

IS THERE HOPE FOR EU FOREIGN POLICY?

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While the foreign policy reforms in the Lisbon Treaty have improved the European Union's foreign policy machine, the EU's overall international position has weakened in the ten years since the treaty's signing. Insufficient leadership and dysfunctional institutional arrangements, the tendency of bigger countries to prioritize their national foreign policies, and the habit of some smaller ones to get free rides have all impeded effective collective action. The EU's current consolidation, however, offers an opportunity for remedial action.

A Tough Environment for an Underdeveloped Policy

- With its emphasis on soft power, its preference for legal solutions, and its enthusiasm for multilateral diplomacy, the EU has had trouble adjusting to a multipolar world increasingly ruled by power politics.
- In the face of growing turmoil in its neighborhood, the EU has downscaled its ambition to transform its neighbors in its own image and switched to a defensive mode, focusing on stability and resilience.
- As a crisis manager, the EU has had some wins but displayed many weaknesses, including in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine. It is now finally beginning to build up its military capabilities, but these efforts will take years to bear fruit.

No Institutional Fixes, but Step-by-Step Consolidation

- **Seize the second chance for foreign policy.** A stronger economy, a reactivated German-French axis, and broad public support for better international action create a promising environment after years of crisis, but EU leaders need to put foreign policy firmly on the agenda.
- **Accept that deep structural reform remains unrealistic.** Few member states are ready to give up their national foreign policy or to subordinate it to EU policy by accepting majority voting. Solidarity among member states needs to be built incrementally through the shared experience of common action.
- **Do more together to build diplomatic muscle.** Stepping up the level of diplomatic and operational engagement seems the most promising approach to record achievements and gain the confidence for more ambitious action.
- **Strengthen the buy-in of member states.** Tasking individual or groups of member states with diplomatic and operational action on behalf of the union could promote a sense of ownership and enhance capacity.
- **Build alliances to preserve global governance.** No international actor is better positioned than the EU to lead the struggle for a rules-based international order. This will require strong investment in the partnerships with other stakeholders.
- **Mobilize expertise.** The EU delegations, the civil and military operations, and the EU headquarters in Brussels possess vast amounts of geographic and topical know-how that is currently dispersed and underutilized. Better reporting systems and a stronger capability for strategic analysis could improve the EU's situational awareness and support more proactive policies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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