

ARE PRIME MINISTERS TAKING OVER EU FOREIGN POLICY?

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Foreign ministers have lost influence in recent decades, and prime ministers have emerged as the central foreign policy actors. Mirroring this development, the European Council, which convenes the European Union's (EU) heads of state and government, has become the top decisionmaker on EU foreign policy. But the European Council's approach to external affairs lacks coherence, continuity, and ambition. The Brussels leadership team that took over in late 2014 should significantly upgrade the European Council's role in this area and, through that body, energize the EU's other foreign policy institutions.

Unfulfilled Potential

- Prime ministers tend to approach foreign policy from a short-term and media-driven perspective and through the prism of domestic politics. This approach often neglects substantive analysis.
- Similarly, the European Council operates under severe time constraints and handles foreign policy almost exclusively in a crisis-management context. With rare exceptions, it does not fulfill its task of giving EU foreign policy strategic direction.
- The European Council's permanent president, the EU high representative that in 2009 was given more powers, and the European External Action Service (EEAS, the EU's foreign policy arm) have considerable potential to make the council's work more coherent and effective. But this potential has hardly been tapped.

The Way Ahead

European Council President Donald Tusk and High Representative Federica Mogherini should work together to upgrade the council's external action. Its meetings need to be better prepared and tied in with the foreign policy work of other EU bodies.

The president and the high representative should build a personal record of leadership on key challenges. They should support each other in identifying suitable subjects, obtaining mandates from the European Council, and mobilizing the necessary support from member states.

The European Council should hold regular strategic debates. To assume its role in giving strategic direction to the EU's external policies, the council should convene debates on the EU's most important relationships, on regional challenges, and on horizontal issues.

The EEAS should be turned into the main source of strategic analysis to support the council. Drawing on the expertise of the EU delegations and working closely with the European Commission and member states, the EEAS should supply a steady stream of substantive analysis to the European Council and other EU foreign policy forums.

The European Council framework should be used to coordinate top-level diplomatic activities among the member states and among the institutions and the member states. This could involve sharing information on diplomatic visits and key messages as well as streamlining EU participation in international events.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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