



Ten years after Lisbon: Member States in EU foreign and security policy

This policy brief reviews the effects of the institutional adjustments in EU foreign policy as instigated by the Lisbon Treaty. It scrutinises the implications of these reforms for the distribution of power between member states and EU actors involved. Our analysis identifies two conflicting trends: on the one hand, an increased influence for EU institutions, with the notable exception of the Political and Security Committee whose position as strategic foreign policy linchpin is no longer certain. On the other, a partial weakening of the commitment of at least some member states to EU foreign policy cooperation.

Key points

- With increased politicisation, European foreign and security policy is taking a much more prominent place on the agenda of the European Council.
- The PSC is increasingly less of a strategic decision-maker and more of a 'talking shop'. Still, it retains significant value as a site for consensus-building.
- The HRVP and EEAS as institutional actors have been empowered.
- Ultimately, the member states have created a system that gives them the capacity to exercise genuine influence internationally.

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The ability of the European Union to act collectively in international affairs and to decisively shape global governance have been much debated in the past five years. Buzz-terms like “collective sovereignty” or “European strategic autonomy” have become increasingly commonplace and are further underlined by claims in 2019 that Ursula von der Leyen would lead a “geopolitical” European Commission. Simultaneously, the 10th anniversary of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and of the reinvigorated role of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP) invite reflections on the state of the European foreign policy cooperation system and the impact of these institutional innovations. On the one hand we see global contestation and gloomy forecasts of the end of the liberal order challenging EU foreign policy-making externally. Internally, on the other hand, the political consensus around the added value of collective international action is increasingly challenged by (re-)emerging nationalist and populist sentiments.

This policy brief reviews the effects of the institutional adjustments to EU foreign policy as instigated by the Lisbon Treaty. It scrutinises the implications of these reforms for the distribution of power between the main institutions and actors involved. It shows how the more central role of the HRVP and EEAS, the permanent presidency in the Council in external relations, and the more prominent role of the European Council is impacting on how member states engage within the EU’s transnational foreign policy cooperation system. Our analysis identifies two conflicting trends: on the one hand, an increased influence for EU institutions, with the notable exception of the Political and Security Committee whose position as strategic foreign policy

linchpin is no longer certain. On the other, a partial weakening of the commitment of at least some member states to EU foreign policy cooperation. We contend that while the more prominent role for the EEAS and the HRVP were an objective of the Lisbon reforms, the shifting (and weakening) role of member states is an unintended consequence. This shift needs more careful political consideration given the nature of EU foreign policy cooperation and the positioning of member states within it. Our research shows that institutions matter, but for EU foreign policy cooperation to be considered legitimate by all member states they have to matter for the right reasons. We also contend that in the current institutional set-up it is unlikely that institutional actors can replace the political agency exercised by member states in EU foreign and security policy. We argue that the EU’s international strength and domestic legitimacy will only ever be as strong as the willingness of the member states to give their proactive support to their collective foreign policy-making endeavours.

EU foreign policy cooperation 30 years after Maastricht: a highly institutionalized system

The Lisbon Treaty introduced the most far-reaching reforms to EU foreign and security policy cooperation since the 1990s. It upgraded the EU’s diplomatic toolkit with the establishment of the EEAS as a quasi-foreign ministry that is supported by embassy-like delegations in more than 140 countries and a range of international organizations including the UN. It also re-adjusted the existing institutional support structures by creating the strengthened and expanded role of the HRVP and instituting a system of permanent chairs (or “presidencies”) of key committees including the Foreign Affairs Council and Political and Security Committee (PSC). The aim

was to create more coherence and an institutional memory that would equip the EU and its member states with a more active, efficient and potent foreign policy in light of international power shifts.

The EU’s pool of foreign policy instruments and processes has grown tremendously in the three decades since the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). We have seen high-profile new initiatives in recent years, including Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to support collaborative military force development (2017) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) to map systemically the existing defence capability landscape in Europe (2019).¹ Meanwhile, despite regular criticism of the inefficiency of EU external action, the EU has undertaken serious efforts to reform its institutional and instrumental repertoire enabling it today to deploy a variety of instruments to support its foreign policy ambitions. These range from economic incentives and sanctions to political dialogues, diplomatic engagement and crisis management operations. This does not mean it is always coherent, effective or even successful in its endeavours given the difficulty for any individual actor to have meaningful impact in a highly interdependent and complex international environment. Nonetheless the EU and its member states have over time pooled their tools and resources more successfully and today engage more proactively with a multitude of stakeholders across the globe.

Coordination processes between the various EU actors and member states’ representatives have also been further developed, routinised and professionalised. While EU foreign action has often (and sometimes quite fairly) been criticised for being too slow, we must not forget that coordination

involves 27 member states and their domestic structures; their representatives at the various levels of the Council; a variety of EU institutions, including the EEAS and frequently the Commission; and often third country partners. Whilst perhaps cumbersome, this process is impressive given its capacity to produce outputs involving such a large and varied number of stakeholders.

Despite the growth in institutional and procedural support, the member states centrality in decision-making in foreign and security policy has remained unchanged since Maastricht. However, we cannot ignore the impact that institutional adaptations have had over time and particularly since the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Together with more general trends, particularly globalisation, populism and the contestation of international authority that have affected the EU’s foreign policy cooperation system over the last 30 years, these have changed how member states perceive and engage with the CFSP and the CSDP.

A ‘Permanent Presidency’ to lead what or whom?

The most eye-catching innovation of the Lisbon Treaty was the effort to bring more institutional coherence to EU foreign policy, firstly by beefing up the role of the High Representative who also became a Commission Vice-President and head of the EEAS. The creation of the HR in 1999 was to provide active leadership in EU foreign policy initiatives. Located within the Council Secretariat, the HR and their small staff faced a situational rivalry and competition with the Commissioner for External Relations and DG RELEX.² The continuous growth in importance of external relations for various EU institutions also meant available resources were spread more thinly across and within the European Commission and the Council of Ministers and the incremental growth

of different procedures that have not always been well aligned. Merging the responsibility for external affairs at the highest political level was intended to ensure more policy and procedural coherence and make the HR better able to corral the institutions and all available resources for EU foreign policy.

Secondly, member states determined that coherence and continuity over the longer-term would be better achieved by replacing the 6-monthly rotating presidency with a permanent presidency in foreign affairs. Thus, instead of each member state chairing the meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council and its supporting committees, driving the agenda and representing the Council externally, these tasks were delegated to a permanent chair. The monthly Foreign Affairs Council attended by EU foreign ministers is now chaired by the High Representative. Meanwhile, the preparatory working groups in the Council covering external relations and CFSP, which bring together member state experts either from permanent representations or domestic ministries, are now chaired by a staff member of the EEAS. Finally the member states' ambassadors to the PSC, also have their twice-weekly meetings chaired by an EEAS official who is appointed as PSC chair by the HRVP in consultation with all PSC members.

Holding the rotating presidency has always been both challenging and rewarding for member states. The Council presidency is responsible for driving the agreed agenda of the member states; for mediating and getting agreement between them on policy; and for representing the collective of Council members to other institutions and externally. It bestows a particular prestige, socialises national diplomats and civil servants into EU policy-making processes, and reminds national populations that they are in the club. Indeed, “[p]sychologically speaking, only after a presidency does a new member really become

a new member”.³ It also it gives each member state the opportunity to showcase that they can do it: that they can act effectively as an honest broker and lead the EU collective in reaching decisions and finding solutions across a wide variety of policy fields and questions. Getting others to compromise and pushing EU policies forward is the most important task for any presidency and is especially challenging as the holder is limited to just 6 months. The success of a rotating presidency is thus measured in terms of how smoothly it manages to facilitate agreement, overcome disagreement, navigate stalemate, and close policy files.

Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, in foreign affairs the rotating presidency also meant representing the EU externally at the level of heads of state and government or foreign minister. Although this certainly brought prestige to the holder, it was nonetheless sometimes confusing and disruptive in interactions with third parties. Consequently, member states decided that a single, permanent presidency in foreign affairs would be better able to represent the EU collectively. This representative would at the same time be a specific institutional actor, supporting member states through policy initiation, keeping attention on EU foreign policy issues, and being responsible for ensuring the implementation of decisions. It was therefore logical that the role be taken on by the High Representative. Furthermore, to ensure vertical consistency within the Council, the key structures below the Foreign Affairs Council - PSC and working groups - would similarly have permanent EEAS chairs.

The permanent presidency in foreign policy has certainly achieved greater overall coherence, coordination and long-term strategic thinking in EU foreign policy. But it has also brought unintended consequences in terms of the internal governance of

EU foreign policy-making. Member states diplomats that we interviewed often observed that in the working groups, the move to a permanent chair has at times led to a loss of all-important political momentum, indispensable in the timely conclusion of negotiations. It has also meant less member state ownership of decisions, with member state officials no longer feeling the same professional empathy and understanding for the permanent chair that they felt when it was one of them. Finally, the routinisation of chairing and the removal of the 6-monthly countdown pressure that each presidency faced in delivering results has reduced the pressure to push for compromise. In short, while consistency has certainly been increased, removing the opportunity for member states to be in the spotlight for six months also meant that the urgency that member states previously felt to deliver results has been diminished.

Under the permanent presidency, meanwhile, the agenda-setting capacity and potential of the High Representative as chair of the Foreign Affairs Council has increased considerably, as demonstrated by Federica Mogherini from 2014-2019. She is regarded as having used the agenda-setting power of her position to good effect, being ‘very activist’ and wanting ‘to be involved in all the major policy decisions’. This has also been the case further down the Council structures. Member states have felt the impact of the permanent presidency and the EEAS primarily through their daily interactions of their PSC ambassadors. The permanent EEAS chair in

the PSC has brought a long-term perspective and continuity, and been able to rely on the institutional memory and expertise provided by the supporting EEAS apparatus. This in turn has enabled the EEAS chair to become in many ways the ‘driving force’ of PSC meetings in the view of some member state ambassadors.

This new-found role for the PSC chair has also altered the dynamics within the PSC. Research has emphasised the identity-shaping effects the rotating presidency can have on member state representatives: it offers a strong mechanism for collective identity-building, with representatives appreciating the difficult mediating role of the chair and aiming to support consensus-seeking. In the specific context of foreign policy, even if not driven by the notion of a strong collective European foreign policy, member state representatives knew that at some point they would be in the chair and would be dependent for success on the support of their peers. This relational perception of “we are in this together” has decreased with the creation of the permanent EEAS chair, even if the current holder as a former Finnish PSC ambassador can still rely on her long-standing experience and insights and of having been “one of them”. More research is needed to fully grasp the dynamics underlying this shift in group feeling. It does suggest, though, that having an institutional actor permanently ‘leading’ key discussions has had the unintended consequence of leaving some member states less invested in the EU foreign policy system.

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Tensions have also risen on occasion due to perceived conflicts between the role of the EEAS chair as facilitator of agreement among PSC ambassadors on the one hand, and the expectation they will pursue the agendas and preferences of the High Representative and/or the EEAS on the other. This situation has been especially problematic in cases where PSC ambassadors opposed to EEAS proposals felt circumvented by the High Representative who, instead of engaging with their feedback and positions, went over their head directly to the Foreign Affairs Council - and on occasion to capitals - in order to push ahead with their preferred policies. This would happen particularly if a PSC ambassador was not felt to be properly 'connected' to their foreign ministry or to speak effectively for their minister.

Thus, EU member states attitudes to the post-Lisbon changes and particularly the permanent presidency in foreign affairs are mixed. On the one hand the active role of the High Representative in agenda-setting and the institutional memory and expertise provided by the EEAS and its delegation network are welcomed. However, on the other the High Representative's efforts to circumvent PSC ambassadors when they were felt to be blocking particular decisions are not. Again, this also points to different perceptions of the role of the High Representative: according to the treaties the High Representative is meant to support member states in Common Foreign and Security Policy policy-making and lead in monitoring the implementation of foreign policy decisions. Yet, in reality there is a fine line between nudging, encouraging and even cajoling member states towards certain policy positions and being perceived as going over their heads. In any case, the practice of the last few years has shown that the PSC is no longer the sole - or even necessarily primary - strategic driver of EU foreign policy-making. Instead this

strategic role has shifted towards the HRVP and the European Council; moreover, the PSC today appears more at risk of being side-lined by a determined HRVP backed up by the EEAS.

When foreign policy becomes “Chefsache”: an increased role for the European Council

Alongside ambitions to strengthen everyday foreign policy coordination, we have also observed the increasing involvement of the highest political level of Heads of State and Government via the European Council. This has been accompanied by an increasing use of external tools to seek to address internal policy failures. Since the early 2000s, the European Council has evolved into the EU's most important centre of strategic foreign policy decision-making. In part this is a function of the issues on its agenda during this period. The crisis between Ukraine and Russia, the Iranian nuclear negotiations, Syria, etc are all Chefsache - issues of such significance that they demand attention and decisions from the very top, before being worked out in more detail and then implemented by the Foreign Affairs Council and/or PSC.

The formalisation of the European Council in the Lisbon Treaty has been accompanied by a significant loss of influence among foreign ministers and their supporting structures. Lisbon institutionalized the European Council's central role as the EU's highest strategic decision-maker. However, this was accompanied by the decision to exclude foreign ministers who now no longer sit alongside and assist their heads of states and governments in the room. Instead, the latter make their decisions alone. The changes have also seen a disruption to the processes by which foreign policy decisions are prepared and a significant shift in structural power between the PSC and its senior counterpart, COREPER II. Crucially,

the preparation of European Council Conclusions does not automatically include standard CFSP coordination processes and thus does not involve those CFSP actors who would normally expect to lead on foreign policy questions, particularly PSC ambassadors.

Thus, while the PSC prepares Foreign Affairs Council meetings, European Council summits are prepared by each member state's Permanent Representative in COREPER II. Coordination and cross-fertilisation of ideas, priorities and solutions are thus reliant on internal mechanisms which may vary from state to state, as well as on the relationship between an individual PSC ambassador and his/her boss. Crucially for the PSC, it means that in practice they are not automatically involved in the drafting of foreign policy elements of the European Council Conclusions, leading some member state ambassadors to question the PSC's capacity to act as a strategic decision-maker in the CFSP.

This loss of strategic importance for the PSC has triggered a number of potentially significant consequences. First, it has led to a broader loss of interest among foreign ministers in the business of the Foreign Affairs Council as they feel relegated to a secondary status where they must simply implement what has already been decided. While we may therefore see increased policy coherence in EU foreign policy positions at the centre, the corollary is a reduction in the pressure felt by member states to proactively implement what has been agreed. Second, it has reduced the capacity of the PSC to feed their distinct expertise in foreign policy thinking into the wider decision-making process. Third, it has also meant an underrepresentation of strategic foreign policy thinking in governance discussions at the highest political level. This echoes a wider trend in Europe that sees foreign policy predominantly as a

tool to solve internal policy problems, for example in the popular discontent felt over policy cooperation on migration. Foreign policy is reduced to a means to react to and solve problems from other policy areas on an *ad hoc* and short-term basis, but at the price of losing the strategic vision of how the EU and its member states can proactively seek to shape their international environment. It also confirms a more general foreign policy malaise in Europe with many capitals no longer considering it at the core of state action and happy to 'outsource' much of the routine business to "Brussels". Meanwhile, in situations where a political stance may create tensions with a third country, member states may feel it is simpler to task the HRVP or relevant EU ambassador to relay any negative messages, instead of proactively engaging and making their voice heard themselves.

Does foreign policy still matter for European capitals?

Foreign policy does not occupy the position of salience it once did in European capitals, and again two trends are observable. On the one hand the nature of foreign policy has been changing due to increased globalisation and (economic) interdependencies. The distinction between domestic and international politics and thus between internal and external policies is increasingly blurred. While states are more strongly impacted by international dynamics and threats, they also need to interact and co-operate more effectively internationally to tackle domestic challenges. Organisationally, this means that foreign ministries and their diplomats are no longer the only link between the domestic and the international; indeed, they increasingly find themselves operating alongside prime ministerial offices and chancelleries which have become hubs for coordinating the activities of sectoral ministries but often lack the expertise or all-encompassing

instruments required to tackle complex global problems. The importance of foreign ministries has been changing within national governments across Europe, with the post of foreign minister no longer enjoying the same allure and prestige it once did, with the possible exception of the bigger EU member states. Diplomatic services across the 27 are battling with budget cuts and losing clout to prime ministerial offices and cabinets. This is inevitably affecting the quality of national foreign policy processes which must increasingly contend with a wide range of cross-cutting questions - a prime example being the climate crisis - and the involvement of a wider set of stakeholders. It is also impacting European foreign policy considerations as it reminds us that the strongest tools for EU action are often not to be found within the CFSP or CSDP, but require instruments managed by the Commission.

processes and achieve international compromises. This also affects to the extent to which states will engage practically in foreign policy co-operation. While EU member states agree in principal to the notion of an interest-driven Union capable of defending its economic and political interests abroad, the concern must be that the pursuit of common foreign policy objectives will be replaced by the need to respond to popular, domestic-level demands as a means to overcome policy shortcomings at the national level. Here, the prime example has been the tensions underlying the EU response to the migration crisis but also more recently the Covid-19 pandemic. This indicates that in some capitals, foreign policy-making may no longer be a goal in itself, but instead an instrument to boost domestic public support.

and Russia. This growth in contestation poses perhaps the greatest challenge to the ongoing relevance of the PSC over the longer term: like all parts of the system, if it cannot function effectively, its value will be quickly lost, and its relevance diminished.

While such instances of obstruction in the CFSP do not necessarily point to a failure of the EU foreign policy cooperation system, they do serve as an important reminder of the salient position of member states within that system and again indicate the degree to which power and influence have shifted within it since Lisbon. They also remind us of the delicate nature of EU foreign policy cooperation more broadly. While strengthened institutions provide crucial support to member states in defining coherent and sustainable foreign policy strategies, these institutions cannot replace the political weight emanating from member states. This reflects the reality that the EU's international actorness requires foreign policy cooperation, which in turn depends on member states. To understand this foreign policy cooperation system today, therefore, we must consider how Lisbon has affected the balance within and between the institutions it encompasses, and particularly how member states interact with and within them.

Conclusion: EU Foreign Policy needs more leadership and agency, not procedures

The EU's foreign and security policy environment has been the site of a range of parallel dynamics playing out over the past thirty years. Continuous institutionalisation has led to a prominent role for institutional actors like the High Representative and the EEAS, and the evolution of a comprehensive platform for regular deliberation between member states. With the increased politicisation of foreign

and security policy and a cross-fertilization of foreign policy from internal politics (e.g. migration, health governance etc), meanwhile, we are seeing European foreign and security policy taking a much more prominent place on the agenda of the European Council, the Union's highest level of political authority of the Union. These dynamics have both negative and positive consequences for the ability of member states to make collective decisions and produce effective and cohesive foreign policy.

Significant shifts in political influence and authority upwards to the European Council and horizontally to the HRVP and EEAS means that the actor formally most central to the foreign policy system, the PSC, is increasingly less of a strategic decision-maker and more of a 'talking shop'. However, it nevertheless retains considerable added value as a site for consensus-building and consensus-seeking between EU actors and member states, and in providing oversight over the implementation of CFSP decisions. The importance of this should not be underestimated. Whether the PSC can maintain its relevance and effectiveness will be determined in large part by whether its status and relevance in national capitals can be maintained. If it cannot, this risks furthering the disconnect between European-level and national-level foreign policy ambitions and deliberations. Member states perhaps need to remember that when they are representing their countries' positions internationally, they are also perceived as representing the EU and divisions will always provide opportunities for those third parties willing to exploit them.

The transgovernmental nature of EU foreign and security policy demands that member states play an active leadership role in the development and implementation of their collective foreign and security policy. The reforms introduced in the Lisbon

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On the other hand, we are increasingly seeing the intrusion of wider political concerns into the foreign policy sphere across Europe, particularly where populist, sovereigntist governments have come to power. Populist rhetoric focuses on division and challenges the underlying premise of cooperation and compromise. Similarly, sovereigntist discourse emphasises the idea that states are better off “going it alone”, without considering the capacity of governments to actually achieve long-term solutions to particular challenges. Both trends risk undermining the understanding and acceptance within governments of the value of European or international cooperation and the need for states to invest financially and politically to shape global

In terms of the practice of foreign policy-making at EU level, these two trends have also impacted on the norm of consensus in CFSP and CSDP decision-making which has even broken down in some cases. Member state diplomats in the Council have traditionally been proud to point to their insistence on decision-making by consensus rather than by voting, emphasising the underlying ambition to foster a collective European foreign policy identity. However, over the last two years in particular, diplomatic isolation has no longer been the taboo it once was in the EU. Indeed, some PSC ambassadors are even instructed by their capitals to pursue a deliberate strategy of obduracy, with obstruction an objective in and of itself. This has played out in splits over Israel; attitudes to the Trump Administration;

Treaty were designed to help them do so by reducing the complexity of an institutional environment that saw a division between foreign policy (embodied by the HR and the Council) on the one hand and external relations (embodied by the Commission) on the other. The changes have certainly increased the potential for the system to produce more coherent, longer-term strategic thinking and decision-making, and it is right that the most sensitive decisions are taken at the highest political level in the European Council. However, they have also had the unintended consequences of seeing one of the major institutional components for member state agency and control - the PSC - side-lined in key aspects of its work while the HRVP and EEAS as institutional actors have been empowered. Ultimately, though, member states remain central in this story. They have created a system that gives them the capacity to exercise genuine influence internationally in pursuit of their collective goals and interests. As has been the case throughout the history of EU foreign policy co-operation, whether they can do so depends on their willingness to use it.

Endnotes

1 For more details see European Defence Agency website on [PESCO](#) and [CARD](#).

2 It should be noted that individually Javier Solana, the first HR, and his opposite number Chris Patten who was European Commissioner for External Relations from 1999-2004, worked well together. Patten noted in a [speech in 2000](#) that this was despite rather than because of the institutional arrangements.

3 Georgi Gotev '[Presidencies are good, actually](#)', EurActiv, 12 January 2018. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/trans-europe-express-presidencies-are-good-actually/>

Further readings

This policy brief draws on the authors' co-authored open-access article in the *Journal of Common Market Studies* (JCMS).

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