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FROM PLAYTHING TO PLAYER: HOW EUROPE CAN STAND UP FOR ITSELF IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Mark Leonard and Carl Bildt

SUMMARY

- The EU's foreign policy is inadequate to the task of keeping Europe safe in today's world.
- Over the last five years, trust between Brussels and member states dwindled, and policy came to reflect the lowest common denominator of popular opinion.
- The coming five years herald acute pressure on Europe, as Russia, China, and the US undermine multilateral institutions and treat trade, finance data, and security guarantees as instruments of power rather than global public goods.
- The new high representative should move to rewire European foreign policymaking to exercise strategic sovereignty.
- The high representative needs more support on this strategy – from deputies, special representatives, and foreign ministers tasked with specific roles.
- The new leadership team in Brussels needs to reoperationalise European defence, build Europe's self-sufficiency through a strong European pillar in NATO, and consider innovations such as a European Security Council.
- Europe will only build greater unity by tackling controversial issues head on in the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council. The high representative needs to play a much more active role in these debates.

The last five years have not been kind to the European Union's foreign policy. The EU has been less relevant, less active, and less united than was hoped in the heady days after the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2010. The next five years might be harder still: the world is well on its way towards a new order based on geopolitical competition and the weaponisation of global economic, cultural, and even climate linkages. As the international situation descends into a miasma of geopolitical competition, Europeans are in danger of becoming hapless playthings in a tussle for pre-eminence between China, Russia, and the United States.

There is nothing inevitable about this scenario. Europeans have the power to take their destiny into their own hands. Collectively, the EU's member states have: the biggest single market in the world; higher defence spending than any power but the US; the world's largest diplomatic corps; and the highest levels of development spending. But unless Europeans can leverage their collective potential – through the EU or other mechanisms – these impressive facts will mean little. Securing this leverage will require a clear-eyed understanding of European weaknesses and an honest appraisal of why they persist.

The time is ripe for such an accounting – and the need is urgent. The new EU leadership team will take over in late 2019. Unless they understand the challenge that confronts them and acquire the tools they need to change Europe's approach to foreign policy, it will likely not matter who the team after them are. Accordingly, this paper offers a frank assessment of the last five years of EU foreign policymaking, and it sets out practical and positive ways for Europe to fulfil its potential on the world stage over the next five years.

The last five years

Not all bad

To be fair, there have been many improvements in the EU's foreign policy machinery in the last five years. The Lisbon Treaty has narrowed the gap between the European Commission and foreign policy. The creation of EU delegations has brought many of Europe's assets together on the ground in countries around the world. And the end of the rotating presidency has given EU decision-making more continuity.

Meanwhile, the adoption of the EU Global Strategy in 2016 created a necessary discussion about EU foreign policy and strategy. It articulated effectively what the EU stands for – multilateralism, the rules-based global order, and the European security order – and it concentrated on the need for the EU to integrate all its various tools into a foreign policy strategy: crisis management, development, and the membership perspective. The EU has also made moves forward on defence policy, through initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, and the European Defence Fund.

The EU has shown some leadership outside the realm of traditional foreign policy. On trade, the European Commission has been skilful at insulating the EU from the threat of tariffs while also playing a more proactive role in reaching out to third countries with a new generation of trade deals. It has tried to advance reform of the World Trade Organisation. Meanwhile, the EU has proved that it still has the potential to be a rule-maker in the digital realm, with the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation and bold decisions taken by the competition commissioner.

In the absence of strong foreign policy leadership from Brussels, the larger member states have had some success in dealing with several of the most pressing challenges to European policy. The EU's ability to introduce and maintain several sanctions regimes on Russia after the annexation of Crimea, and the establishment of the Normandy process, have contributed to the de-escalation of the crisis in Ukraine. The negotiation of the deal with Turkey in 2016 took some of the heat out of the political crisis around migration and opened up an important new channel with one of the EU's most influential neighbours. And the E3, with the help of the EU high representative of the union for foreign affairs and security policy was essential in negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran that, at least for a while, brought along the US.

But the gains in capacity in Brussels have been more than offset by the deterioration of the world around Europe – and the EU has often appeared a helpless spectator rather than an agent of global foreign policy. To be clear, this is not only or even principally a failure of Brussels. Overall, the EU's foreign policy machinery remains hostage to a lack of consensus among its members, and to a general reluctance to concede decision-making on foreign policy

to Brussels. The result is that the EU's machinery has proven incapable of forging a European consensus on issues as essential as the Middle East, Russia, the Balkans, Venezuela, China and, of course, the US. It has, therefore, been incapable of effective action on these files. The looming prospect of Brexit risks worsening the picture further.

Things fall apart

The resurgence in great power competition has put pressure on the EU's dream of a multilateral world order. The rise of authoritarian China, the increasing penetration of European domestic affairs by Russia, and the growing self-absorption of the US all mean that the old model looks unlikely to endure.

The modern form of geopolitical competition puts the EU at a particular disadvantage. The very structure of the EU holds that global rules can govern economic considerations and keep them separate from geopolitical disputes. So, foreign economic policy issues such as trade and competition policy are the province of the Brussels machinery. Meanwhile, more traditionally 'geopolitical' considerations such as foreign and defence policy or relations with the US primarily remain member states' concerns.

But the EU now faces great power competitors that are using all these domains as theatres in which to compete for power and influence. For this, they use economic tools to further political or military ends and vice versa. In contrast, the EU is not only struggling to respond in traditional areas of geopolitical competition – at times, it even looks like it is playing a different game by different rules in its areas of strength, such as trade and development. The EU wants to play softball in a hardball world.

Meanwhile, the ring of friends that the EU sought to build in its neighbourhood has degenerated into a ring of fire. The EU has failed to stabilise Ukraine, it has faded as a presence in many eastern European countries, and it has underperformed in the Balkans – where it could have had much more of a role. More shockingly, it has been utterly divided on Syria and Libya, where its collective political interest in staunching refugee flows could not have been higher. Here, too, individual member states that used to have some clout even when acting outside the EU framework, such as France, have had next to no influence on developments.

Great power competition is not just paralysing the global multilateral system and blocking progress in Europe's neighbourhood – it is increasingly splitting the EU itself. Russia, China, and the US routinely exploit splits between EU member states and have become adept at watering down or blocking EU decisions.

Brussels and member states lose one another

Perhaps the biggest failure has been in the way that the Brussels-based foreign policy institutions have become detached from member states. In theory, the high

representative and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have the unique capacity to act as a bridge between the European Commission and the Council. But the EEAS has instead become a creature of the European Commission. Partly as a result of this – and partly because they prefer it – member states have focused heavily on their own foreign policy and have not sufficiently invested in the EU’s machinery. East-west and north-south divisions have also reduced foreign policy cohesion and made the high representative’s job much more difficult. For all these reasons, the EU foreign policy apparatus has lost the trust of member states, many of which routinely take on foreign policy commitments without reference to institutions in Brussels.

The EU has avoided having real discussions at a political level – whether at the European Council, the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), or the Gymnich. This has fed through to the Political and Security Committee (PSC), which is underused as a format. The high representative and the council president have failed to forge an effective partnership to bring the high representative’s agenda to heads of state and government.

Part of the problem is that the current high representative sees her job as reflecting member state consensus rather than forging it. In doing this, she has mostly delivered what member states want. But, at a time of serious internal disputes and great-power efforts to split the EU, this lack of initiative is nearly fatal to the effort to create a unified and ambitious EU foreign policy.

The EU Global Strategy reflects this approach. It has helped the EU adjust to new power relationships; but, rather than promoting a real consensus among member states – in the way that the 2003 strategy did – the EU Global Strategy has been used as a tool to lower EU ambitions by shifting from transformation to resilience. It does not really live up to its name: for instance, it is not global, as it concentrates on the EU’s regional role and has almost nothing to say about Asia, Africa, or even the US. And nor is it really a strategy, as it ambles along for 53 pages – the 2003 strategy was 13 pages long – while offering little guidance on the allocation of the EU’s financial, diplomatic, or military resources. Most seriously, the Brexit referendum and the rise of Donald Trump as president of the US rendered the strategy out of date before it was even published. In its next iteration, the EU’s new strategy will need to expand to encompass new challenges such as cyber security, artificial intelligence, climate change, and, of course, China. And yet it will also need to be much shorter.

In some ways, the track record of EU foreign policy over the last five years has reduced the scope of EU tools. Rather than living up to the Lisbon Treaty’s dream of integrating defence, diplomacy, and development aid into a more coherent foreign policy, the EU has aimed its biggest guns at ever-smaller targets. On defence policy, the EU has focused on industrial policy, and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has become largely demilitarised. Only six of the 16 current CSDP missions are military and, of these,

two are partly civilian while two others are naval. One of the things that has damaged the EU’s credibility has been its unwillingness to use assets such as the Battlegroups. On diplomacy, the EEAS remains absent from the biggest conflicts – in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Yemen – and reluctant to empower member states. And, with the possible exception of its migration deals with Turkey and a few other countries, the EU has not deployed development assistance as an instrument behind a clear common strategy. In the absence of this integrated approach, EU foreign policy has sometimes looked like a ‘sanctions machine’ – but even that has been more driven by US pressure and member states such as the United Kingdom than by any collective will.

One of the indicators of this ‘ever looser union’ is the limited participation of EU foreign ministers in formal meetings such as those at the FAC, where they often turn up for only part of the discussion or send junior officials to deputise for them. Worse still, when ministers do show up, the lack of unity among them is often a barrier to action: member states such as Hungary routinely block attempts to agree on unified EU foreign policy positions. But, rather than allowing these countries to become isolated, the first instinct of the EEAS is to water down common statements, wasting valuable time and reducing the credibility of the EU. In the past, ministers would go to great lengths to avoid isolation; now, it has become a badge of honour for those keen to play to the gallery in their national capitals.

The European Commission’s decision to trigger Article 7 against Poland, and the EU’s use of qualified majority voting to decide to impose migration quotas, helped lead to a huge lack of trust. This creates a perverse situation in which central and eastern European countries that are not violating the rule of law, such as the Baltic states and Slovakia, feel pressure to side with Poland and Hungary.

The next five years

Storms ahead

Many in Brussels would reject the charge that EU foreign policy has weakened and even regressed in some areas. They would maintain that this remains a work in progress and that the last five years have seen slow but steady improvements in the machinery available to member states.

Alas, the world will not wait. Many of the trends that have put pressure on the EU could become more acute in the next five years.

The US under Trump is actively pursuing the idea of deploying economic warfare against the EU to get its way in trade disputes. It is actively dividing the EU, by asking central and eastern European governments whether they really want to hold their security relationship with the US hostage to Washington’s bilateral problems with Berlin and Brussels. And the months ahead will see EU unity come under great pressure in the Middle East, and in relations

with countries such as Russia and Turkey too. But China will be the biggest source of transatlantic difficulties.

The trilateral relationship between the US, China, and the EU will determine the shape of the global economy in the next century; the three of them collectively account for half of global GDP. The EU has recently done a fairly good job of creating a common front in economic foreign policy on China, but it has been less good at responding to China's geopolitical challenge in east Asia or even in Africa and the Middle East. Despite its best efforts, the EU has failed to realise that it shares with the US a common interest in addressing the China challenge and to find a way to form a united front or, even better, use their mutual problem to ease tension between Washington and European capitals.

On Russia, the EU exceeded expectations by agreeing to and maintaining a tough sanctions regime after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. However, Europe has never really defined its interests in relation to Russia. The EU is meant to have a dual-track policy of sanctions and engagement, but it does not have a common policy beyond sanctions, and these are utterly divorced from any political strategy. Among member states, there is little trust in the high representative to engage with the Russians. And, in any case, there are no formats for dialogue and no strategic discussion between the EU and Russia. This void has been filled by a series of bilateral relationships developed by various member states. One day, the sanctions will be lifted because a member state blocks their renewal – and the EU could then be left with nothing.

The EU does not even have a clear strategy on climate change, an area where Europeans have demonstrated leadership in upholding the Paris climate accord after the US retreat from the agreement. Despite the clear mandate for action that came out of the European Parliament election this year, there remain big divisions among member states and the EU's actions still lag behind its stated ambitions.

All this implies that the new team in Brussels will need to think less in terms of incrementally improving the EU's creaky internal processes and more about what is necessary to deal with the increasingly precarious geopolitical situation the EU finds itself in. This is no easy task – because, fundamentally, not all EU states want Brussels to take on this effort, and nearly all of them do not trust the current Brussels machinery to do it well.

At the same time, most member states agree that the EU needs a geopolitical response to the challenge from great powers, and that no individual EU state is powerful enough to respond on its own. The new team in Brussels could increasingly earn the trust of member states if it demonstrates that it takes the EU's geopolitical predicament seriously, that it will focus its efforts on helping member states with their various foreign policy problems, and that it will deploy its influence and structural power to forge consensus on foreign policy.

What is to be done?

Rewiring Brussels

This picture of the world implies that the key task for the next EU leadership team is not primarily to forge new foreign policies. Instead, it is to establish a machinery, an attitude, and a competence that member states can have confidence in. There are limits to how far Brussels can persuade member states to cooperate if they do not want to. But it can do a lot to induce them to want it. Brussels can set the agenda and 'force' member states to collectively address big issues they might prefer to ignore. It can also present relevant analysis, laying out the key facts and considerations that should form the basis for member states' discussions and decision-making. For instance, more joint reporting by EU heads of mission, orchestrated by the local EU delegation, would be valuable here. The EU must take the lead in finding new ways for Europe to organise itself better and take more responsibility for its own security. Leaders in Brussels will need to consider measures that go beyond the usual concept of EU competencies.

- The European Council needs to have a real discussion about foreign policy priorities for the EU. This should be prepared by foreign ministers and the PSC. More and more foreign policy is made at the level of heads of state and government – so that level needs to be better linked to that of foreign ministers. The EU needs a strong president of the European Council who takes a real interest in EU foreign policy, working very closely with a high representative who supports their agenda at the level of foreign ministers. The president of the European Council should also take a more proactive role in EU foreign policy and establish a global presence as a sort of EU chair of the board.

- One of the key elements of this should be to agree on an agenda on 'EU sovereignty in a multipolar world'. This should include: economic and financial elements (coping with secondary sanctions, the role of the dollar, payments systems, investment screening, and technology regulation); security and defence elements (promoting greater European responsibility and resistance to conventional and hybrid threats, including those in the cyber domain); and political-diplomatic elements (exploring European organisation on multilateral issues). The new high representative and the president of the European Commission should be charged with preparing an agenda for the European Council to implement.

- Over the next few years, the EU needs to maintain its global green leadership role by fulfilling the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2050 and backing this up with more active climate diplomacy on the world stage. It also needs to examine how climate feeds into other policy areas. For example, the EU could focus on climate-sensitive conflict prevention and crisis management policies, while looking at the levers its trade policy has in this area.

- Unable to cover the whole agenda alone, the high representative will require support from a group of strong deputies who are members of the European Commission but who also have a mandate from the Council covering key regional issues: the Sahel, the Balkans, and the Eastern Partnership. There could also be a commissioner for defence and one for cyber and hybrid threats. Another option is to make more frequent and effective use of EU special representatives. These figures used to provide a sustained, high-level focus on topics, and to report back to member states. Such special representatives – including EU foreign ministers – could thus report back to member states and submit written reports to the PSC. This could occur on both specific conflicts and cross-cutting issues such as disarmament. A third approach is to task EU foreign ministers with specific roles. There is a precedent for this: Catherine Ashton mandated Radoslaw Sikorski and Frank-Walter Steinmeier to represent the EU in Georgia, and Sikorski and Carl Bildt to do so in Moldova.

- A review of the role, added value, and impact of the EEAS should take place at the beginning of the new high representative's term. Such a review took place a year after the service was created, which resulted in some reforms. But no one has looked at these issues systematically since then. The EU has been successful at establishing effective delegations in key countries and at bringing foreign policy expertise into the EEAS and the European Commission. But it has been less successful at assembling that expertise into strong efforts in strategic analysis and communicating such analysis to key institutions beyond the EEAS or to member states. The high representative should seek to promote both strategic analysis and planning, as well as a more systematic process for dissemination.

Reorganising European defence

NATO will remain the central body for the territorial defence of Europe from Russia and other threats. But, for all other areas of their security, Europeans need to find ways to organise themselves better and take more responsibility. This is both so that they can be a better partner for the US and so that they can act alone, if necessary. If the UK leaves the EU, each side should conclude a security treaty to allow the EU to share information and work with the British on counter-terrorism and crime. They will also need to establish new mechanisms for exchanging views and information, and for cooperating on sanctions and operations. Creating such mechanisms also gives Europeans the chance to develop structures that might be useful more generally. These could include:

- **A European Security Council** – This idea was originally floated by Angela Merkel and then picked up by Emmanuel Macron. The goals behind it are threefold: conduct a strategic discussion; engage with the UK; and allow the willing and able to make progress. The EEAS would furnish the secretariat of the council, marshal the infrastructure of deputies and preparatory groups that

such a council would inevitably require, and thus move into a position to shape the agenda and alert member states to developments they might otherwise neglect.

There are different models for organising this. At one extreme is the model of the United Nations Security Council, with permanent and rotating members. At the other extreme is the idea of simply inviting the UK to join the European Council for a discussion once a year, with the process being prepared by occasionally adding the UK to the FAC and the PSC. A model in between these options is that of the African Union Peace and Security Council, whose members are elected for two- or three-year terms from within regional groups (so, eastern Europeans would have two seats, western Europeans would have three seats, and so on). One of the advantages of establishing a European Security Council is that it could also create a political superstructure for the European Intervention Initiative, a French-led defence cooperation initiative involving ten member states that sit outside the EU institutions and aims to develop a shared strategic and military culture.

- **Organising the European pillar in NATO** – NATO and the US remain central to European defence, but it does not follow that the main burden of bolstering the alliance's military presence in central and eastern Europe, as agreed at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, must fall on the Americans. Nor does it follow that forward-basing of allied forces is only of value if those forces are American.

European allies should, therefore, reflect on the possibility that US support through the European Deterrence Initiative could go into reverse. Indeed, the EU's new leadership team, along with key member states, would do well to anticipate such a development and organise a proactive response. This would not involve immediately offering to take over current US efforts but rather proposing to emulate them. The US leads one of the four multinational battlegroups that constitute NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (roughly 1,500-strong multinational units based in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, led by the UK, Canada, Germany, and the US respectively). It also plays the lead role in the Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea region. Overall, the US has a presence, familiarity, and credibility in the region that its western European allies lack. Europeans should contemplate more forward bases of their own, even on a permanent basis. Poland's "Fort Trump" idea is objectionable because it heads the wrong way in asking more of the US and because it circumvents NATO. But it at least has virtue in its implicit recognition that the Wales summit erred in stopping short – out of deference to Russian sensitivities – of permanently stationing forces on the territory of former Warsaw Pact allies. If EU member states were to develop even a small facility in Poland, this would be a powerful demonstration of European defence solidarity.

The EU should also take over the lead of the NATO mission in Kosovo, to show the US that it is serious and that it can make a real impact. Steps like this will

prove particularly convincing to Washington if Brussels succeeds in formulating an EU level of ambition within NATO and takes collective responsibility for supplying a discrete part of NATO's future intended capability.

- **Reoperationalising European defence** – One of the ways that Europeans can develop a common strategic culture is by spending time in the mud together. To do this, they should attempt to reintroduce an operational element to EU foreign policy. Exercises should be organised for the Battlegroups. The Battlegroups should be coupled with EU civilian crisis management efforts and be offered to the UN for suitable tasks, such as providing back-up in Libya or the Yemeni city of Hudayda. The Battlegroups could also count towards the troops under NATO's 30-30-30-30 plan, which requires NATO to have 30 land battalions, 30 air fighter squadrons, and 30 ships ready to deploy within 30 days of being put on alert.

Finding unity and engaging member states

EU foreign policy works by unanimity to allow countries to defend their vital interests. But, in the past, member states used these powers only rarely and would go to great lengths to avoid being isolated. More recently, a minority of member states has taken to blocking EU decision-making as a way of courting favour with third powers. Hungary, Greece, and Slovenia, for example, have blocked or diluted resolutions challenging China on the issues of human rights and the South China Sea international arbitration.

It is tempting to get around this by introducing qualified majority voting on foreign policy. This suggestion has some merit, but it faces a practical as well as a philosophical challenge. The practical barrier is that unanimity is needed to introduce qualified majority voting. Philosophically, the EU would be better placed to persuade all member states that, by weakening the EU, they weaken themselves. The example of using qualified majority voting on refugee quotas was counter-productive, as some member states simply refused to follow the EU decision and the EU proved powerless to make them do so.

The long-term challenge is to build a form of de facto solidarity by showing that the EU is the first line of defence for many countries' core interests. On the most general level, the key to achieving this solidarity is by acting and being seen to act. That is to say: the EU can best establish mutual trust through the practical experience of common action. The foreign policy muscle will only develop if it gets lots of exercise. More specifically, to move in that direction, the EU can take certain steps:

- Rather than avoiding controversial issues, the European Council and the FAC should place contentious matters on their meeting agendas with a view to finding compromise and reconciling competing positions. These discussions should be well prepared, with clear options papers written by the EEAS or 'core groups'

of member states. At the end of the discussion, the high representative should draw the main conclusions of the exercise together and lay out the next steps.

- The high representative should appoint these core groups of member states to work through divisive issues and attempt to develop options and common positions that rise above the lowest common denominator. In most cases, it will also be important to ensure that key smaller member states that have a particular interest in the issue are represented. Core groups should not be the preserve of larger member states. If all EU member states can join at least one group that matters to them, they might have enough invested in the process to discourage them from abusing it.

- One of the principles of the core groups that would operate on behalf of the EU is that they would always report back to other member states. Core groups can achieve this by including representatives of EU institutions, as eventually happened in the E3+3 negotiations with Iran. This process of reporting back – with the high representative acting as an active reassurance mechanism and mediator for other member states – would help enhance the legitimacy of these formats within the EU. Germany and France could, for example, show the way on this and make such adjustments to the Normandy process on Russia and Ukraine.

- In the event that they fail to make progress, EU member states should free themselves from the risk of their actions and statements being watered down or blocked by a single member state. They could do this by getting into the habit of releasing statements as a group of 27 (or group of 26 after Brexit) when they get into this situation rather than accepting delay, watered-down measures, or blockages.

Looking forward

These efforts are clearly only the beginning of the story. The EU will need to forge strategies to deal with its principal geopolitical challenges from Russia, China, and even the US. It will also need to agree on new approaches to dousing the ring of fire in its neighbourhood, from the Balkans to the Middle East and the Sahel. The point here is that, before the EU's institutions can even talk about creating such strategies, it needs to firm up the leadership it provides to member states and regain their confidence. Only in this way will it be able to adequately represent them in foreign policy and defend their core interests against outside depredations. The steps outlined above seek to do that, and they offer a solid foundation on which to build a sense of EU unity. From there, it will be relatively easy for a renewed EU to manage problems such as a revisionist Russia, an assertive China, and a disruptive US – problems that currently seem completely insurmountable.

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