increasingly challenging. Constraining factors, in particular (1) internal contestation, (2) regional fragmentation and (3) multipolar competition have emerged as significant obstacles to the EU's ability to respond to international conflict and crises effectively. Although these factors are not entirely new, their mutually reinforcing nature and the greater intensity with which they present themselves makes their analysis of their impact on foreign and security policies particularly important.

*Internal contestation* describes a condition that hampers EU member states consensus due to diverse – sometimes conflicting – domestic interests that reflect back on international policies.[1] As a result, the EU struggles to develop a unified approach to foreign policy issues, leading to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory positions or even blockages, e.g., between different EU institutions and/or certain member states. Internal contestation thus adversely affects the decision-making processes for reaching a common EU foreign policy, which can prolong and worsen international crises and conflicts and leads to the EU losing ground with respect to other international actors.

The second factor hampering a coherent EUFSP is *regional fragmentation*, which refers to the erosion or collapse of state authority and the regional rules of engagement.[2] Generally, fragmentation leads to an increased pursuit by regional actors of more power and influence, which makes it more challenging to coordinate a coherent EU foreign and security policy.

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[1]   Marianna Lovato et al., "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy. A Literature Review of the Implications of Intra-EU Contestation on Crises and Conflicts", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516.

[2]   Agnès Levallois et al., "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639.

Finally, *multipolar competition* refers to the interplay and shifting power dynamics among existing global powers. It describes a process in which regimes and previously agreed upon norms and procedures (e.g., for conflict resolution) change and become weaker, which leads to a setting where existing power dynamics are challenged and, eventually, shift. These complex geopolitical dynamics challenge the EUFSP actors and affect their ability to position themselves while seeking to balance their relationships with different countries.[3]

In a Union of 27 member states, differences in (geo)political interests, socio-economic realities and historical trajectories constantly threaten the internal unity and thus also the external coherence of EUFSP. The general rule of unanimity in the Council's foreign policy decision-making regularly stifles attempts to protect European interests and pursue the EU's global objectives. Constant course corrections are engineered by and through the different EU institutions to overcome internal dissonance. When paired with the emerging realities of regional fragmentation and multipolar competition, the interplay of the three factors can affect EUFSP in significant ways.

This paper draws on the findings of nine case studies that focused on the particular interplay of the three aforementioned constraining factors in the context of current international conflicts and crises. By assessing the EU's response to these constraints, the case studies identified room for manoeuvre to adjust and shape EU policies to become more coherent and effective moving forward. The paper therefore pulls the different threads of the case study research, which was carried out in the context of the EU-funded JOINT project, together.

We start by analysing the impact of internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition as well as the interplay of these factors on the EU's foreign policy *across the nine case studies*. Then we examine the strategies employed by the EU to mitigate their negative impact, categorising them in *institutional measures, functional measures and diplomatic/coalitional measures*.[4]

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[3]    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.

[4]    Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, "Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Heavily Contested World", in *The International Spectator*, 2024 (forthcoming).

The research identifies common patterns and divergent approaches, windows of opportunity to take action moving forward and proposes strategies for reducing the impact of these challenges on EUFSP.

By analysing the results of nine case studies that cover current issues of international security, this paper provides analytical insights and policy recommendations that can inform future expert analyses as well as decisions of EU and member states policymakers. The aim is to help the Union develop a more coherent and effective foreign policy by identifying strategies to mitigate the impact posed by internal contestation, regional fragmentation, and multipolar competition and their mutually reinforcing nature.

# 1. The impact of the three constraints on EUFSP

## 1.1 The effects of internal contestation

The EU's ability to act as a coherent entity in response to an international crisis is often hampered by intra-EU contestation.[5] EUFSP is the outcome of complex political processes that involve a multitude of actors on different levels of governance, making contestation and disagreement almost inevitable. What is worse, every member state can act as a "veto-player", blocking any coherent EUFSP. The recurrence of this phenomenon[6] has been such that the unity among EU institutions and its member states following the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has been not just impressive but also unexpected.

As intra-EU contestation can manifest itself in different forms depending on the specific case, it is important to analyse what really lies at the core of EU internal contestation – what constitutes the "bone of contention". Research conducted in the context of the JOINT project has identified four different levels of origin for intra-EU contestation that (adversely) impact EUFSP: contestation on the *domestic*

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[5]    Marianna Lovato et al., "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

[6]    Jan Zielonka (ed.), Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy, The Hague, Kluwer Law International, 1998; Erik Jones and Anand Menon, "Europe: Between Dream and Reality?", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (January 2019), p. 161-180, DOI 10.1093/ia/iiy237.

*level*, contestation on the *level of EU member states*, contestation on the *level of EU institutions*, and contestation on the *international level*.

**Table 1** | Typologies of contestation and their impact on EUFSP

| Type of contestation | Defining elements | Impact on EUFSP |
|---|---|---|
| *Domestic level* | | |
| *1st variant* | Analogy between external conflict and domestic problems – with no direct link between foreign policy issue and domestic actors. | Blocking or delaying of coherent EU policies. |
| *2nd variant* | Existing ties with parties involved in foreign conflicts – direct link between foreign policy issue and domestic actors. | Member states either dissent from other member states' positions or are unable to form a coherent position, which leads to a blockage of EU consensus. |
| *3rd variant* | Substantial domestic division about current foreign policy conflict. | Delaying and "foot-dragging" rather than open contestation of other member states' positions. |
| *EU member state level* | Diverging and competing national interests and identity constructions cause internal contestation. | Decision-making process and coherent policies are negatively impacted and slowed down. |
| *EU institutions* | Significant amount of competition between different EU institutions, sometimes including lack clearly defined roles. | Power competition (resulting in a blockade between EU institutions), lack of communication, analysis and coordination, differing policy priorities, hardened political preferences. |
| *International level* | Relationship with and dependence of the EU and its member states on external global players. | External actors influence the power dynamics *within* the EU and contribute to internal contestation. |

*Contestation on the domestic level* refers to contestation *within* a member state. It can stem from different actors, such as government representatives, political parties, interest groups, diaspora communities or civil society organisations. This form of contestation can manifest itself via debates in parliament, party politics, media dissent – all the way to street protests. Contestations on the domestic level can impact EUFSP in several ways. Modes of contestation differ depending on the nature of the link between the domestic level and the EU foreign policy level. In the *first variant*, the core of the contestation is a structural similarity between the EUFSP issue and a domestic-level conflict in one or more member states. Contestation arises here because the affected members want to avoid a "dangerous precedent" (for their own country) and, in effect, block or delay coherent EU policies. For instance, in the case of the Kosovar-Serbian conflict, Spain and Romania are among

the five EU member states that do not recognise Kosovo's independence. At its core, this is not about Kosovo as such for either country. Rather, contestation is rooted in *domestic* minority conflicts in the respective dissenting member states, such as fears over the potential loss of territorial sovereignty. This is particularly visible in the case of Spain (the strongest non-recogniser), where the reason for not actively supporting a coherent EU policy is the government's stance towards the Basque and Catalan independence movements.[7]

The *second variant* of domestic-level internal contestation revolves around more direct links between the foreign policy issue and domestic actors – for instance ties, connections, or just sympathies between significant actors within one (or more) member state and a party to a foreign conflict or crisis in which the EU has a stake. These ties can influence a member state's position towards the EUFSP issue at hand. As a result, the member state in question either dissents from the other member states' positions or finds itself unable to form a coherent position and then blocks an EU consensus. This was observed in the case of Venezuela, where Italy's anti-establishment and populist Five-Star Movement (which, at the time, was the strongest party of the Italian coalition government) and Greece's leftist government contributed to preventing a common EU position towards recognising Juan Guaidó, the speaker of the General Assembly and leader of the opposition to President Nicolás Maduro, as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela.[8] At its core, this was due to "anti-establishment" antipathies[9] towards what was perceived as a regime change policy basically dictated to the EU by the United States. This variant of domestic-level contestation only becomes relevant for EUFSP if the political power of the respective actors within the member states translates into government participation. In addition, the effect can be reversed on occasion of changes of government (e.g., the change in Greece's position towards the Venezuela dossier).[10]

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[7]  Pol Bargués et al., "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia: Strengthening EU Foreign and Security Policy amidst Internal Contestation", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 12 (December 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1459.

[8]  Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth: Challenges to Finding a Way Out", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 18 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1550.

[9]  More substantial connections might have existed but could not be empirically established beyond doubt.

[10]  Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the

In the *third variant* of domestic-level contestation, it is divided public opinion that makes it hard for a member government to form a decisive political position on an EUFSP issue. Typically, the result is delay and "foot dragging" rather than open dissent, which may lead EU involvement to remain more limited than it otherwise would have been. The classic example from the set of analysed case studies is Germany's position towards arms exports to Ukraine in 2022. For Chancellor Olaf Scholz' government, it was politically rather costly to form a clear opinion and act on it decisively and early, essentially because public opinion in Germany was deeply divided (which, in turn, was due to Germany's still significant pacifist and non-interventionist constituency as well as those focused on reconciliation and cooperation with Russia – a fundamental policy choice in the post-1990 era that was not easily reversed[11]). It is important to note that, in this variant, the domestic conflict is directly *about* the international conflict (unlike the first and partly the second variants) and the resulting incoherence on the European-level is thus the direct effect of internal member-state level divisions. In the essentially consensus-based EUFSP system, this implies that any salient foreign policy issue that divides the public in even a single member state on the domestic level can effectively block the formation of a coherent EUFSP – if the respective government is reluctant to antagonise a significant part of public opinion.

The second form of contestation, *contestation on the level of EU member states*, originates from diverging and competing national interests and identity constructions that adversely impact EUFSP. This second level differs from the first level whenever such differences between member states are not domestically contested – either because the respective issue is domestically (more or less) consensual or because it is simply not salient enough to trigger domestic debate. This form of contestation, in a way, is the most "normal one" as it is to be expected that 27 sovereign states do not have identical foreign policy interests and international identities. Unsurprisingly, contestation on this level can take many forms – from disagreements about policy priorities or the allocation of resources, diverging foreign policy approaches and/or traditions, or simple differences of interest.

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Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

[11] Kristi Raik et al., "Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine: From Strategic Denial to Geopolitical Awakening", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 20 (April 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1623.

Some of this can even be seen as the result of "natural differences" between member states. For example, Poland is "closer" to the Ukraine War than Ireland is, not just in terms of geographic proximity but also as concerns its historic collective memory and process of national identity formation. Similarly, the Southern EU member states (Italy, Greece, Spain and France) are more affected by migration routes, commercial flows and energy supplies from Africa and the Middle East than Finland. The resulting differences are apparent in the EU's response to the civil wars not only in Syria[12] but in Ethiopia too.[13] Geographic location alone rarely affects interest formation. Both France and Italy consider Libya part of a Mediterranean "sphere of interest", for example.[14] This is not only an issue of geographic proximity but of historical ties – a factor that becomes even more visible in France's stand on the strategic significance of the South China Sea.[15] In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, member states have formed three major blocs: one group in stronger support of Israel, one pro-Palestinian group and a third group that tries to strive for a balance between the parties. The pro-Palestinian stance of the Nordic countries can be explained by a strong focus on human rights (a highly relevant issue in this case),[16] which is part of their foreign policy traditions. In the case of Germany, this tradition also exists, but it is counter-balanced by a strong pro-Israeli stance that has deep historical roots and became very visible in then-chancellor Angela Merkel's 2008 statement about the security of Israel as part of Germany's "raison d'état".[17] Poland does not fit in either of these groups, but its

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[12]   Agnès Levallois at al., "Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 17 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1540.

[13]   Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, "Ethiopia and the Tigray War: Limits and Challenges of EU Policy in a Fragmented and Contested Region", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 16 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1535.

[14]   Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, Caterina Bedin and Dario Cristiani, "The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation: The EU and the Limits of Its Approach to Libya", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 15 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1521.

[15]   Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition: A More Targeted EU Response?", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 14 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1499.

[16]   Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division: EU Internal Contestation over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 19 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1575.

[17]   German Government, *Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel vor der Knesset am 18. März 2008 in Jerusalem*, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-dr-angela-merkel-796170. For an English translation see: *Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem*, 18 March 2008, https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/

changing levels of conflict and engagement with Israel can also be explained by its historically grounded national identity construction (and not least the right-wing populist reading thereof by the ruling PIS party, which falls under the first form of contestation).[18]

As mentioned above, contestation on the level of member states is almost to be expected. What may come as a surprise is *contestation on the level of EU institutions*. At first glance, one may expect that EU institutions should have a clear preference in terms of joint EU policies and a single "European voice". This perspective fails to consider, however, that the interests of different EU institutions are not identical and that there is a significant amount of competition between them, not least because their respective roles are not always clear. This kind of contestation can also take different forms, from competition via insufficient communication, analysis and coordination all the way to differing policy priorities and hardened political preferences. On the institutional level, competition can be observed between the European Council, the European Commission, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission (HRVP) and the European Parliament (EP). All this results in incoherent EUFSP, with negative implications for both the target of EU policies and the EU itself.

For instance, in the case of Ethiopia, a lack of common information gathering, analysis and communication among the various EU institutions made the EU unprepared to face the contingency of a civil war erupting in the Tigray region.[19] Another example where the problems on the European level become apparent is the case of Israel and Palestine. While the EU has generally been supportive of a two-state solution, there have been disagreements among various representatives of EU institutions over how to achieve this goal and how to deal with the conflicting parties. The absence of effective mechanisms for de-blockage led to a stalled situation where the Neighbourhood Commissioner took a more pro-Israeli stance, while the HRVP echoed a more pro-Palestinian point of view. While inter-services bodies do exist to resolve conflict between institutions (e.g., the Commissioners'

activity/Documents/SpeechPdf/merkel.pdf.

[18]    Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division", cit.

[19]    Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, "Ethiopia and the Tigray War", cit.

Group "A stronger Europe in the World" to mediate between Commission DGs, or the 'Group for External Coordination' (EXCO) to synergise EEAS and Commission), in this case the blockage could only be resolved upon the intervention of EU member states which highlights member state's ability to act effectively when necessary.[20]

The fourth and final form is *contestation on the international level*, which refers to the relationship with and the dependence of the EU and its member states on external global players. While multipolar competition plays an important role on almost all levels, its impact becomes most noticeable for this kind of contestation. Significant global actors such as the United States, China or Russia influence the power dynamics *within* the EU and contribute to internal contestation. In the case of the South China Sea, despite an agreed upon common language by the EU that depicts China as "cooperation partner, economic competitor and systemic rival", some member states take a different stance based on the respective bilateral connections, such as France who still holds territory in the Indo-Pacific.[21] In the case of Venezuela, the US and EU imposed sanctions, scaled down diplomatic relations and denounced President Maduro's regime, while Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Cuba provided financial assistance and helped Venezuela to circumvent the sanctions.[22] International-level contestation became apparent in Greece's stance as Athens opposed policies that implied close collaboration with the US.[23] This highlights that international actors influence EU member states in different ways and that thus the international level can be "transported" into the debate among members states much in the same way as the domestic level is.

## 1.2 The effects of regional fragmentation

The concept of fragmentation manifests itself in the weakening of "state authority", defined as the state holding the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence and the ability to set and enforce rules. Under the fragmentation

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[20]   Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division", cit.

[21]   Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition", cit.

[22]   Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

[23]   Ibid.

process, multiple centres of power emerge and compete with the main authority, ultimately undermining the state as a whole. These conflicts for power not only disrupt the stability of the country but also its close neighbourhood. On top of that, external actors take advantage of this phenomenon to pursue their own interests in fragmented territories, although fragmentation can also act as a disruptive factor for their own policies since regional rules of engagement erode or collapse altogether. The fragmentation process profoundly characterises the present international scenarios, as there has been a noticeable rise in the number of areas where state authority has collapsed, is fiercely contested or severely restricted by domestic actors.

The crises and conflicts rooted in regional fragmentation weigh heavily on EU conflict management efforts due to the extreme complexity of the challenges it poses.[24] The fragmentation process impacts EUFSP in several ways, mostly by exposing its inability to formulate coordinated actions. Furthermore, when dealing with such constraints, the EU has to handle multiple interlocutors in negotiation processes. The EU, therefore, faces the challenge of developing a strategy that simultaneously aligns with the interests of the stakeholders and adapts to the field in which it operates.

The elements that can be generalised from the analysis of JOINT's case studies as consequences and characteristics of this specific constraint concern six different forms of fragmentation: (1) governmental, (2) externally-induced, (3) multi-scale, (4) conflict status, (5) historic and (6) intergovernmental. *Governmental fragmentation* is further divided into two defining elements, namely the weakness of institutions or the collapse of the state. *Multi-scale fragmentation* is characterised by three levels: regional, national and sub-national. Lastly, forms of *conflict status fragmentation* can be differentiated between the presence of agreements such as peace or cease-fire and ongoing conflict. The table below presents a comprehensive overview of the characterisation types, their principal defining elements and the consequences they have on the implementation of the EUFSP.

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[24]    Agnès Levallois et al., "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

**Table 2** | Fragmentation typologies and their impact on EUFSP

| Type of fragmentation | Defining elements | Impact on EUFSP |
|---|---|---|
| **1) Governmental fragmentation** | | |
| *Collapse of the state* | · Dysfunctionality of state authority.<br>· Confrontation between formal and informal powers.<br>· Polarisation of governmental structures. | Presence of multiple interlocutors, which complicates the EU's interactions with local structures. |
| *Weakness of institutions* | · Inability to address the symptoms of fragmentation at the institutional level.<br>· Failure to implement policies. | EU may be forced to engage with non-state actors. |
| **2) Externally induced fragmentation** | · Symptom of involvement of external powers in fragmented territories.<br>· Support of external powers amongst divided territories may strengthen fragmented dynamics. | May call into question the EU's legitimacy to act on fragmented territories. |
| **3) Multi-scale fragmentation** | | |
| *Regional level* | · Fragmentation between states; interstate conflicts.<br>· Increase of areas where state authority has collapsed/is contested. | · Fragmentation can spread to neighbouring states, creating political disruption and strengthening fragmented dynamics.<br>· Possible further destabilisation of the EU's neighbourhood, complicating EU policy agenda. |
| *State level* | · Fragmentation between authorities.<br>· Competing powers and state-level groups. | |
| *Sub-national level* | · Local fragmentation, between cities and local residents.<br>· Presence of opposed/conflicting (ethnicity, identity...) minorities/ municipalities/communities. | |
| **4) Conflict status** | | |
| *Peace or ceasefire agreement* | Fragmented territories where agreements establish a "status quo" until further resolution. | Ongoing conflict status can create further complications since the EU needs to be careful not to reinforce confrontation dynamics.<br>In the case of an agreement, the EU must carefully manage its implementation policy in order not to disrupt the fragile equilibrium. |
| *Ongoing conflict* | Fragmented territories where no agreement has been found. | |
| **5) Historic fragmentation** | · Characterised by factors such as identity, ethnicity, etc.<br>· Interplay and instrumentalisation of these factors can induce fragmentation and nurture it once established. | Multiplicity of historical factors can undermine the EU's ability to formulate an adapted and comprehensive strategy, which takes into account all variables. |
| **6) Intergovern-mental frag-mentation** | · Exclusion of fragmented territories from regional alliances and intergovernmental structures.<br>· Lack of cooperation between governments and/or institutions in the region.<br>· Lack of ties with external partners can strengthen the fragmentation process through further exclusion. | EU faced with the difficulty of implementing a policy based on regional integration. |

*Governmental fragmentation* presents the EU with the challenge of dealing with multiple interlocutors, each presenting itself as the legitimate site of the government. This implies that when the EU identifies a privileged interlocutor to establish stable relations in conflict and crisis settings, it inevitably risks prolonging or exacerbating conflict dynamics. For example, in Libya, the factionalism characterising the country, which is rooted in the weakness of its institutions, makes it difficult for the EU to be present on the ground without being drawn into the competition of the opposing governmental actors.[25] Moreover, the emergence of multiple centres of powers also implies that the EU has to engage with non-state actors. Consequently, the relations established with them may differ from usual diplomatic relations, meaning that the EU will have to adapt its communication and operational strategies.

In the context of *externally-induced fragmentation*, the involvement of international powers in favour of a particular centre of power results in prolonging fragmentation – if not reinforcing it. In this perspective, fragmentation induces consequences over the implementation of EUFSP, but simultaneously the EU's very involvement in foreign conflicts can be an inducing factor of the constraint. This fragmentation type is fuelled by the level of legitimation given by the diverging external recognition to opposing actors. As an illustration, in the Kosovo-Serbia case, the competition between the EU and Russia contributes to the strengthening of the fragmentation through the support and recognition that is given – or not – to Kosovo.[26]

*Multi-scale fragmentation* can be declined at the regional, state and sub-national levels. This entails that when fragmentation is localised on one of the levels, it can easily spread to another, for example from a country to neighbouring states or *vice versa*, creating multi-scale political disruption and strengthening fragmentation dynamics. This is evident in Iran's case, where Iran's actions in Iraq, the Gulf and against Saudi Arabia led to increased regional insecurity, exposing the necessity of regional dialogues to be developed in a preventive perspective.

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[25] Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, Caterina Bedin and Dario Cristiani, "The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation", cit.

[26] For more insights on the impact of the three constraints on the EUFSP in the context of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, see Pol Bargués et al., "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia", cit.

Depending on the *status of the conflict* – meaning whether it is an ongoing conflict or whether there is an established peace process – the implementation of EUFSP does not follow the same patterns. This is because fragmentation dynamics occur at different levels of exacerbation, thus, carrying out certain policies could become a factor for the disruption of balance. Currently, the Ukrainian case represents a clear example of how the EUFSP has been impacted by the outbreak of an open conflict and is forced to constantly adapt to the ever-changing and deeply challenging context.[27]

When considering *historic fragmentation*, the process is driven by recurring factors such as nationalism, identity, or the legacy of colonisation. Foremost, it is important to keep in mind that these can be considered roots of the process but are not the sole factors that make it persist and divide whole regions. Ethiopia, for example, is torn by deep-rooted national, ethnic, and religious clashes, and distrust between local governments. The country's main political actors are divided along ethnic lines and the principal root of fragmentation lies within identity.[28] In this context, the multiplicity of historical factors can undermine the EU's ability to properly formulate an adapted and comprehensive strategy – that is because it faces the need to acknowledge these roots and the dynamics they're inducing, in order to better comprehend and apprehend the territories it is implementing its policies on.

Finally, in the case of *intergovernmental fragmentation*, the lack of regional cohesion and of alliances between fragmented territories and reliable partners complicates the establishment of an intergovernmental dialogue. For example, in Venezuela, the crisis has revealed the weakness of the institutional framework of multilateral governance in Latin America: the polarised environment and the exclusion of the country from intergovernmental organisations are furthering Venezuela's own fragmentation.[29] The EU is consequently faced with the difficulty to implement a policy fostering regional integration, which could prompt greater regional engagement with complex crises in fragmented contexts.

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[27]    Kristi Raik et al., "Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine", cit.

[28]    Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, "Ethiopia and the Tigray War", cit.

[29]    Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

This articulation of the constraint is not just about understanding better the various challenges fragmentation poses to EUFSP regarding the latter implementation and coherence. Analytically isolating the impact of each type of fragmentation allows experts and policymakers to establish clearer connections between issues and potential policy responses, thus opening the path to a formulation of tailored mitigation strategies.

## 1.3 The effects of multipolar competition

Increased competition between the world's powers (global but also regional) has affected EUFSP in different ways, partly because it takes a different form across the various countries and regions covered by JOINT's case studies. The renewed outbreak of war on the European continent is intimately linked to the security of the EU itself; the Iran file centres on the question of non-proliferation (although it has grown to encompass other issues, especially regional stability); and the South China Sea disputes concern the need for security and predictability in a region through which a sizeable proportion of EU trade passes. A similar diversity is appreciable in the other cases, from Syria to Venezuela to Ethiopia, from Kosovo-Serbia to Libya and Israel-Palestine. In each case, the constraints imposed upon EUFSP have differed due to a variety of factors: the number and interests of the players involved, the geographic distance of the crisis or conflict from the EU's borders, the breadth or narrowness of competition, and the ability of EU member states to agree on a common approach and set of priorities. However, it is nonetheless possible to generalise two core factors shaping the nature of this constraint.

The first factor depends on the degree to which competition has become *all-encompassing and zero-sum*. An all-encompassing competition represents a more forceful constraint and generally limit the EU's room for manoeuvre. However, a deeper rivalry can also spur the EU into prompter, common actions. For example, the consolidation of the Russo-Turkish duopoly in Libya (in spite of their differences) helped bridge the gap between France and Italy,[30] just as deepening competition

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[30]  See Michaël Tanchum, "Turkish Military Maneuvering Pushed Italy and France to Join Forces in the Mediterranean. Now What?", in *Foreign Policy*, 23 September 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/23/pax-mediterranea-italy-turkey-france-oil-european-union.

with Russia and China has spurred the EU to take a more active role in conflict resolution in the Western Balkans as part of its enlargement agenda.[31] However, this "enabling" function of multipolar competition generally relies on the presence of a second factor, namely the existence of a relatively benign partner with whom the EU can cooperate, most often the United States. Even so, increased geopolitical competition results in a more coherent EUFSP depending on the quality of the exercise of partnership and not purely on the activation of a partnership per se. The Libya case clearly illustrates the point: US-European cooperation in NATO's 2011 military intervention did not prevent subsequent state collapse, contributing to the exacerbation of regional fragmentation.

Nonetheless, cases such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrate the importance of partnerships in achieving EUFSP goals. The Russia-West rivalry, which had become increasingly zero-sum in the years preceding the invasion of Ukraine, featured fundamentally incompatible visions for how to organise the European security space. This ultimately turned out to be an enabling rather than constraining factor for EUFSP coherence because EU member states' deep security and defence ties with the United States provide the foundations on which the EU manages its deepening confrontation with Russia. With Washington leading the way in terms of providing military support, the EU seized upon Russia's flagrant violation of international law to adopt multiple sanctions packages against Russia, offered Ukraine candidate country status, pursued a rapid decoupling of energy ties with Russia, and strengthened instruments of defence pooling such as the European Peace Facility and the common procurement of ammunition. While the EU still needs to consider how best to offset the negative impact of its Russia policy on its influence elsewhere in the world, these developments are nonetheless transformative and have enhanced the EU's "geopolitical" consciousness.[32]

The Iran case further demonstrates how EUFSP effectiveness is often a function of EU member states' ability to navigate potential divisions with the United States. Despite the disagreements on numerous policy files between EU capitals, Washington, Beijing and Moscow, all parties compartmentalised their nuclear diplomacy with Tehran in the run-up to the conclusion of the Iran nuclear

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[31]   Pol Bargués et al., "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia", cit.

[32]   Kristi Raik et al., "Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine", cit.

agreement of 2015. Unlike areas where the core interests of these actors clash, the deal showed how the Iran file was not an area where the world's leading powers unavoidably interpreted their interests in zero-sum terms. Nonetheless, without a clear and unambiguously benign partner, the EU has found it hard – indeed, too hard – achieving its objectives with regard to Iran, as former US President Donald Trump's decision to quit the deal re-ignited geopolitical tensions to an extent the EU was incapable of managing effectively. Where the US withdraws support for EU action, the attainment of the latter's foreign policy objectives and ultimately the cohesion of its foreign and security policy suffers immensely.[33]

For their part, the South China Sea disputes are largely centred on a bipolar standoff between the United States – the hegemonic naval power in the Western Pacific Ocean – and a rising China. Although ASEAN countries have played an important role in developing a multilateral architecture that place them at the centre of regional affairs, with groupings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, this has largely served as a buffer against excessive great power encroachment rather than a pathway for ASEAN to develop a common approach towards those powers.[34] Not every ASEAN member is a littoral claimant with a territorial dispute with China, and some countries such as Laos and Cambodia do not favour a confrontational approach towards Beijing at all. When combined with the theatre's geographic distance from European shores, as well as the relatively recent arrival of the EU as a strategic actor in this region, this bipolar construct leaves comparatively little space for the EU to make a decisive difference in shaping outcomes on questions of war and peace, even if it can play a role in enhancing the hard-power capabilities of local actors in an effort to secure its own geo-economic interests. Here, the EU holds somewhat of a hybrid perspective when it comes to regional partnerships. On the one hand, there exists a fear that Washington's zero-sum competition with Beijing – rooted in a desire to preserve its position of primacy in the global hierarchy of powers, which the EU does not necessarily value over the preservation of an international order rooted in commonly accepted rules – may constrain the EU's ability to set the terms of

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[33]   See Riccardo Alcaro et al., "The Unfulfilled Promise of EU Foreign and Security Policy Towards Iran", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 13 (February 2023), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1489.

[34]   Bilahari Kausikan, "Southeast Asia in the Age of Great-Power Rivalry", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (March/April 2021), p. 186-191.

its own economic relationship with China.[35] At the same time, many EU member states share Washington's concerns over Beijing's increasingly combative attitude, see cooperation with the US in relation to China as valuable, and view a European soft-power approach in the Indo-Pacific as complementary to the security-centric focus of the United States.[36]

At the same time, Beijing's approach to the South China Sea disputes, where it has created facts on the ground through a bare exercise of hard-power and likely perceives its core interests to be at stake, differs from its policy towards other theatres, notably Ukraine. To be sure, China would not look favourably upon an unambiguous Russian defeat in Ukraine, as this would allow the West to focus exclusively on confronting Beijing rather than two adversaries at the same time.[37] When combined with the "anti-hegemonic" worldviews espoused by Moscow and Beijing and the deep investment that President Xi Jinping has made in his personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, this explains why China has provided Russia with a diplomatic and economic lifeline throughout this war. Still, Beijing has been at pains to present itself as a neutral party and defender of territorial integrity interested in a peaceful settlement, even if its engagement with the belligerents has been obviously one-sided. As such, while the geopolitical context surrounding the war has become increasingly bipolar, featuring a reconsolidated transatlantic alliance against a deepening Sino-Russian entente, China has not (or least not overtly) provided Russia with military assistance and retains the space to attempt to drive a (limited) wedge between the United States and its European allies while simultaneously appealing to sensibilities of many states in the Global South.[38] In this context, many have therefore suggested that China may play a mediating role between Russia and Ukraine. A European "partnership" of sorts with Beijing, however limited, may therefore ultimately become necessary for the success of EUFSP in the Ukrainian case study, given that a mediated ceasefire and

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[35]    For more, see Bruno Maçães, "Surprise! The EU Knows How to Handle China", in *Politico*, 22 June 2021, https://www.politico.eu/?p=1748598.

[36]    Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition", cit.

[37]    See Bruno Maçães, "An Insider's Perspective on China's Strategy in Ukraine", in *Time*, 20 March 2023, https://time.com/6264512.

[38]    See Stuart Lau et al., "We Can't Lose China, EU Leaders Say", in *Politico*, 24 March 2023, https://www.politico.eu/?p=2819970.

mutually acceptable security guarantees are necessary preconditions for Ukraine's reconstruction and eventual EU accession.

The table below, focused on the three case studies in which multipolar competition features as the most salient constraining factor, illustrates how partnerships remain perhaps the most decisive elements in determining the outcome of EUFSP efforts. Even in instances where competition between power poles (including the EU) is moderate, failure to secure US alignment for EUFSP goals can prove fatal, even if partnerships with other actors can be beneficial.

**Table 3** | Multipolar competition and the impact of enabling partnerships on EUFSP in 3 cases

| Case study | Degree of multipolar competition | Presence of enabling partner | Result |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Ukraine** | Zero-sum (Russia and West) | Yes | Transformation of EUFSP (geopolitical actorness, progress on security & defence policy, candidate status extended to Ukraine) |
| **Iran** | Moderate (EU able to conduct shuttle diplomacy) | No (after US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal) | Failure of EUFSP (nuclear deal not salvaged, EU-Iran relations overtaken by other events – e.g., Iranian participation in Russia-Ukraine war) |
| **South China Sea** | Zero-sum (US and China) | Mixed | Moderate success of EUFSP (e.g., capacity building efforts in the South China Sea, development of Indo-Pacific Strategy) with limited ability to influence local outcomes |

# 2. Mitigation strategies on EUFSP

Building on the analysed effects of the three identified constraints – regional fragmentation, intra-EU contestation and multipolar competition – on EUFSP, the goal of this section is to introduce a set of mitigation strategies that aims at developing a more effective and coherent EU foreign and security policy. These measures can be organised under the threefold typology defined as *institutional*,

*functional* and *diplomatic-coalitional*.[39]

- *Institutional measures* include all mitigation strategies and practices centred on the actors of EUFSP, namely EU member states and/or institutions; such measures usually involve procedures of (informal) delegation of responsibilities from the EU and its member states to specific EU institutions or a limited core group of member states.

- *Functional measures* relate to strategies and/or practices whereby the EU and its member states utilise only part of their policy instruments by focusing on a limited number of issues (or even a single issue). These can manifest in the form of selective engagement (compartmentalisation, prioritisation, decoupling) or issue-linkages.

- *Diplomatic-coalitional measures* increase the EU and its member states' leverage over other states by reinforcing their engagement, through flexible coalitions of like-minded partners (strategic partnering) and other multilateral institutions (multilateralisation).

## 2.1 Mitigating the effects of internal contestation

Corresponding to the different forms of internal contestation impacting the EUFSP outlined in section 1.1, this section discusses strategies to mitigate their impact with the aim of increasing the coherence and effectiveness of EUFSP.

*Mitigating internal contestation originating on the domestic level.* Three different variants of internal contestation at the domestic level were identified: (1) analogy between external conflict and domestic problems – with no direct link, (2) ties with parties involved in foreign conflicts, and (3) substantial domestic division about current foreign policy.

Regarding the first variant, a possible mitigation strategy is based on breaking the connection and – if possible – even the analogy between the conflict and the respective domestic problem, which is seen as structurally similar. This has been partly achieved in the Kosovo-Serbia case by parking the most contentious issue – formal recognition of Kosovar independence – while focusing on pragmatic lower-

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[39] Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, "Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Heavily Contested World", cit.

level actions and hoping for eventual positive spillover effects. A further mitigating strategy in this regard is to delegate the issue to the European level, so that the opposition of the member states in question and the analogy to their domestic problems become less prominent. Moreover, the issue can be reframed as not analogous, for example by pointing out the differences between the situation of Kosovo and Catalonia.[40] Finally, a last strategy is about leveraging the domestic level, meaning that the EU could take advantage of domestic-level conflicts to draw from its member states' conflict-resolution models. This could serve as a model for building consensus at the European level.

For the second variant, it is important to keep in mind that ties between member states and parties involved in the conflict are only a problem if they imply opposition to a common EU-level policy, i.e., if these foreign parties linked with member states are the target of EU sanctions or of other restrictive foreign policy instruments. In this sense, the Venezuela case suggests that European actors should reconsider the value of their ties with local actors by evaluating the cost of risking an incoherent EUFSP and antagonising a significant subgroup of other – if not all – member states.[41]

Finally, the third variant is particularly challenging as significant divisions within the domestic public opinion come with equally significant political costs for the member state's government deciding to pursue a coherent EUFSP rather than giving in to domestic expectations for alternative policies. In addition, when multipolar competition is stronger, it affects both domestic opposition and the respective governments. The above strategy of parking highly contested issues while focusing on the most easily achievable goals appears helpful in this context, as does strategic delegation to the EU, because it reduces pressures on the member states governments. The Iranian, Ukrainian and Venezuelan dossiers, however, suggest that the international level might also be successfully leveraged. In fact, once major international actors, especially the US, have been brought on board, mainstream domestic opposition becomes more difficult in all member states.[42]

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[40]  Pol Bargués et al., "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia", cit.

[41]  Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

[42]  Ibid., and Kristi Raik et al., "Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine", cit.;

*Mitigating internal contestation originating on the member state level.* Intra-EU contestation also stems from differences in national interests and foreign policy identity constructions, often deeply rooted in history. This type of internal contestation appears almost unavoidable, given that the EU consists of 27 rather different member states, and is particularly difficult to mitigate, as some member states would have to act against their national interests or even identities. Concretely, all EU policies have undoubtedly encountered this issue and member states' interests never align easily in any policy domain. At the same time, the exact role of the EU has been that of finding a common ground for member states to agree to compromise in return for creating joint policies on common interests, or via reframing interest construction e.g., via deliberation.

It is important to note that while differences between member states' foreign policy preferences can sometimes be seen as the logical result of material differences between them (such as differences in geographical location), there is no necessary connection between such differences and their interpretation in terms of policy preferences. Indeed, this link can be based on a political interpretation that can be subject to both negotiation and deliberation. These two terms summarise the core mitigation strategies for member-state level contestation. Regarding *negotiation*, member states engage in conflict resolution, which can *inter alia* imply (re)framing and linking foreign policy strategies. This happens in such a way that a consensus can be found by concessions to opposing member states, which is the case in other policy fields through classical EU negotiation. From the perspective of *deliberation*, conflict resolution is based on the attempt to convince each member state of the merits of a particular type of common approach. In both cases, it is important to highlight the universal added value of a coherent EUFSP in a world characterised by multipolar competition, the achievements of uncontroversial EUFSP policies (such as humanitarian assistance), and finally the importance of strategic delegation to the EU in order to reduce pressures on member states.

*Mitigating internal contestation originating on the EU institutional level.* At the European level, contestation is stemming from differing interpretations of competences and competition between different EUFSP actors. The associated

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Riccardo Alcaro et al., "The Unfulfilled Promise of EU Foreign and Security Policy Towards Iran", cit.

fundamental mitigation approach is thus based on the improvement of internal EUFSP processes. The case studies provide ample suggestions for improving EU internal processes, ranging from optimising EU-internal communication to establishing effective mechanisms for unblocking different EU actors e.g., by empowering the President of the Commission or the HRVP with greater policy-making power (as in the Kosovo-Serbia and Iran cases) or by ensuring that member states actively engage in consensus-building (Israeli-Palestinian case).[43] Using and improving common information gathering and sharing, as well as analysis of conflict situations, is crucial and can lead to an effective and more coherent EUFSP, as recommended in the case of Ethiopia.[44] In addition, developing common policy action plans and using this process for consensus-building can be particularly helpful in shaping a more coherent EUFSP as suggested in the case studies on Venezuela[45] and Israel-Palestine.[46]

*Mitigating internal contestation originating on the international level*. Special ties or antagonisms vis-à-vis certain international actors (in particular global powers but also former colonies and their neighbours) can sow conflict among EU member states. The contestation at the international level thus bears the potential to disrupt the formation of a coherent EUFSP. Mitigation strategies of this type of internal contestation are linked to those aimed at mitigating internal contestation at the member states' level, as these ties (or antagonisms) influence member states' interests and identity construction. For instance, France, with its overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific, deems it to be in its interest to maintain constructive ties with China[47] despite the potential for incoherence in EUFSP. In Venezuela, Greece's left-wing government was opposed to an EUFSP aligned with the US because of ideological antagonism.[48] Another example previously outlined is Germany, which had significant difficulties in parting from its legacy of post-Cold War pro-Russia

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[43]    Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division", cit.

[44]    Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, "Ethiopia and the Tigray War", cit.

[45]    Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

[46]    Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division", cit.

[47]    Hans von der Burchard and Gabriel Rinaldi, "Germany Aims to 'Set the Record Straight' on China after Macron's Taiwan Comments", in *Politico*, 12 April 2023, https://www.politico.eu/?p=2900403.

[48]    Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

policies. Since the causal pathway of this form of internal contestation originates at the international level and impacts member states' national interests and identity construction, the mitigation strategies are similar to the ones outlined above, namely negotiation and deliberation, against the backdrop of the increased value of implementing a consistent EUFSP.

*Addressing the interplay of internal contestation with regional fragmentation and multipolar competition.* EU member state disagreements tend to reinforce the effects of both multipolar competition and regional fragmentation in most geographic locations, by preventing the EU from speaking with one voice through the implementation of a coherent EUFSP, thereby undermining its scope and credibility. For instance, in the Tigray conflict, the Council and Commission disagreeing on the approach towards the conflict resulted in the EU losing relevance and ultimately failing to occupy a key role in the peace process.[49] Even more so, the lack of consensus among member states slows the decision-making process for potential EU-led actions, while in parallel other powers such as Russia or China successfully gain influence in zones of conflict. Although this is directly linked to the intergovernmental nature of critical EUFSP actions, it ultimately poses problems to the effectiveness of the EUFSP itself, especially since consensus is rarely reached. Anew in the Tigray crisis, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, China and Iran backed Ethiopia's government and influenced its positions towards Western countries. In parallel, the EU's position was oscillating, leading to the inability of responding properly to and occupying a decisive stance in the conflict (while the Tigrayan forces were in favour of having the EU lead the mediation process, the government refused to grant the Union and its member states even an observer status).[50]

Considering the impact of intra-EU dissent on both the cohesion of the Union and the countries targeted by its policies, it appears essential to find ways to circumvent the lack of consensus between member states. Implementing efficient mitigation measures while preserving the stability of the EU could rely on: (1) defining more precisely the role of the EU and its member states in each specific case; (2) developing mechanisms that would provide the EU with sufficient power to

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[49]   Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, "Ethiopia and the Tigray War", cit.

[50]   Ibid.

act autonomously (e.g., in Kosovo-Serbia's case member states have 'agreed to disagree' and delegated more decisional power to the EU to overcome national conflicting interests);[51] (3) developing frameworks of internal dialogues that could help to catalyse and harmonise the efforts of the member states towards a more coordinated approach, or to let certain member states act even if EU-wide consensus is absent (the case of Israel-Palestine attests to the importance of this latter strategy).

*Summarising the mitigation strategies and their effectiveness.* Based on the analysis of mitigation strategies outlined above, it becomes apparent that, overall, seven mitigation strategies stand out and can be classified according to the mitigation typology previously established.

*Institutional mitigation measures* include (1) strategically delegating tasks/issues to the EU to reduce the salience of member states' conflicts; (2) improving internal EUFSP processes to clarify roles, to reduce institutional competition and to improve communication and collaboration; and (3) engaging in deliberation among member states to allow for the reframing of issues, interests and identities.

*Functional mitigation measures* include (1) parking contested issues while focusing on easily achievable goals and intending positive spill-over effects; (2) achieving deals among member states via issue-linkage to offset differences in interests and identities; (3) leveraging the domestic level in terms of conflict resolution.

*Diplomatic mitigation measures* include (1) leveraging the international level by establishing strong diplomatic partnerships and valuing a coherent EUFSP against the backdrop of multipolar competition to achieve consensus either by negotiation or deliberation.

While it is true that the unity of EUFSP largely hinges on the ability of the member states to find consensus on issues which touch upon the core of their interests as seemingly independent actors on the international stage (a process which often results in a "race to the bottom" in search of the lowest common denominator),

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[51]   Pol Bargués et al., "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia", cit.

instruments and means to overcome the lamentable state of Council decision-making do exist. A certain flexibility has been introduced over time in the EUFSP to keep the member states "united in diversity". In a spirit of sincere cooperation with the EU, outliers may, for instance, wish to constructively abstain from decision-making carried out and paid for by the other member states.

Given the heterogeneous landscape of intra-EU contestation types, some of these mitigation strategies overlap across the different forms of contestation. Consequently, these strategies are expected to have various levels of effectiveness when implemented. At the same time, not every strategy corresponds as efficiently when addressing a certain type of internal contestation, which can be observed in the following overview.

**Table 4** | Mitigation strategies and their effectiveness by level of internal contestation

| | Domestic level | Member state level | EU level | International level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Parking and focusing* | green | red | red | red |
| *Delegating to EU processes* | green | green | yellow | red |
| *Improving EUFSP* | red | red | green | red |
| *Leveraging domestic level* | green | red | red | red |
| *Leveraging international level* | green | yellow | yellow | yellow |
| *Achieving deals* | yellow | green | red | green |
| *Deliberation* | green | green | yellow | green |

Key: green=helpful, yellow=supportive, red=less helpful.

## 2.2 Mitigating the effects of regional fragmentation

The consequences of fragmentation on the implementation of the EUFSP are multifaceted and complex. In this perspective, strategies require a nuanced and context-specific approach that addresses the root causes of fragmentation and take into account the interplay with multipolar competition and intra-EU contestation, which can exacerbate the fragmentation process.

*Re-thinking humanitarian aid.* As one of the principal levers of the EU and an essential support for local populations, humanitarian assistance is key to alleviating the negative effects of fragmentation while strengthening the EU's outreach activities. The EU's strong economic influence endows it with the required resources and instruments to provide such support consistently. This fits with the EU's overarching discursive construction of its foreign policy as being geared towards the promotion of freedoms and human rights. However, the potential politicisation of humanitarian aid should be acknowledged (as shown by the cases of Syria and Venezuela) and consequently the need to rethink how it is delivered so that aid is depoliticised and the EU is made a more visible humanitarian aid provider.

Distributed in line with local needs and adequately targeted, humanitarian aid channels should provide destabilised territories with the necessary funds to support their people. However, the financial support flows towards the population and provides it with resources to survive without improving their social and political well-being – mainly because aid does nothing to strengthen institutions, which ultimately fail to address local concerns. This often happens because the EU is constrained by the principle of aid conditionality, hence, the EU channels funds through international organisations because it does not want to engage with governments that do not respect democracy and human rights. The EU is hence stuck in an impasse between the necessity of providing populations with sufficient aid to support their survival and the unfeasibility of accompanying that kind of help with an effort in strengthening the institutional capacity that could improve their livelihood in a long-term perspective. In the Israeli-Palestinian case, the EU's aid to Palestinians was not conducive enough to finding and supporting a political solution to the conflict. Eventually, this aid only helps to sustain the Palestinian population.[52] A further complication is that humanitarian assistance is often instrumentalised by the involved parties to serve their interests, financially or for legitimisation purposes. For instance, in the early stage of the Venezuela crisis, the regime perceived the EU's aid as an indirect way to legitimise the opposition's claims that the government's economic policies were exacerbating the country's conditions.[53]

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[52]   Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division", cit.

[53]   Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the

A solution is the depoliticisation of aid through the compartmentalisation of the EU's humanitarian assistance. This strategy, eventually followed in Venezuela, could also be applied in Syria, where the need for humanitarian aid for the population risks getting entangled in the debate over the normalisation of the Assad regime, which the EU is trying to avoid.[54] The EU could do this using UN delivery channels to multilateralise humanitarian aid, especially by insisting on keeping open cross-border points. Additionally, a re-framing of current EU humanitarian strategies around their principled values – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – would be essential to avoid making them a purely transactional tool in the face of the EU's external interlocutors.[55]

One final consideration is that, while the EU is a major aid donor in multiple fragmented territories, it is often not perceived as such. For example, in Syria the EU is not recognised as a key player by locals because its aid is delivered through UN channels.[56] As a consequence, despite its economic resources, in these areas the Union lacks sufficient leverage and legitimacy. A suitable strategy to mitigate this involves achieving better coordination between the EU's bodies managing instruments and the EU and the already locally-established players, to improve aid delivery but also legitimise the EU as an aid provider. Additionally, reaching agreements with external politically influential actors could help the EU to improve its humanitarian strategy. In Syria, for instance, Russia represents a major player – engaged with the Assad regime – that holds the ability to block aid delivery as illustrated by its vetoes on the renewal of the cross-border aid.[57] This highlights the essential necessity for the EU to hold dialogues with rival powers.

*Establishing assessment and evaluation processes*. A main challenge emanating from fragmentation for the EU is to forge a shared understanding of the dynamics that characterise fragmented regions. In this perspective, the EU should prioritise

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Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

[54]    Agnès Levallois et al., "Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

[55]    Carsten Wieland, "The Politicization of Aid in Syria", in *Babel: Translating the Middle East*, 29 June 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/politicization-aid-syria.

[56]    Agnès Levallois et al., "Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

[57]    Amnesty International, *UN/Syria: Russian Veto of Cross-Border Mechanism a Blow to Human Rights*, 8 July 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=175697.

missions on the field that allow identifying shortcomings and provision of recommendations for the future, prior to implementing any new or modified policy. Such knowledge-gathering actions would enable the identification of fragmentation dynamics and therefore facilitate the EU's ability to identify the predominant issues to implement the most tailored action possible while avoiding negative externalities. Foremost, developing such prior assessments would provide the EU with the information to develop criteria that would be used as a reference framework: this would help evaluate the readiness of the EU to effectively implement the EUFSP. Such knowledge would prove fundamental to ensure an effective rollout of EUFSP, for example in the provision of humanitarian aid or the establishment of development projects. It would also prevent and contrast the politicisation of such policies with the elaboration of safeguarding mechanisms. Two key takeaways result from this broad strategy. First, it permits avoiding reactive actions from the EU and external players, while involving all the relevant actors. Second, it can help to better understand and frame the priorities of local actors. Considering that the EU and its member states have their own particular interests that they will inevitably want to foster, they should adopt an approach that comprehends the divergence between local interests and their own. As an illustration of this argument, in Libya, the EU's focus mainly remains on border control. Considering that this issue is not a priority for local actors, whereas it is used by the EU as a marker of success for its actions, the Union risks losing sight of the real needs of Libyan citizens.[58] Considering this, if the EU interests prevail, it would fuel the perception that assistance is only meant to further its political interests and needs, which in turn would become a disincentive for local political forces to engage constructively. This is particularly important when considering that the EU presents itself as a backup force for local ownership, as a supportive player who is able to improve the situation in foreign territories.

*Engaging in regional and local dynamics*. The role of regional and local actors and their relationship with the EU is a pivotal element for the mitigation of the effects of fragmentation on the EUFSP. This is explored hereafter following three different levels: investing in collaborative work with regional actors, supporting and implementing dialogues at the regional and local levels, and aiming at the

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[58]   Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, Caterina Bedin and Dario Cristiani, "The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation", cit.

preservation of territorial integrity.

Intensifying bilateral and multilateral talks with regional actors is necessary to mitigate fragmentation dynamics. This assessment is especially valid when acknowledging that state-level fragmentation easily spreads to neighbouring states resulting in regional political disruption.[59] As an example, further regional insecurity followed Iran's actions in Iraq, the Gulf and against Saudi Arabia, highlighting the necessity of engaging in regional talks to prevent more fragmentation on all levels.[60] Moreover, if the EU engaged in policies pursuing further regional integration, it would lessen the exclusion of certain countries by creating ties with external partners. In this context, identifying and relying on local and regional key actors gives the EU credit and room for manoeuvre. This strategy is more particularly effective when associated with efforts at facilitating dialogues to address conflictual issues between countries. The EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, for instance, has made it possible to address technical cooperation issues, with a view to an eventual normalisation of relations, even if obstacles remain.[61] In this regard as well, it is essential that the EU develops strategies relying more on local organisations and actors, supporting them in the elaboration and implementation of mediation processes while respecting their wishes and needs. Additionally, this would allow strengthening local ownership by establishing long-lasting links with neighbouring countries and local/regional institutions, while fostering cohesive regional dynamics around fragmented territories. Thus, when engaging in mediation processes and peace talks, these actors should be the privileged interlocutors at the national, regional and international levels. Intrinsically linked with the previous strategy, it is essential to identify the relevant stakeholders to engage with and at which level – depending on their position in conflicting fragmented areas.

As a reminder, fragmentation means that the main central power has been challenged, thus underlying the risk of a potential territorial split, which would entail a high risk of a conflictual drift. Consequently, on a further level of engagement,

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[59]    Agnès Levallois et al., "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

[60]    Riccardo Alcaro et al., "The Unfulfilled Promise of EU Foreign and Security Policy Towards Iran", cit.

[61]    Pol Bargués et al., "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia", cit.

preserving territorial borders (unless changes are the result of negotiation) is a main issue, implying that key players such as the EU should maintain a consistent approach centred on the importance of preserving it. As an illustration, in the South China Sea case defending and respecting the territorial integrity of states is an issue that lies at the core of the region's disputes, thereby it is essential that the EU adopts an approach centred on addressing that issue through the means provided by international law.[62] This would lead to the implementation of tailored effective measures that would be well-received by local actors and help to focus the scope of the EU's action.

*Summarising the mitigation strategies and their effectiveness.* Considering the mitigation strategies elaborated above, they address a broad spectrum of possible actions in order to adequately address multiple fragmentation situations (illustrated in section 2.2). The strategies were linked to particular defining elements drawn from the fragmentation characterisation, thus providing them with an essential comprehensive dimension. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these measures have their own degree of relevance depending on the situation addressed and the implementation means used. On the other hand, they are not mutually exclusive, resulting in the possibility to cross-use them to complementarily address specific situations. Overall, eleven mitigation strategies stand out and can be classified according to the mitigation typology previously established as follows:

- *Institutional mitigation measures* include (1) achieving better coordination between the EU's bodies managing instruments.
- *Functional mitigation measures* include (1) improving humanitarian aid delivery; (2) leading facilitated dialogues to address conflictual issues between countries; (3) carrying out knowledge-gathering assessments; (4) leading monitoring process throughout and after EU's policies implementation; (5) reaching agreements with external politically influential (rival) actors.
- *Diplomatic-coalitional mitigation measures* include (1) reaching agreements with external politically influential (like-minded) actors; (2) achieving better coordination between the EU and the already locally-established players; (3) intensifying bilateral and multilateral talks; (4) engaging in policies pursuing further regional integration; (5) supporting local actors in the elaboration and

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[62]  Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition", cit.

implementation of mediation processes.

## 2.3 Mitigating the effects of multipolar competition

The task of mitigating the impact of multipolar competition takes on a particular tinge in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. With a hot war raging across its border, there is little that the EU can (or wants to) do to bring the confrontational dynamic between Russia and the West to a halt.[63] This conflict presents a peculiar case where the focus lies on gathering the EU's energy to enable advancements in the EUFSP rather than mitigating the effects of multipolar competition. Additionally, even if the EU occupies a significant position in the competition between China and the United States, it remains unable to shape the trajectory of their rivalry – confrontational and rooted in both ideological and structural problems.[64] Indeed, as the EU's dependence on the United States for its own protection has become ever more evident in Europe, it will have less room for manoeuvre to part ways with Washington in its overall approach towards the Indo-Pacific (and elsewhere). This has already shown consequences in the South China Sea case, especially in the EU's ability to be perceived by Southeast Asian states as a partner who understands and can strengthen their desire not to definitively choose between Washington and Beijing.[65] Indeed, the traditional EUFSP goal has been that of representing a third way between China and the US, but the recent downturn in EU-China relations has made the EU's position more ambiguous.[66] A somewhat similar lack of clarity can be observed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the EU's stand against Russia's occupation of foreign lands contrasts sharply with its unwillingness to denounce forcefully Israel's occupation and integration of recognised Palestinian lands.[67]

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[63]   Pjotr Sauer and Andrew Roth, "Putin Prepares Russia for 'Forever War' with West as Ukraine Invasion Stalls", in *The Guardian*, 28 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/p/nhb4b.

[64]   Judy Dempsey, "Judy Asks: Can Europe Influence U.S.-China Rivalry?", in *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 16 February 2023, https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/89059.

[65]   Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition", cit.

[66]   Alexandra Brzozowski, "Von der Leyen Wants 'De-risking' not 'De-coupling' in New China Doctrine", in *Euractiv*, 30 March 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1902405.

[67]   Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division", cit.

On the economic side of multipolar competition, some hold the view that the EU should eschew subsidy wars in favour of maintaining a posture committed to openness and support for multilateral institutions[68] but even in this case, the current policy orientation may be difficult to overcome. Perhaps more fundamentally, mitigating the impact of multipolar competition appears increasingly less about preserving the Union's maximum freedom to manoeuvre. In some cases, such as Ukraine, the imperative of siding unambiguously with one partner limits this freedom but may also unlock the potential for major advances in the coherence of EUFSP. In other cases, either the range of available policy options limits the EU's mitigation ability, or the trade-offs it faces lead to side effects – with mitigation strategies in one theatre undermining the ability to conduct mitigation elsewhere.

Against this backdrop, the very concept of mitigation of the effects of multipolar competition appears somewhat imperilled, offering either de minimis policy options in some cases or the embrace of geopolitical confrontations in others. Nonetheless, three main conclusions can be drawn concerning how the EU and its member states might best approach conflicts and crises affected by deepening multipolar competition.

*Strengthening partnerships.* Partnerships lie at the core of the EU's ability to mount an effective foreign policy response to any crisis or conflict.[69] The importance of partnerships in a multipolar world should be evident; indeed, in this system, it is advantageous to have multiple actors to one's side and not to be isolated. However, the EU does not favour a system of shifting alliances based primarily on the calculation of raw interests rather than shared norms and values. And besides the fact that the transatlantic alliance is a more longstanding and deeply institutionalised relationship than other EU partnerships, the reality is that – despite the erosion of what many have called the "liberal international order"[70] –

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[68]  Member states have internalised this reality, with "partner" representing one of the four pillars of last year's Strategic Compass – albeit perhaps the least conceptually developed of the four – alongside "act", "invest" and "secure", although the Compass is admittedly more focused on security and defence than the full spectrum of EUFSP. See Daniel Gros, "America's Inward Turn on Trade", in *Project Syndicate*, 12 December 2022, https://prosyn.org/ovNSfBf.

[69]  Steven Blockmans, Dylan Macchiarini Crosson and Zachary Paikin, "The EU's Strategic Compass. A Guide to Reverse Strategic Shrinkage?", in *CEPS Policy Insights*, No. 2022-1 (March 2022), https://www.ceps.eu/?p=36032.

[70]  David Lake, Lisa Martin and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal International Order:

the world remains in many respects unipolar, trending toward bipolarity, and not multipolar on a global scale (regionally, things stand differently).[71] As such, while working with a diverse set of relatively benign partners on a case-by-case basis is always advantageous, in big-ticket issues such as Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific there is little substitute for an effective partnership with the United States when it comes to managing the pressure of multipolar competition. This is also true when multipolar competition is not the prevailing factor. For instance, in Libya the performance of the anti-smuggling mandate of the EU's naval operation *Irini* has suffered from an absence of effective cooperation with other stakeholders such as the United States.[72] Regarding Syria, a geopolitical and humanitarian crisis which also has a clear bearing on the security of EU borders, the EU's strategy has been heavily influenced by shifts in the US approach towards the conflict, such as when Washington's focus on backing the Syrian opposition against the Damascus regime shifted to a strategy of aerial support aimed at combating the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014.[73] Lastly, the impact of EUFSP on the Tigray War also suffered from the belated support it received from an otherwise distracted United States.[74]

*Working towards a more effective "Europeanisation".* The more of a driving factor multipolar competition is in a given conflict or crisis, the more Europeanisation of the EU member states' policy response is likely to prove useful. In this context, Europeanisation implies a commitment to pursue the national interests and policy responses of member states at the European level. Direct involvement of EU bodies from member states for the achievement of common goals has proven effective. For instance, in the Iran case EUFSP remained proactive and received widespread support among member states partly thanks to the E3 of the United Kingdom, France and Germany actively involving the HRVP in their multilateral talks, while

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Reflections on International Organization", in *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Spring 2021), p. 225-257, DOI 10.1017/S0020818320000636.

[71] Nuno P. Monteiro, "World Order across the End of the Cold War", in Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel (eds), *Before and After the Fall. World Politics and the End of the Cold War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 338-360. Also see Andrey Kortunov, "Western Consolidation and Asymmetric Bipolarity", in *RIAC Working Papers*, No. 69/2022, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/workingpapers/a-new-western-cohesion-and-world-order.

[72] Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, Caterina Bedin and Dario Cristiani, "The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation", cit.

[73] Agnès Levallois et al., "Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy" cit.

[74] Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, "Ethiopia and the Tigray War", cit.

also seeking support from the EU Council. Furthermore, Europeanisation allows for the development of a more coherent and comprehensive framework for regional engagement and the reduction of intra-EU disagreements. The Indo-Pacific case demonstrates how the adoption of a common EU Indo-Pacific strategy has allowed this, but also increased the perception among regional players that the EU is a potential order-shaping actor with more to offer than either hard power (France) or economic cooperation (Germany).[75]

It is important to underline that Europeanisation differs from the mere coordination of certain member states' approaches, deploying affected members' leverage and diplomatic assets in the pursuit of EUFSP aims. This strategy may prove more effective in cases where other constraining factors prevail, such as Libya,[76] while it does not in situations where multipolar competition is the prevailing factor. For example, the Normandy Format for Ukraine consolidated a dynamic in which France and Germany remained insufficiently attuned to the concerns of Central and Eastern European members. It eventually culminated in the rejection of their proposal for a reset with Russia, at the June 2021 European Council, because it lacked sufficient prior consultation.[77] Nonetheless, it is worth recalling that in a world of multipolar competition, the perception of greater actorness that Europeanisation invariably entails highlights that efforts to develop a more coherent and joint EUFSP will lead to the EU entering the fray of multipolar competition rather than resisting it, which at the same time can be considered as a strategy to mitigate the negative effects of internal contestation.

*Developing and maintaining dialogue with systemic rivals*. In order to minimise the impact of multipolar competition on EUFSP, another mitigation strategy is to maintain and develop a dialogue with systemic rivals on specific crises and conflicts. The EU could consider reaching out to China on the question of how best

[75]   Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition", cit.

[76]   Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, Caterina Bedin and Dario Cristiani, "The Vicious Circle of Fragmentation", cit.

[77]   Sabine Siebold, Robin Emmott and Gabriela Baczynska, "France and Germany Drop Russia Summit Plan after EU's East Objects", in *Reuters*, 25 June 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-germany-drop-plans-russia-summit-after-eu-outcry-2021-06-25.

to support intra-Venezuelan political dialogue and mediation.[78] Similarly, efforts to foster compartmentalised outreach to Russia, Iran and Turkey in Syria's case, difficult though they may be to sustain, could allow the EU to develop greater influence over the Assad regime while remaining committed to a policy of non-normalisation.[79] Such dialogue efforts would help avoid the EU becoming a bystander to events shaped by other influential actors and affecting its security and policy-making. Indeed, it is relevant to notice how in Iran, where the conditions which facilitated a proactive and effective EU foreign policy – the ability to prioritise, compartmentalise and multilateralise the nuclear file – are no longer present, this mitigation strategy could be a valid new approach for the EU. The coordination of EU member states, such as France and Germany, with China, with the contribution of the HRVP could help the EU to keep Iran engaged in nuclear diplomacy. China holds security interests in avoiding nuclear escalation in the Persian Gulf region and preserving economic and energy ties with Iran, hence it could contribute to enhancing EUFSP's influence in spite of remaining a systemic rival.[80] Evidently, Russia could in theory also be a rival with whom to develop a dialogue; however, the EU-Russia confrontation on the Ukrainian dossier is so intense that it makes Moscow an unlikely interlocutor on most other grounds as well. Moreover, with the intensifying great power competition between the US and China having become a structuring vector in international politics, the extent to which the EU is able to autonomously make decisions regarding its relations with either country has diminished.

*Summarising the mitigation strategies and their effectiveness*. Considering the analysis of mitigation strategies outlined in this section, overall, 6 mitigation strategies can be classified according to the mitigation typology previously established as follows:

- *Institutional mitigation measures* include (1) member states directly involve EU bodies towards common goals; (2) implement common EU strategies.
- *Functional mitigation measures* include (1) maintain space for (or gradually

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[78] Anna Ayuso, Marianne Riddervold and Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir, "The EU Trapped in the Venezuelan Labyrinth", cit.

[79] Agnès Levallois et al., "Syria: A Multifaceted and Challenging Crisis for EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

[80] Riccardo Alcaro et al., "The Unfulfilled Promise of EU Foreign and Security Policy Towards Iran", cit.

develop) dialogue with systemic rivals.

- *Diplomatic mitigation measures* include (1) establish strategic partnerships on a case-by-case basis; (2) establish standing and deeply institutionalised relationships; (3) enter the fray of multipolar competition on select files, while resisting the logic of competition across the board.

## Conclusion: Innovative mitigation strategies for a coherent EUFSP

This paper highlights the necessity for the EU to implement innovative mitigation strategies to address the broad challenges and negative effects caused by three factors that contribute to shaping the context in which the foreign and security policy of the EU and its member states unfolds: internal contestation, the fragmentation of regions and geopolitical rivalries between regional and global powers.

It appears that the future success of EUFSP depends on the ability of EU member states to strike a balance between reducing intra-EU divisions while dealing with international issues that touch upon their core national interests and identity. The latter consists of building strong international partnerships and networks with regional and local actors to alleviate the negative impact of regional fragmentation, and with gaining power, respect or visibility as international actor in a complex and fast-moving environment shaped by multipolar competition. The analysis contained in this paper has discussed several strategies that have been and can be implemented to mitigate the negative effects of the three constraining factors, thus strengthening EUFSP and ensuring its long-term viability. While it is imperative to address the specific constraints with tailored mitigation strategies, it appears insufficient to do so without considering their interrelated nature and how they exacerbate each other. It is important to underline that constraint-specific strategies might have limited results in complex and multi-layered scenarios. Consequently, this paper has identified a number of comprehensive and mutually-reinforcing mitigation measures that the EU could implement and which can be applicable to most hotbeds of conflicts where the EU is operating.

The analysis in this report has first outlined the challenges that arise from the individual constraints as well as their mutually reinforcing interplay. The different forms of internal contestation often result in incoherent policies or the delaying and/ or slowing down of decision-making processes. On the level of EU institutions, power competition, lack of communication, analysis and coordination, as well as diverging policy priorities or political preferences further exacerbate the negative impact of internal contestation. When dealing with regional fragmentation, the main challenges encompass the presence of multiple actors, including non-state actors, which complicates the EU's involvement in the crisis or conflict at hand. Conflicts that lead to regional fragmentation in areas neighbouring EU borders create prioritisation of goals and synchronisation of policy tools for EU member states. The core challenges emanating from multipolar competition depend on a variety of factors: the number and interests of the players involved, the geographic distance of the crisis or conflict from the EU's borders, the breadth or narrowness of the competition, and the ability of EU member states to resist external pressure and agree on a common approach and set of priorities. Specifically, two core factors shape the impact of multipolar competition on EUFSP: the degree to which competition has become all-encompassing and/or zero-sum for the involved actors and the potential for partnering with a relatively benign partner, especially the United States.

Three clusters encompass the variety of strategies aimed at mitigating the negative impact of the constraining factors on EUFSP: institutional, functional and diplomatic-coalitional measures. The *institutional* mitigation strategies that bear the potential to reduce the negative impact of the three factors (especially internal contestation) include delegation, negotiation and deliberation, as well as efforts at improving internal policymaking processes. It can be useful, even necessary, for EU member states to strategically delegate tasks/ issues to the level of EU institutions to reduce the salience of member states' conflicts. Generally, what has proven to be a useful strategy to allow for the reframing of issues, interests and identities, is the engagement in deliberation and negotiation among member states. To respond to internal contestation, but also fragile environments and the increasing competition of global actors, a core institutional mitigation strategy is the improvement of internal EUFSP processes to clarify roles, reduce institutional competition and to improve communication and collaboration among the EU's bodies and the use of its policy instruments. Better defining the different

tools, platforms, and means of action used would allow for a more accurate and effective approach when outlining European foreign policies. Investing more in the coordination and harmonisation of its own strategies would enable the EU to implement its strategies, within a space that is the most beneficial to all the stakeholders, while avoiding the risk of becoming an unfortunate player in the disruptive competition for power. This approach would support the EUFSP's effectiveness and help prevent an engagement in domains where it is less likely to reach positive outcomes, which risks unnecessarily expending the EU's geopolitical capital. In trying to be prominent in an increasing number of conflicts and disputed areas, the EU is gradually risking losing major leverage in most regions within the widening scope of application of its policies. Additionally, this is compounded by disagreements among member states, preventing them from reaching a consensus, and between the EU and local actors of the territories where the EUFSP is implemented. With the aim of basing its actions on realistic prospects and goals, the EU should clearly define its orientation in terms of foreign and security policies while taking into consideration its capabilities and resources.

*Functional* mitigation measures consists of the following strategies to reduce the impact of the three constraining factors: parking contested issues while focusing on easily achievable goals and intending positive spill-over effects, which can for example look like improving the delivery of humanitarian aid, achieving deals among member states via issue-linkage to offset differences in interests and identities or leveraging the domestic level of EU member states in terms of conflict resolution. Building on the necessity of a relatively benign partner in countering multipolar competition, it also is of utmost importance to maintain (or gradually develop) space for dialogue with systemic rivals. In scenarios where the Union's leverage remains limited, the possibility to cooperate with regional countries would bolster its actions and diminish potential disagreements. This strategy also depends on the EU's ability to ease potential misunderstandings with other actors involved; indeed, the EU's implication in some regions should not appear only as a means to extend its outreach by competing with established powers.

Finally, mitigation strategies that fall into the category of *diplomatic-coalitional* measures include multilateralisation and strategic partnering. The diplomatic-coalitional measures revolve around leveraging the international level through the establishment of strong multilateral partnerships (both within and outside

formal international organisations) through the effective use of negotiation or deliberation. It can be recommended to establish these strong and strategic partnerships on a case-by-case basis, depending on the local context and the presence of a benign partner. At the same time, establishing standing and deeply institutionalised relationships is helpful in scenarios of sudden conflict and crisis situations. In the current global environment of increasing competition, the EU may enter the fray of multipolar competition on select files, while resisting the logic of competition across the board. The EU should therefore assume a role of support for local actors when engaging in mediation processes rather than being the leading voice, notably by supporting bilateral and regional talks. Relying more on locals and neighbouring countries is essential since their legitimacy regarding their region is undeniable and they possess a deeper understanding of local dynamics. Therefore, it is essential to identify the relevant stakeholders to engage with, and the level – local, national, regional, international – to establish local actors as the core point of reference for mediation and peace processes.

In conclusion, the EU must continue to adapt and refine its policies to respond to an ever-changing global and increasingly complex environment. The current stake mainly lies in the ability of the EU's institutions and member states to coordinate in order to ensure that the necessary resources, expertise, and political will are in place to effectively mitigate the negative effects of the constraining factors and respond to international crises on key files. Moreover, the EU should not only focus on strengthening its own capacities and widening its network of trustworthy, strong and strategic partnerships, but should also identify and apply the lessons from (un)successful tactics to mitigate the constraining factors on the formulation and implementation of its foreign and security policies.

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