From Economic Giant to Geopolitical Powerhouse?

A roadmap towards enhancing the EU's global clout

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Clingendael Report

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Contents

List of abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CEPS	Centre for European Policy Initiatives
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
Commission	European Commission
Coreper II / CRPII	Committee of Permanent Representatives II
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
(The) Council	The Council of the European Union
DG	Directorate-General
DGDEFIS	Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space
DGMENA	Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf
DGRELEX	Directorate-General for External Relations
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EP	European Parliament
EPF	European Peace Facility
EPRS	European Parliamentary Research Service
EU	European Union
EUCO	European Council
EU INTCEN	EU Intelligence and Situation Centre
EUSR	European Union Special Representative
EXCO	Commissioners' Group for External Coordination
FAC	Foreign Affairs Council
FES	Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
FPI	Service for Foreign Policy Instruments
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice President
ICC	International Criminal Court
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument

OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PSC	Political and Security Committee
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SIEPS	Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies
TEU	Treaty of the European Union
TFEU	Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Executive Summary

This report addresses the question of how the European Union (EU) can transform itself from a merely economic giant to a geopolitical powerhouse. This requires the EU to take decisive steps forward which would enable the Member States and institutions to cooperate more effectively. Currently, decision-making in the Union on the broad palette of foreign and security policy is scattered among various institutions and leaders. The Common and Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), is governed on an intergovernmental basis, with the Member States – represented in the European Council (EUCO) and the Council of the EU (Council) – deciding on the basis of unanimity. However, policy fields in which the EU and Member States share competences (e.g. international partnerships and the internal market) or in which the EU has exclusive competence (e.g. trade) – are gaining quickly in geopolitical prominence. This blurs the demarcation line between the intergovernmental CFSP and CSDP and more supranational policies with a geopolitical dimension. As such, it also increasingly obscures the division of competences between EU institutions.

These developments take place against the backdrop of an eroding rules-based international order. The EU struggles to cope with this new world order. Nevertheless, in recent years, the EU has proven capable of taking steps that until recently seemed impossible – think for example of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) that emerged as a cornerstone of the EU's post-COVID economic response, the 19 packages of sanctions against Russia and the decision to indefinitely freeze Russian assets. Yet such unprecedented steps were often achieved by circumventing unanimity, for example by using emergency legislation or by moving around unwilling Member States.

From a geopolitical perspective, such shortcuts have been both inevitable and necessary. At the same time, they disrupt the inter-institutional balance as envisaged in the Treaties. In recent years, such disruption has mainly taken the form of a growing role for the European Commission (Commission) in areas where it has no formal powers. For example, the Commission is taking on a stronger role in the field of defence and security by taking the initiative for the Readiness 2030 roadmap and a Commission-led intelligence service. With this stronger geopolitical role, the Commission is pushing and stretching the limits

of its competences. It does so at the expense of others, notably the European External Action Service (EEAS). Such institutional dynamics undermine the effectiveness and coherence of the EU's geopolitical actions.

At the same time, the Commission is making use of the leeway provided by the Member States and considers it necessary to force breakthroughs in deadlocked (Council) negotiations. Indeed, the biggest obstacle to the EU's geopolitical clout is currently the unanimity requirement on CFSP-matters and abandoning it could substantially benefit EU influence. However, to structurally do so would require treaty reform, which is unlikely (and perhaps also undesirable) in the short term. This report therefore addresses the question of what can be done in the short term to enhance the EU's geopolitically clout. What could be changed in the EU's institutional architecture? And which less far-reaching interventions in daily institutional relations would ensure that decision-making in the EU evolves with the new geopolitical reality?

This report addresses these questions on the basis of a rich body of literature available on the EU's foreign and security policy, an analysis of official policy documents, and a series of interviews with key actors from EU institutions and Member States. It concludes with a roadmap offering a considerable number of recommendations. Some relate to changes in the institutional structure, the most far-reaching being a step-by-step shift to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the CFSP. Most, however, constitute measures to ensure that Member States and institutions cooperate better – and that they can do so at different speeds as needed – as well as measures to better define the mandates and roles of the EU institutions in line with the Union's geopolitical ambitions. In short, we recommend the following (for further elaboration see chapter 6):

1) A stronger but more cooperative Commission: Embrace a strengthened Commission in EU foreign policy, while ensuring greater transparency, efficiency and coordination vis-à-vis the EEAS and other relevant institutions.
2) An EEAS with a clearer yet more facilitative role: Redefine the mandate of the EEAS to supporting the Member States and the Commission through acting as a coherence builder between Member States and between the institutions, an idea generator for the HR/VP, and the diplomatic agency of the Union abroad.
3) Stronger coordination between *Team Europe* and *Team National* partners: Link *Team Europe* and national efforts by empowering the HR/VP to pool resources from both levels, while enabling the Commission to set overall objectives.

4) Maximising the potential of a multi-speed Europe: Further develop enhanced cooperation in foreign, security and defense policy through leading groups and voluntary initiatives, while maintaining opt-out possibilities for cautious Member States.
5) Accelerating decision-making in the EU by reducing the risk of vetoes: Continue discussions on introducing QMV in the CFSP on a step-by-step basis while strengthening safeguard measures such as through emergency break procedures and enhancing the political preparation of decision-making in a to be established European Security Council.
6) Stronger democratic control and accountability: Enhance the role of the EP in the CFSP and CSDP through strengthening its consultation and budgetary oversight roles and its communication channels with the HR/VP.

1 Introduction

"They belong to us, they are one of us, and we want them in."[1] Commission President Ursula von der Leyen did not mince her words when discussing potential Ukrainian EU Membership on 27 February 2022, just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sharply contrasting were the remarks of then Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte two weeks later at the ad-hoc Paris summit: "EU accession of Ukraine is something for the long term, if at all."[2] While seemingly a mere political divergence, it in fact conceals fundamental questions of who is in charge of the EU's external engagement and whether the EU can play a significant geopolitical role despite its fragmented distribution of power.

Such questions are not new. Already in 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon sought to strengthen the EU's foreign policy capacity. First with the formalisation of the European Council (EUCO) as an official EU institution, including a permanent President. Lisbon also paved the way for the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010. Yet the addition of two institutions did not solve the question of who to call to "talk to Europe" but rather made it more pressing. Informally, both the EUCO – and thus the Member States – *and* the Commission increasingly steer the EU's geopolitical actions. Formally, however, the governance of these actions is scattered across multiple institutions.

When it comes to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Member States are at the helm. At the same time, the Union's 'foreign and security policy' no longer encompasses only the CFSP and CSDP, as more and more Union policies include a geopolitical dimension. Policies and instruments in the area of economic security, such as the recently spotlighted anti-coercion instrument, provide an example. In other words, the demarcation line between the intergovernmental CFSP and CSDP on the one hand, and other supranational policies with a geopolitical dimension becomes increasingly blurred. This also obscures the division of competences between EU institutions.

1 Meabh Mc Mahon, "Ukraine is one of us and we want them in EU, Ursula von der Leyen tells Euronews," *Euronews*, 27 February 2022.

2 Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU leaders tone down Ukraine's Membership plan", *Euractiv*, 11 March 2022

These developments take place against the backdrop of a significantly changed world order to which the Union struggles to adapt.[3] Nevertheless, the day-to-day governance in the Union is moving along and on occasions, it manages to take unprecedented steps. Examples are the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) (which was set up to help the EU recover stronger and more strategically independent from the COVID-19 pandemic), Ukraine's and Moldova's EU membership bids, and the recent steps towards enhanced defence cooperation. The 90-billion-euro joint loan to Ukraine could be another example, if Hungary ultimately decides not to block the proposal.[4] Such groundbreaking steps are indeed often only possible by means of shortcuts to prevent vetoes, for example by using emergency legislation or by moving around unwilling Member States.

Such shortcuts have been both inevitable and necessary, but at the same time they disrupt the inter-institutional balance as envisaged in the Treaties. To restore this balance in a way that fits the Union's geopolitical aspirations would, arguably, require a treaty reform that transfers powers to the EU institutions with associated checks and balances. However, such a treaty reform is unlikely to take place in the short term. Moreover, there are important differences in geopolitical interests between Member States. For example, France, due to its position in the UN Security Council, its significant defence industry and its possession of nuclear weapons, occupies a fundamentally different position than, for example, the Netherlands or Spain. As long as these differences exist, it may be undesirable for countries to be outvoted by (qualified) majorities.

This report therefore addresses the question of what the EU can do *in the short term* to enhance its geopolitically clout. What could be changed in the EU's institutional architecture? And which less far-reaching interventions in daily institutional relations would ensure that decision-making in the EU evolves with the new geopolitical reality?

3 For a foresight study (in Dutch) on how the global order is changing, see: Koen Aartsma et al., 2026, "Clingendael Geostrategisch Perspectief 2026-2040".

4 At the time of writing, the join loan to Ukraine is not set in stone since Hungary has threatened to use its veto despite giving its consent earlier: Politico, "EU's €90B plan to fund Ukraine in jeopardy as Hungary blocks deal – POLITICO", 20 February 2026.

In particular, the report addresses the following sub questions:

i. How does the EU make decisions on the EU's foreign and security policy, and what impact does the EU's institutional architecture have on the effectiveness and coherence of that policy? *(Chapter 2)*

ii. What are the key shifts in the field of foreign and security policy (Chapter 3), and how do these developments influence the inter-institutional dynamics (Chapter 4)?

iii. What steps can the EU take to enhance the effectiveness and coherence of its geopolitical actions and, as such, increase its global clout? (chapters 5 and 6)

These questions will be answered on the basis of a rich body of literature available on the topic, an in-depth analysis of official policy documents, and a series of interviews with key policy makers working in the EU institutions and Member State administrations.

2 Geopolitical action in the EU

Decision-making on geopolitical matters in the EU is scattered among various institutions and leaders (visualised in Figure 1), reflecting the EU's complex division of powers.[5] The CFSP and CSDP are governed on an intergovernmental basis, with the Member States – represented in the EUCO and Council – taking decisions unanimously.[6] In these areas, the Commission and European Parliament (EP) play a limited role.[7] Next to the CFSP and CSDP, there are many Union policies with a geopolitical dimension on which the EU institutions and Member States share competences, such as trade, development cooperation and climate policy. The geopolitical relevance of these policy areas is gaining in prominence. This also increases the overall role of the Commission (and the EP) in the EU's external engagement. Although the HR/VP (supported by the EEAS) operates at the intersection of the CFSP (and CSDP) and all other EU policies with an external dimension, its role is hampered by a high degree of institutional fragmentation.

While the current geopolitical context requires the EU to act decisively and in unity, this is difficult to achieve with 27 Member States and numerous institutions involved. As a result, fragmentation occurs which hampers the EU's ability to formulate and implement common foreign policy objectives across institutions (*coherence*) and to achieve such objectives (*effectiveness*).[8] Consequently, the Union often reacts (too) late (for example in the case of the Greenland-crisis) or in a divided fashion (in the case of condemning Israel for assaulting the foundations of international law in Gaza). The conflict in Iran provides yet another example of an EU that struggles to formulate a common response that is shared among Member States and actors.[9]

5 Ignacio Molina and Luis Simón, 2019, "A Strategic Look at the Position of High Representative and Commission Vice-President", *Elcano Royal Institute*.

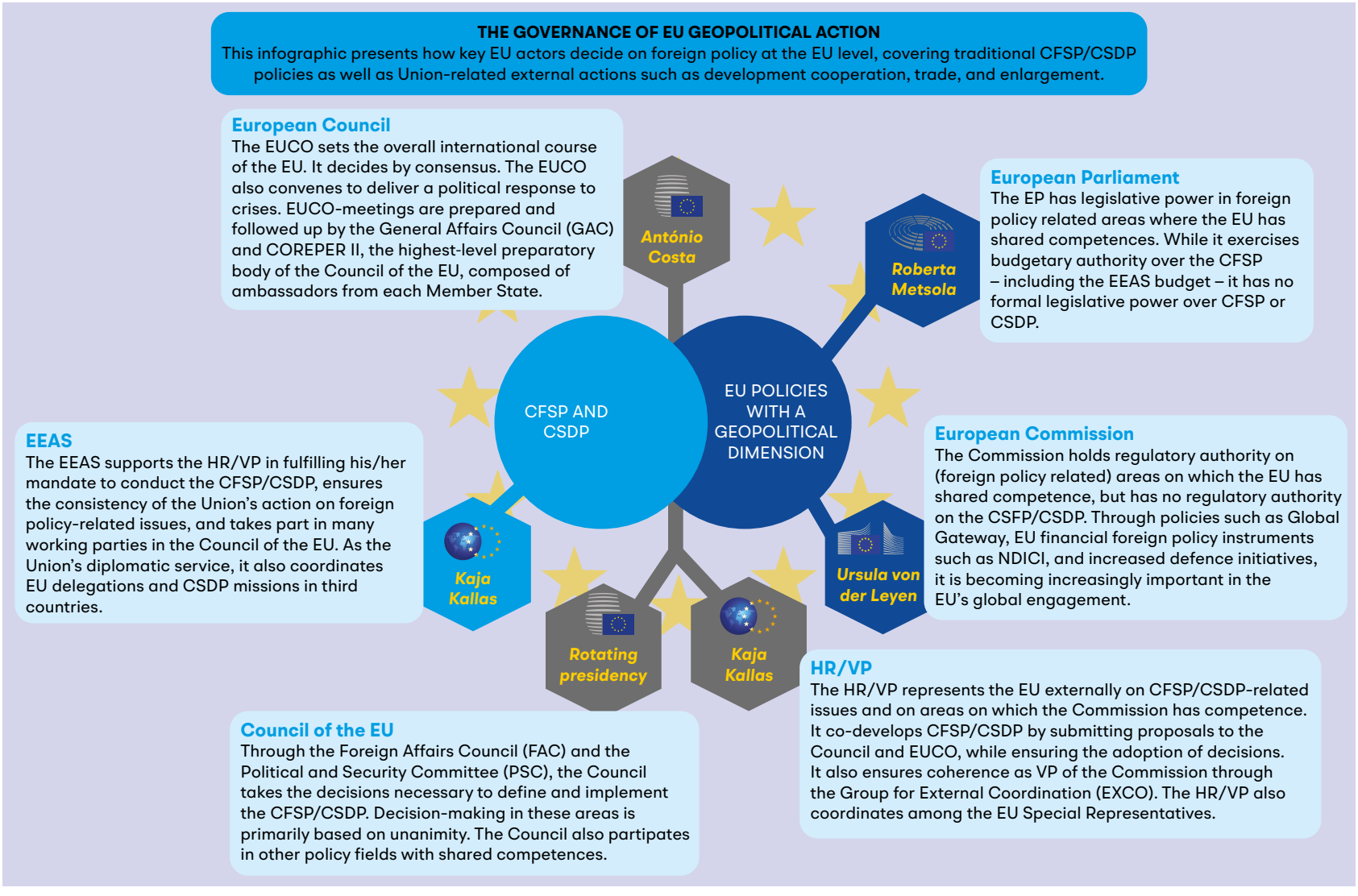
6 Article 31(1) TEU: EUR-Lex - 12016M031 - EN - EUR-Lex.

7 Article 36 TEU: EUR-Lex - 12016M036 - EN - EUR-Lex.

8 Ibid; Giovanni Grevi et al., 2020, "Differentiated Cooperation in European Foreign Policy: The Challenge of Coherence", *Instituto Affari Internazionali*.; Daniel C. Thomas, 2012, "Still Punching below Its Weight? Coherence and Effectiveness in European Union Foreign Policy", *Journal of Common Market Studies*.

9 See for possible EU course of actions this Clingendael alert: Erwin van Veen et al., 2026, "Epic Fury...en wat gaat Europa doen? Amerikaanse en Israëlische aanvallen op Iran – Gevolgen en handelingsperspectief", Clingendael Alert.

Figure 1 The governance of EU geopolitical action



2.1 The EU's effectiveness on the global stage

While in countries like the United States (US) and China geopolitical ambitions reflect a single national course, for the EU a geopolitical course involves navigating 27 distinct national agendas. On certain areas, these also need to be aligned with the Commission and EP. The HR/VP and EEAS are tasked with ensuring alignment between Member States and the EU institutions on foreign policy matters. Yet interviewees consulted for this study indicate that the EEAS often rather acts as a "28th Member State", formulating its own positions on foreign policy rather than acting as consensus-builder.

Defining and achieving common goals is all the more difficult without clear leadership. A common question is whom to call when seeking to speak with the EU. Is this Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, EUCO President António Costa or HR/VP Kaja Kallas? Or is it the leader of the country holding the rotating EU Presidency? Who represents the EU internationally is also loosely defined. In the UN, the Presidents of the EUCO and Commission *and* the HR/VP represent the EU, while in the G7 and the G20, the two Presidents do so. As a rule of thumb, the Presidents represent the EU at a head-of-state level meeting, while the HR/VP represents the EU at ministerial level – though this is not set in stone. Uncertainty about who acts as the external face of the EU exposes its scattered division of power. The leader of the European People's Party (EPP), Manfred Weber, stressed that as a result, the EU is "not up to the task", suggesting merging the positions of the EUCO and Commission Presidents.[10]

Member States are also responsible for adding to the unclarity. Member State actions after the installation of President Donald Trump in the US provide a case in point. Their leaders – like the French President Emmanuel Macron and the (then) Polish President Andrzej Duda – rushed to the US to ensure Donald Trump they would be his best partner in Europe, rather than coordinating these efforts among each other.[11]

Especially when the stakes are high, the EU manages to act *despite* its fragmented distribution of power. The recent agreements with India provide a

10 Max Griera, "One all-powerful president of Europe? Conservative chief calls for EU merger. – POLITICO", *POLITICO*, 28 January 2026.

11 Katarzyna-Maria Skiba, "European leaders to visit Trump following realigned US commitments to Ukraine", *Euronews*, 22 February 2025.

notable example. During the India–EU Summit on 27 January 2026, Costa and Von der Leyen represented the Union in negotiating a trade deal, while Kallas – in parallel – signed a security and defence partnership.[12] Each representative operated within a defined policy domain, ensuring coherence across EU actors and clarity for India about interlocutors on specific issues. Yet this clear distribution of responsibilities is not always achieved and can be undermined by other countries pursuing a divide-and-rule strategy between the Commission and the EU Member States.

In the leadership vacuum, the Commission often tries to force consensus by acting ahead. It does so for example by presenting far-reaching plans (like the "Drone Wall" to protect the EU against Russian drones) or making agreements with third countries which later attract considerable criticism (such as the "Tunisia-deal" to curb migration). Notably, in her latest '*State of the European Union*', Von der Leyen proposed sanctions against Israel, despite knowing that this would not be supported by the Council.[13] As a result, Kallas quickly had to temper expectations by announcing that there was no unanimous support for the measures.[14] Although the Commission can get things moving with such proactivity and is able to rally Member States behind ambitious goals, tensions between the Commission and other institutions also undermine the EU's credibility and its ability to act effectively.[15]

2.2 The EU's coherence in its actions abroad

With approximately 144 EU delegations and offices worldwide and countless Member State embassies, the EU is the most represented entity globally.[16] However, it is proving difficult for the EU to get all these delegations to act cohesively. Interviewees consulted for this study point to overlapping initiatives, sometimes conflicting policies and/or messaging, and uneven implementation of

12 EEAS, "Security and Defence: EU and India sign security & defence partnership", 27 January 2026.

13 Ursula von der Leyen, 2025, "State of the Union address"

14 Max Griera, "Brussels ready to crack down on Israel but EU capitals block progress, Kallas says", *POLITICO*, 9 September 2025.

15 Calle Håkansson, 2024, "Von der Leyen's Geopolitical Commission: Vindicated by Events?", *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.*

16 "EU delegations", 2025, *European Commission, Directorate General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood.*

EU objectives. This is for example reflected in different approaches towards the EU's Global Gateway strategy. The EU launched Global Gateway in 2021 as an investment programme in global connectivity to streamline investments in third countries based on the EU's strategic priorities. Global Gateway 1.0 (during the first term of Von der Leyen) focused on development finance with an emphasis on promoting democratic values and principles. Yet, in Global Gateway 2.0, the values-based approach is fading to the background.

The current Commission holds a pragmatic view and seems increasingly willing to establish partnerships with countries that do not necessarily share the EU values of liberal democracy and the rule of law (or even actively oppose these). This pragmatism fits in with the geopolitical ambitions of the Commission, which sees Global Gateway primarily as a means of increasing the Union's strategic autonomy and securing critical supply chains. At the same time, the Scandinavian Member States give primacy to value-based international cooperation focused on good governance, the rule of law and human rights, while Members like France and Italy approach the issue much more interest-based. Others, such as the Netherlands, are positioned in between. Such diversity in approach could reduce predictability and alienate international partners.

Limited EU cohesion is not only due to divergent Member State positions but also relates to the fact that several EU institutions are involved in doing nearly the same work. These are not always well connected and sometimes duplicate each other's work. This applies for example to EEAS and the EU's Special Representatives (EUSRs) that act as emissaries on specified issues. The EUSRs operate alongside the EEAS and are not part of its formal operational structure, resulting in limited coordination and overlap in their work.

The EU's limited coherence is clearly visible in the Union's engagement with the Sahel countries. Some EU Member States – notably France – have withdrawn from the Sahel due to a wave of military uprisings, while Spain actively pursues bilateral partnerships with countries such as Mauritania (specifically with an eye on migration).[17] This has severed the EU's overall ties with the region.[18] The EU institutions also hold different positions and objectives. The EP, in the

17 Gonzales Barcos, 2025, "Spain and the Sahel: Security at Stake After International Withdrawal", *thediplomatinspain*.

18 Ivan U. Klyszcz and Rossella Marangio, 2025, "The multi-aligned Sahel: Reframing the EU's role in a crowded region", *European Union Institute for Security Studies*.

annual CFSP report of 2025, calls for a value-based approach to the Sahel and calls to invest in good governance, capacity building and partnership aimed at preventing state collapse.[19] At the same time, the Commission holds a more pragmatic stance and aims to mobilise funding on health and climate financing.[20] Such a mismatch damages the EU's credibility, and is especially risky in conflict-sensitive areas.

To sum up, decision-making in the EU on geopolitical matters is scattered among various institutions and actors. This fragmentation is inherent to its multi-level governance. The division of competences with its many checks and balances is part of the Union's strength. Yet in the current geopolitical context, this fragmentation is increasingly proving to be the EU's Achilles' heel since it prevents the Union from speaking with one voice and from acting swiftly and proactively in a changing world order.

19 "REPORT on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2025 | A10-0253/2025 | European Parliament", 2025, *European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs*.

20 "Annual Activity Report 2024", 2025, *European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships*.

3 An evolving foreign policy field

In this chapter, we identify two international developments which necessitate paradigm shifts in the conduct of EU foreign policy to ensure effectiveness and coherence. First, the chapter discusses the trend of a geopoliticisation of EU policy, implying that EU policy is increasingly interlinked with, and dependent on, strategic geo-economic interests such as access to resources, as well as hard power capabilities. For the EU, this affects the once much stricter boundaries between the relatively intergovernmental domain of the CFSP (and CSDP), and areas in which Member States have already (partially) transferred sovereignty to the EU, such as trade, migration, and climate policy. Second, the chapter discusses the effects of the declining prominence of the international rules-based order, which in the past decades formed the cornerstone of EU external action. The shift from a somewhat functioning rules-based order towards heightened international rivalry and spheres of influence has severe consequences for the EU. It implies that the EU will need to find new ways to work with strategic partners who are not always obvious allies.

3.1 The geopoliticisation of EU policy

The increased geopolitical rivalry and more transactional US government have heightened the links between foreign policy and security on the one hand, and all EU policies with a global dimension on the other hand. The (nuclear) security umbrella of the US, sheltering the EU from potential adversaries, always influenced the EU's positions in for instance the fields of trade and human rights. However, it never did so to the degree it openly challenged the EU's sovereignty and strategic autonomy in its foreign policy positions.[21] Now, it is abundantly clear how the US links support for Ukraine, trade tariffs and the EU's ability to buy defence materials, digital services and energy (LNG) to a continuation of US

21 For a full analysis (in Dutch) of the US MAGA ideology and its foreign policy stance, see: Liam Klein et al., 2026, "MAGA in Nederland: Deel 1 - Een analyse van de Make America Great Again-beweging en haar mogelijke toekomst(en)", Clingendael Institute.

military forces in Europe and providing crucial strategic enablers for its defence. Even if during the 2026 Munich Security Conference US representatives adopted a seemingly less confrontational discourse, it remains clear that the country's leadership seeks to continue reshaping the global order with clear repercussions for Europe.[22] China is equally prone to link foreign policy positions to access to strategic goods the EU needs, notably critical raw materials and chips. Russia has moreover used gas supplies and fertilizer ingredients to pressure the EU.

The behaviour of these powers means that it is more difficult for the EU to continue operating as what is often referred to as an "economic giant, political dwarf and military worm".[23] In the past decades, the EU managed to do so because it held other, more subtle sources of power, e.g. by setting global standards, through its development agenda et cetera.[24] Now, global power politics make it harder for the EU to decide autonomously upon its Common Commercial Policy, standards for privacy, protection against market, food safety and environmental norms. These economic domains are, moreover, increasingly threatened from outside, and therefore a matter of European (economic) security. In the wake of the Draghi report that highlighted the EU's weak position in strategic technologies such as cloud, AI, semi-conductors and access to critical raw materials supply chains, steps have been taken to boost the EU's economic security. The icing on the cake is the Union's anti-coercive instrument, which the EU for the first time considered deploying in January 2026 against the US.

The increasingly blurring lines between the traditional CFSP and all other EU policies with a geopolitical dimension challenges the CFSP's intergovernmental set-up. All significant EU positions require consensus. Where the EU functions as a supranational entity in the realm of economic relations, it is merely a coalition of sovereign states in the realm of foreign and security policy. On prominent foreign policy issues, such as the Middle East, it is unable to take (strong) positions. If

22 Politico, "America's charm offensive in Munich masks harder line on Europe", 14 February 2026, *accessed 18 February 2026*.

23 This phrase was first coined by former Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens in 1991 in the context of the EU's inability respond decisively to the Gulf War. Later academic research has partially endorsed but also challenged this image, noting that the European Union, while lacking military capabilities and political power, has more subtle ways of exerting power abroad. See for example F. Bossuyt, 2007, "An economic giant, political dwarf and military worm?: introducing the concept of 'transnational power over' in studies of (the EU's) power", *ECPR Conference paper*.

24 Ibid.

the EU manages to form a position, it is often not matched with action, such as sanctions or military interventions. Several EU member states, including the Netherlands, consider the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) the prime venue for defence matters and not the EU. This situation already in the past decades let to a gap between expectations and actual foreign policy capabilities of the EU, undermining EU credibility and effectiveness on the global stage. Nowadays, the mere diplomatic speed required to navigate the new geopolitical setting is further exposing the limits of intergovernmental foreign policy making.

But under pressure, everything becomes fluid – as evident from the rapid developments in the CFSP and CSDP. A notable example has been the EU's relatively united stance on Ukraine, even though agreeing sanctions and steps in offering Ukraine an EU membership perspective are not a given. Considerable steps were made in the joint purchasing of defence equipment through the European Peace Facility (EPF) and plans to rearm Europe through the *Readiness 2030* program. Overall, the EU is seeking to transform from a military worm into a "military powerhouse" as Commission President Von Der Leyen noted in January 2026.[25] Still, with many internal differences – including some Member States prioritizing EU defence cooperation, while others clinging to NATO cooperation – the EU still has a long way to go.

3.2 The decline of the international rules-based order

The EU is also facing a decline of the rules-based international order, rendering a further need for geopoliticising the EU's entire policy arsenal. EU normative or standard-setting power was relatively successful in the past decades in which the rules-based international order was the dominant ordering principle between states. While the world was certainly not without conflict, functioning international institutions – international organisations, international treaties, and international norms – helped the EU to actively take on climate, humanitarian, migration and economic global challenges. This was especially the case in Europe itself after the conflicts related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia ended in 2001. But already from Vladimir Putins Munich Security Conference speech in 2007, the global security, economic, and humanitarian rules-based order has steadily declined.

25 Alice Bergoënd, et al., "EXCLUSIVE: EU to become 'military powerhouse,' von der Leyen told MEPs", *Euractiv*, 14 January 2026.

Security wise, from a European viewpoint, the international norm of the inviolability of borders and the non-use of force took a first notable hit with the Russian 2008 war against Georgia, followed by the Russian invasion of (Eastern) Ukraine in 2014. Fast-forward to 2026 and military force has become a much more mainstream instrument for global powers to alter geopolitical constellations in especially their neighbouring regions. Russia's full 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine constitutes the prime example. More recently, the unilateral action of the US against Venezuela, and its threats to undertake potential military action against Greenland are further advancing sphere of influence thinking as a dominant paradigm in international relations. Combined with the increasing withdrawing from (or expiring of) key international (nuclear) security treaties, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF), Open Skies and New Start treaties, as well as the dysfunctioning of key international organisations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe, this strongly affects EU security.

Economically, too, power is increasingly more important than rules. As a common market of about 450 million citizens, the EU thrived on open trade and economic globalisation. Since 1994, when General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations culminated in the creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), economic non-discrimination became institutionalised as a global rule. That is until January 2025, when the US attacked the global trade order by installing import tariffs as high as over 50%, seeking to pursue political and even coercive objectives through trade policy. A prime example is the January 2026 US threat to raise tariffs for European partners as a response to a European NATO reconnaissance mission to Greenland. In addition, EU consumer protection standards on product safety and privacy are increasingly under pressure by that very same US government expecting unlimited access of American big tech corporations to the EU market.

The rules-based international order is also under pressure in the areas of human rights, climate and migration. Political divides have withheld the 'international community' from acting on humanitarian crises in Sudan, Gaza and Yemen, undermining international humanitarian law. While it was never fully embraced globally, China and other powers are increasingly rejecting the right to protect (R2P) as a key principle to take humanitarian action, preferring strict non-interference instead. The International Criminal Court (ICC) was never globally accepted, but in the past years its own members are criticising and ignoring its arrest warrants against the likes of Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, with several countries leaving the organisation. UN climate talks have been

challenging ever since the Paris Climate Agreement, with the latest round of talks in Belém failing to reach global consensus on key measures. On migration, European countries and the EU's border agency Frontex themselves are violating protection obligations and the right to asylum through illegal pushbacks. Some of these examples show that the EU itself has not acted consistently in accordance with its proclaimed democratic values.

3.3 A changed EU foreign policy conduct?

The way in which EU institutions and Member States adapt their foreign policy conduct to the new geopolitical reality reveals new inconsistencies. Particularly the Commission has become increasingly transactional, prioritising strategic partnerships over a normative foreign policy approach. In contrast, the EP has maintained a more normative outlook on EU external action. However, it is often subject to significant pressure from the Commission to set aside normative benchmarks in pursuit of political outcomes. For example, in the case of the macro-financial assistance package to Egypt, human rights and rule of law benchmarks were ultimately ignored following pressure from the Commission and allied groups within the EP.

The EEAS on the other hand continues to face financial, political and organisational challenges undermining its ability to steer EU external action. As such, it is mostly the Commission, together with the Council, that has managed to instigate a transactional turn in EU foreign policy conduct which now dominates over normative commitments. EU Member States have responded in a divergent fashion. Some countries maintain a predominantly human rights-based outlook and would like the Commission to impose stricter conditions on strategic partnerships with third countries, while others align to the Commission's transactional approach.

The Commission's transactional turn becomes most evident in the EU's Global Gateway Strategy. In essence, Global Gateway is the EU answer to a changing world order.[26] Moreover, it aims to constitute a more sustainable and local-led alternative investment programme to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that China

26 Maaike Okano-Heijmans, 2022, "Global Gateway: Positioning Europe for a Sustainable Future | Clingendael", *Clingendael Institute*

launched in 2013.[27] Global Gateway implies a fundamentally different approach than earlier development cooperation. It is much more strategic in nature and based on the realisation that the EU is no longer the only partner with whom developing countries do 'business'.

This realisation requires the EU to offer a genuinely attractive alternative to cooperation with powers like China, Russia and Turkey. These latter countries do not impose conditions on aid and investments like the EU has been doing in the past (and to a certain extent still does). With Global Gateway, the EU is trying to kill two birds with one stone. It aims to achieve economic partnerships with third countries that benefits both sides, and to bring about sustainable and rights-based development in these countries that will benefit those partnerships. Normative conditionality is still present but subject to geopolitical and geo-economic interests.

Beyond foreign policy, developments in the EU itself are mirroring the decline of the rules-based global order. Democracy and the rule of law are increasingly under pressure in several Member States.[28] This trend also goes for EU standards. Long considered a global benchmark, EU product standards and climate norms are now being reassessed through the lens of competitiveness and strategic autonomy. EU deregulation and simplification processes are a direct result of global geo-economic pressures on the Union. Initiatives aimed at streamlining legislation or reducing compliance costs are increasingly framed as essential for safeguarding economic resilience and industrial capacity. Yet this shift risks undermining the very standards that have historically distinguished the EU's economic and political model.

These developments create a mounting dilemma of how to remain geopolitically relevant without foregoing the normative foundations on which the EU's global influence has long relied. This, in addition, reshapes the EU's own governance and identity, though – as argued in the next section – in a way that is increasingly at odds with the inter-institutional balance in the EU as envisaged in the Treaties.

27 Luuk van Middelaar, Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Sven Biscop, 2025, "Partnerships in a Geopolitical Era: Time for a New Strategic Conversation", *Global Gateway Forum*

28 European Commission, 2025, "2025 Rule of law report - Communication and country chapter".

4 An evolving institutional architecture

Pressured by this changing foreign policy field, the EU has experienced two incremental governance shifts. First, the EUCO and Commission increasingly coordinate the Union's geopolitical actions. Second, this leads to an ongoing centralisation of and within the Commission with Commission President Von der Leyen at the helm. This chapter analyses these shifts and their impact.

4.1 The New Duo in Town: The EUCO and Commission

Increasingly more matters have become so-called *Chefsache* – leaving the Council and the EEAS increasingly overshadowed by the EUCO and the Commission. Although this tandem is primarily driven by a necessity to enhance decisiveness, the next sections show that it simultaneously leads to even more institutional fragmentation and even competition.

The European Council (and Coreper II) versus the FAC (and the PSC)
The EUCO's role in defining the EU's geopolitical course has become increasingly prominent over the past fifteen years.[29] This is partly due to its formalisation as EU institution and with the introduction of the office of a full-time EUCO President. Major crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have further contributed to the trend. Accordingly, the EUCO is best equipped to deal with crises, since the Heads of State or Government have the political mandate to decide rapidly on a wide range of issues.[30] In addition, the EUCO can speed up decision-making in the Council by deciding to shift from unanimity to QMV.[31]

29 Suzana Anghel and Ralf Drachenberg, 2019, "The European Council under the Lisbon Treaty: How Has the Institution Evolved since 2009?", *European Parliamentary Research Service.*

30 Ibid. p. 27.

31 Saskia Hollander and Karen van Loon, 2026, "Managing Crises, Sharing Power: The EU's Inter-Institutional Cooperation in Action", *Clingendael Institute.*

While the role of the EUCO has increased, the relevance of the FAC has decreased, and hence, also of the Political and Security Committee (PSC).[32] Formally, the preparatory body for the EUCO – called Coreper II (CRPII) – is tasked with preparing the agenda for the meetings of the FAC. Yet, in daily practice, the PSC had increasingly taken on this role. But with more foreign policy issues becoming *Chefsache,* CRPII is once again taking on this task. As Maurer and Wright (2020) argue: "The previous modus operandi whereby CRPII would generally leave PSC ambassadors to deal with foreign and security questions unless a serious issue arose can no longer be taken for granted."[33] This leads to more fragmentation and a waste of knowledge and skills within the PSC. Moreover, removing the preparatory competence from the PSC to CRPII also means that the PSC ambassadors are no longer able to remove the stumbling blocks from difficult negotiations in advance. Interviews conducted reveal that preparing negotiations on foreign policy at the highest preparatory level does not always contribute to more effective and coherent decisions, as it is precisely in these technical working parties where negotiations and coordination between Member States take place. [34]

An enhanced role of the Commission at the expense of EEAS

Next to the EUCO, also the Commission's role on foreign policy issues has become increasingly prominent. In line with her ambition to lead a geopolitical Commission, Von der Leyen has become a main EU interlocutor on foreign policy issues and presented herself as key crisis manager during the successive crises that have hit the EU. This also means that the Commission formulates policies at the upper limit of its competences and even expands these (known as a so-called 'competency creep') as well as its in-house capabilities.[35] An example is the creation of a Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DGDEFIS), led by Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius.

32 Suzana Anghel and Ralf Drachenberg, 2019, "The European Council under the Lisbon Treaty: How Has the Institution Evolved since 2009?", p. 29.; Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

33 Heidi Maurer and Nicholas Wright, 2020, "The EU's Political and Security Committee: Still in the Shadows but No Longer Governing?" *Encompass.*

34 See for an overview of the working parties: pdf

35 Nick Witney, 2024, "Commissioning Defence: How to Build a European Defence Union", *European Council on Foreign Relations.*

In doing so, the Commission pushes the EEAS to the background. The Commission is playing an increasingly important role in shaping and implementing the CFSP and is also becoming increasingly prominent in the Union's diplomacy – in fact, a core task of the EEAS. A telling example is the creation of a Directorate-General (DG) focused on the Mediterranean and gulf regions (DGMENA), through which the Commission seeks to steer EU diplomacy towards this region. Its (albeit recently softened) ambition to establish a Commission-led intelligence service alongside the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) that is managed by EEAS, is also exemplary of a Commission that is increasingly pushing the EEAS into the background.

At the basis of this trend are some inherent "design flaws" on the part of EEAS.[36] From the onset, the EEAS has had no clear political mandate. Its key responsibility is to support the HR/VP in her capacity as President of the FAC and in her capacity as Vice-President of the Commission.[37] Yet, the EEAS has no clear political mission or mandate.[38] For that reason, the organisation operates somewhere between a European Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a Secretariat General that coordinates the EU's foreign policy and external action.[39] The HR/VP also suffers from an unclear mandate. Having to coordinate between the EUCO, the Council, the Commission, Member States and delegations abroad, it is safe to argue that its coordinating responsibility is overextended.[40] Consequently, the HR/VP is neither fully recognized as VP, nor as HR. [41]

36 Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

37 Council Decision 2010/427/EU of 26 July 2010 establishing the Organisation and Functioning of the European External Action Service, *OJ* L 201, 3 August 2010, 30–40, http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2010/427/oj.

38 Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

39 Ibid.; Research interview conducted for this study.

40 Ties Dams, Giulia Cretti, and Louise van Schaik, 2022, "Europe Cannot Wait for Unity", *Clingendael Institute*.

41 Ignacio Molina and Luis Simón, 2019, "A Strategic Look at the Position of High Representative and Commission Vice-President", *Elcano Royal Institute*.; Antonio Missiroli, ed., 2016, "The EU and the World: Players and Policies Post-Lisbon; A Handbook", *European Union Institute for Security Studies*.

Secondly, the EEAS has too limited instruments and resources to effectively support the HR/VP in its double role. The most effective foreign policy instruments – such as trade and international cooperation – fall under the Commission's remit. This creates a certain dependency of the EEAS on the Commission. The Commission also has significantly more financial resources. For example, the Commission's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) equals to about 79,5 billion euros in the 2021-2027 MFF.[42] The Commission pools NDCI funds with other resources, such as through the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) and Global Gateway. As such, it controls investments worth hundreds of billions of euros. In comparison, the EEAS in 2025 had an annual budget of about one billion euros for its entire organisation and diplomatic operations.[43]

In terms of personnel, the EEAS is also largely dependent on others.[44] EEAS' threefold composition, comprising former officials of the Commission, the Council General Secretariat and Member State diplomats, means that, on paper, it has a competent staff with high-level diplomats who have meaningful connections in the foreign policy field. Yet this dependency on secondments of employees prevents the service from developing a general *European Corps Diplomatique*.[45]

According to the interviewees consulted for this study, these design flaws have created a turf war in which the Commission's DG's and the EEAS are not primarily interested in cooperating and sharing information, in fear of losing ownership in their policy area. As the next section will show, a strategic centralisation of and within the Commission further facilitates such inter-institutional competition.

42 "Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe) - Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood", 2025, *European Commission, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood.*

43 "Annual report on Budgetary and Financial management European External Action Service Section X Year 2024", 2025, *European External Action Service.*

44 Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

45 Research interviews conducted for this study.

4.2 Strategic centralisation of and within the Commission

Under pressure from successive crises, Commission President Von der Leyen has increasingly centralised decision-making within the Commission. This is primarily reflected in her role in distributing the portfolios to the Commissioners. Although the Treaty of Lisbon provides for a rotational system to reduce the number of Commissioners, this has not been implemented. As a result, the current Commission remains based on the 'one-Member-State-one-Commissioner' logic, and hence, consist of no less than 27 Commissioners. Moreover, Von der Leyen has increasingly assigned these Commissioners overlapping portfolios. She has also created so-called project groups in which Commissioners work on cross-cutting topics, thereby blurring the lines of responsibility (see Chapter 5 for a more extensive analysis).[46]

The interviews conducted reveal that these project groups allow her to act as an arbiter, thereby strengthening her grip on the Commissioners.[47] Although this contributes to the President's effective leadership, her working methods are also subject to criticism – for example expressed by ex-Commissioner Nicolas Schmidt.[48] Moreover, due to the large number of Commissioners, it has become increasingly difficult for them to act as alternative figures of leadership because of their uncertain mandates and constant struggle to compete for policy autonomy.[49]

Centralisation does not only take place within the Commission, but also regarding the position of the Commission President vis-a-vis the Member States. Von der Leyen has emerged as the political linchpin of the Union, shaping its direction through the concentration of powers and institutional strategy. For

46 European Commission, 2025, "Commissioners' Project Groups - European Commission".

47 See also: Maria Patrin, 2024, New Structure, New Priorities; Spyros Blavoukos et al., 2024, "The von der Leyen Commission 2.0: Institutional Features, Portfolios and Mission Letters", *Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy.*; Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

48 Max Griera, "Von der Leyen's management style 'not good for Europe,' says ex-commissioner – POLITICO", *POLITICO*, 2 February 2026

49 Johan Adriaensen et al., 2024, "The effect of geopoliticisation on the EU's polity: exploring institutional power shifts", *Journal of European Public Policy*, pp. 1–25.; Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

a large part, this has to do with the personality of the politically nimble Von der Leyen, who – as former German Minister of Defence – is able to mobilise others behind her cause. At the same time, a dominant German (and Christian Democratic) voice is making itself felt in her policies – for example as evidenced by the foreseen ban on combustion engines in cars, which was scrapped under German pressure.[50] As became clear from interviews with EU policy makers, she frequently uses her direct connection to one of the most powerful Member States and party families to "one up" the HR/VP Kallas.

Von der Leyen has enhanced her influence on policy areas that were previously "no-go's", such as deepened defence and security coordination at an EU level. At the same time, she can only do so when accepted by the Member States. On occasions, Von der Leyen has been able to propose far-reaching policies and find Member States' support along the way; on other occasions, such support was lacking and she was reined in. An example was the premature announcement by Von der Leyen that the EU will use frozen Russian assets to help Ukraine – for which there proved no consensus among Member States.[51]

Strategic centralisation becomes problematic insofar as the Commission acts too far ahead of the troops without a clear mandate. This not only undermines the effectiveness and coherence of foreign policy, but also its democratic legitimacy. This particularly applies to those policy areas that lie at the intersection of traditional CFSP and all other policies with a geopolitical dimension – and hence, where the lines of responsibility and accountability are unclear.

50 Jordyn Dahl, "How Germany Tore down a Giant Pillar of EU Climate Policy", *POLITICO*, 16 December, 2025.

51 European Council, 2025, "European Council Conclusions, 18 December 2025".

5 Initiatives for an effective and coherent foreign policy

EU institutions such as the Commission, as well as EU Member States and think tanks have proposed or launched initiatives to boost the EU's geopolitical clout. For example, the Commission has changed its internal working methods with the aim of geopoliticising its activities and strengthening interinstitutional cooperation. At the Member State level, initiatives are taken to stimulate discussions on fundamental reforms. An example is the launch of an independent group of EU experts (the so-called *Franco-German Expert Group on EU reforms*) by the French and German governments that has formulated proposals for institutional reform.[52] The Netherlands also contributed to the debate with a non-paper on a more coherent EU foreign policy.[53] In addition, numerous think tanks, including the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs, the Centre for European Policy Initiatives (CEPS), the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS) and the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES), have published reports containing concrete recommendations.[54]

The next sections provide a non-exhaustive overview of these initiatives and proposals. We chose not to assess proposals that would require fundamental treaty reform, as this report aims to explore the EU's short term institutional options to reinforce its geopolitical clout. Some of the proposals discussed in this section do, however, require minor treaty changes, which could for example be enacted through the Accession Treaty of the next country to join the Union (which as things stand now could be Montenegro).

52 Olivier Costa et al., 2023, "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century", *The Group of Twelve*.

53 Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024, "Suggestions of the Netherlands for the Commission 2024 – 2029: A stronger geopolitical EU in the world: a more coherent EU foreign policy".

54 Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2025, "Daadkracht: EU-hervormingen van GBVB, begroting en rechtsstaat | Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken"; Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021. "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

First, we identify initiatives to improve the EU's governance capacity on the part of the Commission by ensuring better cooperation within its College, and between the Commission, the HR/VP and Member States. These comprise:

- A stronger but more cooperative Commission (section 5.1)
- An EEAS with a clear yet more facilitative role (section 5.2)
- Stronger coordination between *Team Europe* and *Team National* partners (section 5.3)

Second, we identify initiatives that enable the EU to move forward on CFSP matters even when this is not supported by all Member States. These include:

- Maximising the potential of a multi-speed Europe (section 5.4)
- Accelerating decision-making in the EU by reducing the risk of vetoes (section 5.5)

Finally, we explore possibilities to enhance democratic control over initiatives strengthening the EU's geopolitical clout:

- Stronger democratic control and accountability (section 5.6)

5.1 A stronger but more cooperative Commission

Since the Commission is already in charge of key foreign policy issues such as trade or development cooperation, it is logical to assign a stronger coordinating and steering role to the Commission when it comes to the entire foreign and security policy field. Yet this requires the Commission to cooperate more effectively, both internally and with others. Several proposals have already been made to this end. Some go as far as the proposal of EPP President Manfred Weber to merge the positions of Commission President and EUCO President. However, limited alignment between the Commission and EUCO is not the main bottleneck in foreign policy. On the contrary, they appear more aligned recently. Moreover, it seems unworkable to have one President for both the Union's intergovernmental and the more supranational policies. Greater short-term impact can be expected from initiatives that ensure that the Commissioners (and their staffs) work in a cooperative and integrated manner, and initiatives to improve cooperation between the Commission and the EEAS.

Amongst other things, a more unified Council and greater space from the Council for Commission initiatives would better enable the Commission to act as a vanguard in EU foreign policy. Still, when it comes to who represents what, coherence across EU actors can only be ensured if Commission and EEAS representatives operate within their defined mandates - as was the case in the January 2026 EU-India summit. This means that in the case of CFSP or CSDP negotiations with international partners, the HR/VP should have a leading role.

Cooperation within the Commission

A growing portfolio also raises concerns about the Commission's workability. By working in so-called Commissioner's Groups, President Von der Leyen aims to manage the Commission and to enhance cooperation between Commissioners.[55] Her current Commission is divided into seven of those groups, chaired by the President, Vice-President and executive Vice-Presidents. The Commission already worked in smaller groups under Jean-Claude Juncker, but it has become an official working method only under Von der Leyen.[56] Moreover, in her second term, work processes have been streamlined further by the creation of so-called project groups in which Commissioners are assigned to cross-cutting topics.[57] Each project group is chaired by an executive Vice-President or a Commissioner, but the President may choose to chair them on an ad hoc basis. Although this intervention aimed to improve the coherence of the Commission's work, policymakers interviewed for this study primarily view them as a way for the President to gain (even) more grip on the Commissioners (see Chapter 4.2).[58] This working method would benefit from more transparency in choices for clustering and less top-down involvement by the President.

The workability of the College of Commissioners is also under pressure from its size, comprising 27 Commissioners. This challenge will be exacerbated as the EU enlarges with new Member States, which under current workings would each acquire their own Commissioner. As such, several initiatives have been floated to limit an ever-expanding Commission. Such a reduction was already foreseen in

55 European Commission, 2019, "The Working Methods of the von der Leyen Commission".

56 Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU." p. 12.

57 European Commission, 2025, "Commissioners' Project Groups - European Commission".

58 Giulia Torbidoni, "Von der Leyen breaks up and centralises: "project groups" emerge for commission priorities", *eunews*, 10 January 2025.

the Treaty of Lisbon, which provides the option of introducing a rotational system after a decision by the EUCO.[59] So far, there has always been a lack of political will to do so.

An option to downsize the Commission that the *Franco-German Expert Group* also discussed is to replace Commissioners mid-term, hence after two-and-a-half years. This could push Member States unwilling to give up their commissioner for a full term over the line. However, this option compromises coherence and continuity and is therefore also undesirable. All in all, the most viable initiative to limit the size of the College of Commissioners is the idea to establish a hierarchical differentiation between Commissioners as put forward by the *Franco-German Expert Group*. This would imply that on each portfolio, a Lead Commissioner and a Commissioner – ideally of different political families to tackle the politicisation of the Commission – would build one team and cooperate. The group did not express an opinion on whether only the Lead Commissioner or also the 'ordinary' Commissioner should have voting rights. However, to have a real impact on the manageability within the Commission, it is recommendable to give voting rights only to Lead Commissioners. This would require a reform of Article 17(5) TEU.[60]

Cooperation between the Commission and the EEAS

A more effective and coherent foreign policy depends on better cooperation and information exchange between the institutions, notably between the Commission and the EEAS, with a clearer defined demarcation of competencies. Von der Leyen's Commissioners' group for a *Stronger Europe in the World* is chaired by the HR/VP, and as such could foster a cross-fertilization with the work of EEAS. But this ambition has not been realized yet (see Chapter 4).

Another working method aimed at enhancing coordination and coherence "on external action matters" is the creation of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO).[61] On paper, EXCO could enhance the working relationship between the

59 According to Article 17(5) TEU, "the Commission shall consist of a number of members, including its President and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, corresponding to two thirds of the number of Member States, unless the European Council, acting unanimously, decides to alter this number." EUR-Lex - 12008M017 - EN - EUR-Lex

60 Such a Treaty reform could be proposed in the Accession Treaty of the next country to join (most likely Montenegro).

61 European Commission, 2019, "The Working Methods of the von der Leyen Commission".

Commission and EEAS, which would be guaranteed by the dual chairmanship of the Diplomatic Adviser of the President and the Deputy Head of Cabinet of the HR/VP. But also this ambition has not yet come to fruition. In practice, also EXCO leads to further centralisation exactly because the Cabinets of the President and Vice-President play such a central role in the Group. As they together determine the degree of cooperation between the Commission and the EEAS, common strategic prioritisation is done at the highest level, while cooperation would be most beneficial at the lower working levels instead. That is because more bottom-up cooperation would be more suitable to pool capabilities and thereby make better use of the expertise that exists in both organisations.

Last, it is crucial that the Commission can deploy flexible financial resources at short notice in acute crisis situations abroad. The HR/VP could actively be involved in identifying and prioritizing the use of such resources. The Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), which deals with more flexible funding and is located in the EEAS building, provides an interesting institutional opening for advancing Commission and EEAS cooperation in situations where quick EU responses are opportune, though its clout is currently constrained by financial limitations.

5.2 An EEAS with a clearer yet more facilitative role

Currently, the EEAS is not a full-blown EU Ministry of Foreign Affairs with political autonomy, nor a merely supporting secretariat in charge of coordinating the EU's external actions. While the EEAS prefers to continue hedging its bets and do both, it would be in its interest to prioritise. The interviewees consulted for this study call for a more clearly defined and facilitating role for the EEAS that supports the political leadership and brings coherence to the actions of EU institutions and Member States. This is in line with a proposal made by the think tanks CEPS, SIEPS and FES in 2021 (the Task Force 'EEAS 2.0'), which urge the EEAS to go "back to basics" and to fulfil three interrelated roles – namely, of "coherence builder", "factory of ideas", and "the face of the Union in the field."[62] At the same time, the HR/VP should be able to respond quickly to global developments through diplomatic statements, without having to coordinate

62 Steven Blockmans, Christophe Hillion, and Pierre Vimont, 2021, "From Self-Doubt to Self-Assurance: The European External Action Service as the Indispensable Support for a Geopolitical EU."

endlessly with all Member States separately. To that extent, the EEAS should have sufficient capacity to support the HR/VP. Effective coordination with the Commission remains another significant requirement for a coherent EU diplomatic voice towards third countries.

The EEAS as "coherence-builder"

The primary function of the EEAS is to support the HR/VP in performing its double role, and to bring together Member States and EU institutions. To do so, the two think tanks recommend improving cooperation within the EEAS itself. Better connections could be created between the upper echelons of the organisation (up to the HR/VP) and the lower ones. In addition, it is crucial to create a working atmosphere in which information is mutually shared. According to the interviewees consulted for this study, this would entail significant changes in the organisation's human resource policy (see below).

The EEAS as "factory of ideas"

A second key role of the EEAS that the two think tanks have identified is that of a "factory of ideas".[63] According to the Treaties, the HR/VP is tasked with the development of the CFSP and CSDP, with the right to initiate proposals to the EUCO and Council. Given its double-hatted role of also being the Vice-President of the Commission, the HR/VP could do so on the whole spectrum of EU external action. It is therefore recommended that the EEAS more actively facilitates the HR/VP's power of initiative. To this aim, the Service is well positioned to provide the HR/VP with ideas and proposals in which all dimensions of external action come together. For example, the EEAS could take the initiative to draft a revision of the EU Global Strategy of 2016 and the Strategic Compass of 2022. Thereby, it should ensure adequate coordination with the Commission and the Council, as the 2016 Global Strategy failed to become a generally accepted foreign policy guide amongst the EU institutions and Member States. Such a follow-up has already been proposed by the above-mentioned Dutch non-paper. Moreover, the EEAS could more actively produce non-papers to test Member States' positions on strategic policy proposals and actively elicit such responses.

The EEAS as "the face of the Union in the field"

As the Union's diplomatic service, a key role of EEAS is to coordinate EU actions in third countries, including civilian missions. To this aim, the interviewees consulted

63 Ibid.

for this study recommend that EU ambassadors play a more prominent role as faces of the Union, and as coordinators of Member States' delegations abroad. Moreover, to enhance EEAS' diplomatic role, it is crucial that also the EUSR's become better embedded in the Service. Problematically, EU Member States increasingly tend to appoint their own Special Representatives for specific regions or countries. Instead, Member States backing the EUSRs and better coordination between EUSRs and the Member States could lead to a more coherent EU posture in third countries.

Financial and human resources

Whether the EEAS can effectively take up the roles described above depends on the political willingness of the Commission and Member States to provide the EEAS (and the HR/VP) the resources to do so. Moreover, according to our interviewees, this requires that Member States provide both the financial means and necessary human resources, while EEAS would need to adopt a modernised human resource policy with better secondary working conditions. The strict selection process at the gate does not necessarily ensure that people with the required skills are hired. The Service would benefit from a common diplomatic training of its entire staff (rather than a selection) in order to establish a common diplomatic culture. It is also recommendable to invest in employees' mobility between EEAS, national foreign ministries *and* the Commission, which would also facilitate cooperation between these institutions. Overall, interviewees consulted agree that for the EEAS to become more relevant, working at the Service should be made more attractive by creating a working atmosphere based on cooperation rather than competition. This also implies that working at the EEAS (or the EU institutions in general) must be made more financially attractive for officials from all Member States.[64]

64 Especially the representation from the richer Member States (Denmark, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) is lagging because the EU paygrades are lower, making the EU services not as attractive. This hampers the overall representation, but also policy coherence across institutions and Member States.

5.3 Stronger coordination between *Team Europe* and *Team National* partners

Stronger coordination between European- and Member State efforts is crucial to ensure cohesive EU action abroad. A way of doing so has become the so-called *Team Europe* approach. This approach had previously shown its potential during the COVID-19 pandemic when the EU, its Member States, and financial institutions worked together in fighting the pandemic and its economic aftermath.[65] In essence, *Team Europe* implies a coordination and pooling of initiatives and resources (also from the private sector) based on common objectives.[66] In doing so, it aims to reduce duplication of funding, enhance coherence and increase overall effectiveness of EU action abroad. This has become more important as governments across the EU have less funding available to spend on international cooperation, as budgets shift to defence spending instead. Yet, for this ambition to be realised, Member States would need to be much more strongly involved in developing the common vision of the Union's engagement, rather than only through (financial) contributions. Especially considering that *Team Europe* has become a central working method to the Commission's most ambitious international cooperation programme yet, namely Global Gateway.

In order to implement such a *Team Europe* approach, the Commission now aims to transform Global Gateway in a bottom-up approach, for example by urging Member States to come up with proposals instead of the Commission. To this aim, many Member States have developed a so-called *Team National* which bring together relevant government ministries (e.g. trade, economy, development, climate, transport, etc.), public financial institutions, export-credit agencies and development agencies. This has led to mixed results: while some Member States have fully embraced the strategy and adapted their way of 'doing' international cooperation accordingly, others have not yet substantially aligned their strategy. The interviewees consulted for this study largely stress that there is still unwillingness among Member States to invest their own assets

65 Niels Keijzer e.a., 2021, "The Rise of the Team Europe Approach in EU Development Cooperation: Assessing a Moving Target', in *Discussion Paper 22/2021*, version 1.0, *German Institut of Development and Sustainability*,.

66 European Commission, 2025, "Launch of the Global Gateway Investment Hub: Empowering EU private sector engagement worldwide".

into EU priorities, since they see it as losing autonomy vis-a-vis pursuing their own national objectives.

Different national perspectives and approaches towards Global Gateway do not necessarily stand in the way of *Team Europe*. In fact, they could complement each other – for example by tapping into complementary financing streams on both the EU and national levels. However, this requires more awareness on the part of the Commission about what drives Member States' (and their private sectors') actions in third countries, so that it can leverage them to scale-up Global Gateway. In the same vein, *Team Europe* and *Team Nationals* do not have to be driven by the exact same interests and values, as long as they are complementary and do not work against each other. To achieve that, it is necessary to facilitate more exchange between the teams to coordinate efforts. Given its double role, the HR/VP would be in a unique position to coordinate *Team Europe* and *Team Nationals* and to mobilise resources from the Commission, Member States and international financial institutions to promote common interests.

5.4 Maximising the potential of a multi-speed Europe

The world around the EU does not wait for the EU to reach consensus. For that reason, the *Franco-German Expert Group* pleaded for making more use of so-called flexibility tools that allow for differentiated integration. This allows Member States that wish to do so to cooperate more extensively without the requirement that all Member States agree, let alone participate. There are several options for a multi-speed Europe.

A first option allows countries to form so-called *leading groups*. This could take the form of a loose agreement, such as the recently formed group of six Member States (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands) that will drive up projects to strengthen the EU's competitiveness and defence capabilities.[67] It could also be a formalised mode of enhanced integration, such as the oldest and best-known examples: Schengen (1985) and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (1992). After these, the possibility of *enhanced cooperation* became

67 Maria Martinez and Victoria Waldersee, "Six European economies vow to drive progress on stalled projects | Reuters", *Reuters*, 28 January 2026.

enshrined in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). Back then, Member States that disagreed with the proposed enhanced cooperation would retain the right to veto. The Treaty of Nice (2001) abolished this veto power and extended the mechanism of enhanced cooperation to the field of the CFSP (where Member States, however, held their power to veto decisions to proceed with enhanced cooperation). Defence cooperation remained excluded. In addition, the threshold to launch the procedure for enhanced cooperation changed from a majority to a fixed number of eight Member States.[68] The Treaty of Lisbon furthermore extended the mechanism to include defence policy as well and changed the threshold to nine Member States.

The EU already uses enhanced cooperation in several policy areas.[69] However, it is exceptional within the CFSP because, in this area, it requires the consent of all Member States. The instrument was recently used to facilitate a joint loan to Ukraine (without the participation of Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic).[70] At the time of writing, the loan is, however, not set in stone since Hungary has threatened to use its veto despite giving its consent earlier.[71] Since enhanced cooperation in the area of the CFSP allows the Union to move forward regardless of whether all Member States participate, it could be used more often.

In the area of defence, specifically, Lisbon also introduced the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), allowing EU Member States to deepen cooperation on security and defence policy without requiring full participation from the full Council. PESCO was established in 2017 and currently includes all EU Member States except for Malta.

The EU is also setting up facilities in which countries can voluntarily participate. An example is the European Peace Facility (EPF), which is an off-budget instrument that covers CSDP expenditures based on an intergovernmental model.

68 Article 20 TEU : EUR-Lex - 12016M020 - EN - EUR-Lex; Article 329 TFEU : EUR-Lex - 12016E329 - EN - EUR-Lex

69 Christian Maurice Bissinger, et al., 2026, "EU Foreign Policy via Enhanced Cooperation", *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*

70 Ibid; European Parliament, 2026, "Parliament approves €90 billion Ukraine support loan package | News | European Parliament".

71 Politico, "EU's €90B plan to fund Ukraine in jeopardy as Hungary blocks deal – POLITICO", 20 February 2026.

Opt-outs are also a form of differentiated integration. They allow certain Member States to refrain from certain EU policies without hampering these policies as such. Current Member States with opt-outs are Denmark (from Justice and Home Affairs, the EMU and until 2022 the CSDP) and Ireland (from Schengen and Justice and Home Affairs).[72] In areas where unanimity is required, opt-outs allow Member States to refrain from participating without stalling the entire process and cooperation of the other Member States as such. In other areas, they prevent Member States from being outvoted and having to implement policies that are perceived to go against their interests. However, as the *Franco-German Expert Group* rightly stresses, opt-outs cannot be enforced unilaterally, but can only be offered to countries during negotiations on treaty reform.[73]

Leading groups, voluntary initiatives, and opt-outs allow for effective action among willing Member States without being impeded by vetoes.[74] At the same time, foreign policy and external action should not become a menu from which countries can selectively pick and choose as they see fit. But in the absence of a supranational CFSP and CSDP, such initiatives for a multi-speed Europe allow the EU to move forward. In addition, the EU can also enhance its geopolitical clout when EU Member States voluntarily join forces in partnerships *outside* the EU structures. An example is the *Coalition of the Willing* of 34 (EU and non-EU) countries that have pledged strengthened support for Ukraine against Russian aggression.

5.5 Accelerating decision-making in the EU by reducing the risk of vetoes

To enhance the EU's effectiveness on the global stage, it is widely suggested that QMV is extended to (specific elements) of the CFSP. According to the *Franco-German Expert Group*, the use of QMV could push negotiation dynamics towards compromise and coalition-making, as evidenced by the fact that eighty percent of the decisions on areas where QMV applies is based on consensus without a

72 The United Kingdom as well had opt-outs from Schengen, the EMU and Justice and Home Affairs.

73 Christine Verger et al., 2023, "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century", *Institut Jacques Delors*.

74 Davide Genini, 2025, "How the war in Ukraine has transformed the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy", *Yearbook of European Law Oxford Academic*.

formal vote being necessary.[75] This is in line with pleas from the Commission, already expressed in 2018, to take certain decisions in the area of the CFSP by qualified majority, for example on EU positions on human rights violations, on sanctions and on civilian missions.[76]

In 2023, this proposal by the Commission was taken up by a group of Member States that call themselves the Group of Friends of QMV.[77] The group calls for introducing QMV in the CFSP on a step-by-step basis, and use of the possibilities that the Treaties already provide. One such possibility is the use of emergency clauses. An example is *Article 122* TFEU, which allows the Council and Commission to take temporary measures in response to crises on the basis of QMV (and without involvement of the EP).[78] The most recent example is the December 2025 decision to indefinitely freeze Russian assets.[79] employing emergency clauses has enabled the EU to act swiftly in times of crisis. Yet, its use has limitations, as it breaks with the principle of consensus, sidelines the EP, and could potentially be rejected by the Court of Justice of the EU.

There are also other ways to switch to QMV. Article 31(2) TEU allows the Council to act by qualified majority when adopting a decision defining a Union action based on a decision of the EUCO relating to the Union's strategic interests and objectives or based on a proposal from the HR/VP on request of the EUCO.[80] Article 31(3) TEU also allows for a so-called *passerelle clause* and stipulates that the EUCO may unanimously decide that the Council can take a decision by a qualified majority in cases other than those referred to in Article 31(2). However, as *passerelle clauses* require consensus in the EUCO, they constitute an unlikely route to move towards QMV on issues which lack structural consensus.

75 Olivier Costa et al., 2023, "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century", *Franco-German Expert group on EU Reforms*, p. 20.

76 Europese Commissie, 2021, "MEDEDELING VAN DE COMMISSIE AAN DE EUROPESE RAAD, HET EUROPEES PARLEMENT EN DE RAAD. 2018. Een krachtiger rol op het wereldtoneel: efficiëntere besluitvorming voor het gemeenschappelijk buitenlands en veiligheidsbeleid van de EU".

77 The group is chaired by Germany and initially included Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain. It was later joined by Denmark, Romania and Sweden, with Ireland and Slovakia acting as observers.

78 Saskia Hollander and Karen van Loon, 2026, "Managing Crises, Sharing Power: The EU's Inter-Institutional Cooperation in Action", *Clingendael Institute.*

79 Other recent examples are the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis.

80 This excludes decisions with military and defence implications.

Indeed, on issues considered of high importance and national sovereignty, the Council lacks the political will to lift the unanimity requirement. Moreover, the use of QMV in the field of the CFSP is no guarantee for more effective decision-making, as it could lead to countries simply not obliging, sabotaging the measures, or using a veto on other dossiers as a means of blackmail.[81] For that reason, the *Franco-German Expert Group* calls for a broad 'sovereignty safety net', modelled after the safety measures already included in the Treaties.[82] These include the so-called 'emergency brake' in Article 31(2) TEU. This measure stipulates that if a certain Member State does not agree with a proposal, it can use this brake for reasons of national interest. In that case, the vote will not take place, and the HR/VP is tasked to find a solution. If this is unsuccessful, the Member State can refer the proposal to the EUCO, which is then required to reach consensus.[83]

Another safety measure could be to introduce a so-called super-qualified majority, which is posing a greater threshold than a normal qualified majority. Instead of 55% of the Member States, 72% might then be required, which currently adds up to 20 countries instead of 15.[84] Another measure would be to allow Member States to opt-out, as discussed in the previous section. These measures would however require treaty reform.

Given the unlikeliness that such a reform will take place in the short-term, it is recommendable to look at other options to prevent vetoes. One option is to make greater use of so-called constructive abstention. Article 31(1) TEU already provides for the possibility for Member States to abstain from voting if they disagree with a proposal in the CFSP field, allowing the decision to be adopted despite their objections. Accordingly, if a Member State abstains, it is not obliged to implement the decision but shall accept that the decision commits the Union as such. An example of the use of Article 31(1) TEU is the 2022 Council decision to establish an EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM), from which Hungary constructively abstained. The EUCO and Council could

81 Valentin Kreilinger, 2025, "Article 122 TFEU: The legal workaround to freeze Russian assets and possible repercussions", *Swedish Institute for European policy Studies*.

82 Olivier Costa et al., 2023, "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century", *The Group of Twelve*, p. 22.

83 Such an emergency brake also applies to other policy areas where decisions are made by QMV, such as in the field of judicial cooperation and common rules for criminal offences.

84 General Secretariat of the Council, *2025*, "Qualified majority - Consilium".

also be more creative in preventing blockades on other areas than the CFSP (for example, EUCO decisions on enlargement) by allowing Member States to abstain from voting.[85] Viktor Orban's walkout from the room at the time Member States were to vote on opening the accession negotiations with Ukraine in December 2023 is an example.[86] The question, of course, is how often this can be done without losing credibility in the EU and at home.

Moreover, it may also help to require countries to explain their vetoes, which requires an extra hurdle. What is more, vetoes can also be prevented when EU leaders become more transactional and be more willing to link certain issues in package deals (hence, to give countries certain things on other issues in order to avoid a veto on a particular issue). A final option to prevent vetoes, which would however require a treaty reform, is to introduce a 'collective veto' instead of an individual veto. This might require, for example, three Member States representing a certain population percentage.

In general, vetoes are and can be prevented through enhancing the political preparation of decision-making on the CFSP and CSDP in the Council's technical working groups and preparatory bodies (including the PSC). In earlier reports, the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) has advised the establishment of a European Security Council that can prepare high-level decision-making in the Council on defence and military affairs.[87] Such a Security Council would consist of a group of Member States including a flexible circle with non-EU European countries such as the United Kingdom (UK). This could help streamline decisions and create an effective united European front that goes beyond the EU. Yet, as this would add another player to an already fragmented landscape, effective cooperation and coordination would be essential, including vis-a-vis NATO. The idea of a European Security Council could therefore be further explored.

85 Belén Becerril Atienza et al., 2024, "How to Get Rid of Vetoes in EU Foreign and Security Policy?" *European Foreign Affairs Review vol. 29, no. 3*, pp. 227–230.

86 Wouter Zweers, 2024, "Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement | Clingendael", *Clingendael Institute.*

87 Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2025, "Daadkracht: EU-hervormingen van GBVB, begroting en rechtsstaat | Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken"; Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2020, "Europese veiligheid: tijd voor nieuwe stappen | Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken".

5.6 Stronger democratic scrutiny by the EP

With the Commission's increased involvement in foreign and security policy, democratic scrutiny by the EP could also be strengthened. Currently, the EP's role in foreign and defence policy is limited, as the CFSP operates merely intergovernmental. Nevertheless, the EP regularly expresses its views on foreign and security issues through its resolutions and through its CFSP and CSDP reports. One role of the EP is to ensure that the Union's foreign policy and external action is consistent with EU values and interests, rather than merely national ones.

Yet there are clear limits to the Parliament's democratic oversight of the EU's foreign and security policy. Of course, politicians in the EUCO and Council are accountable to their national parliaments. But the extent to which varies – as well as the extent to which national parliaments are actively involved in EU foreign policy (or EU policy in general). This creates the famous *democratic deficit* where losses of democratic scrutiny by national parliaments are not fully compensated by democratic scrutiny by the EP.

The blurring lines between traditional CFSP and CSDP and other geopolitical matters also require a revaluation of democratic oversight. The securitisation of a growing number of policy areas within the Commission's portfolio means that national parliaments lose their ability to fully scrutinise policies that are (also) affecting national security. At the same time, involvement of the EP in these areas is not guaranteed. For example, because of the use of emergency clause *Article 122*. Member States – and their national parliaments – thereby lose their veto power, but at the same time, the EP has no role in those decisions.
While the use of *Article 122* has led to breakthroughs in times of crisis, it is advisable to avoid its use as much as possible or to hand the EP an advisory role in such decisions.[88]

The current geopolitical context requires far-reaching measures that should have a clear democratic mandate. Without full-blown treaty change that would create a supranational CFSP and CSDP, other ways would have to be found to empower the EP. The EP itself has already taken initiatives in this regard. In

88 Saskia Hollander and Karen van Loon, 2026, "Managing Crises, Sharing Power: The EU's Inter-Institutional Cooperation in Action", *Clingendael Institute*.

its annual CFSP and CSDP reports, the EP consistently calls for enhancing its scrutiny *and* budgetary role over the two domains.[89] It has for example demanded more exchange of information by the HR/VP and called on the latter to consult with Parliament before presenting CFSP or CSDP proposals.[90] In addition, the EP would like to make sure that all administrative and operational CFSP and CSDP expenditures covered by the EU budget (with the exception of expenditures of operations with military or defence implications) in order to enhance its budgetary oversight.[91]

Moreover, the EP has already become increasingly active on issues that lie at the intersection of the CFSP and other policies with geopolitical implications. An example is the establishment of a Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield, involved in strengthening the EU's capacity to detect, deter and counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and other hybrid threats and attacks. This gives the EP greater influence on the broader geopolitical policy arena.

89 European Parliament, 2025, "REPORT on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – 2024 annual report | A10-0010/2025 | European Parliament"; European Parliament, 2025, "REPORT on the implementation of the common security and defence policy – annual report 2025, Committee on Security and Defence".

90 European Parliament, 2025, "REPORT on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – 2024 annual report | A10-0010/2025 | European Parliament".

91 Ibid.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

In times of crisis, breakthroughs often occur that were previously thought impossible – even in the complexly governed EU. Yet the EU still struggles to transform from an economic and (self-proclaimed) normative power into a meaningful geopolitical force. What can be done in the short term to enhance the EU's geopolitical clout? What could be changed in the EU's institutional architecture without major treaty reforms involving significant transfers of sovereignty (as these would take too much time or even be unrealistic in the current political reality)? And which less far-reaching interventions in daily institutional relations would ensure that decision-making in the EU evolves with the new geopolitical reality? This report has addressed these questions on the basis of a rich literature available on the subject, analysis of key policy documents, and a series of interviews with key policy makers working in the EU institutions and Member State diplomats.

To address our research questions, this report first examined the governance architecture of EU foreign policy and its impact on policy effectiveness and coherence (Chapter 2). For indeed, the EU's limited geopolitical clout stems to a large extent from its complex multi-layered division of competences. The CFSP and CSDP are governed merely intergovernmentally and decisions are made on the basis of consensus among Member States. At the same time, policies in the areas of trade, competitiveness, digital security, and climate policy are supranational, while these policies increasingly affect foreign and security policy. This blurs the competences of the many actors that determine the EU's geopolitical actions. As argued in Chapter 3, the fragmented division of competences is problematic in an evolving geopolitical context in which the Union's economic and security interests, as well as its values, are repeatedly put to the test. In a world order that is no longer determined by rules but by power, the EU will have to move along and become more geopolitical. This requires the EU to act decisively and united, but exactly that is difficult to achieve with 27 Member States and numerous institutions and actors involved.

When the pressure is high and the EU's core values and interests are challenged, such as with the Russian invasion of Ukraine or US trade tariffs, the EU proved to be able to stand relatively united. However, strategic steps to structurally enhance its geopolitical clout, for example by boosting its defence capabilities independent from the US, are still small and dependent on national (un)will. At the same time, our analysis clearly shows that the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP and CSDP is not the only issue undermining EU decisiveness and coherence. Under pressure, institutional dynamics have already begun to shift – with a greater role for the Commission and the EUCO making geopolitics their top priority. At the same time, this is straining the institutional balance and exposing structural problems in how the institutions collaborate (Chapter 4).

This also means that more needs to be done to make the EU's foreign policy truly effective and coherent. This involves not only institutional reforms, but also (and perhaps more importantly) measures that force institutions and actors to work together more effectively, identify responsibilities more clearly, and that offer more opportunities to act decisively without unanimity but with broad democratic mandate (Chapter 5). Based on an analysis of initiatives already taken to achieve this and numerous proposals for improvement, the concluding boxes 1-6 summarise the recommendations for a stronger and more coherent geopolitical role for the EU.

Box 1. A stronger but more cooperative Commission

Cooperation within the Commission:

- ✓ The current geopolitical context requires strong EU leadership. The Commission is best placed to serve the common EU interests and values because it can transcend individual national interests. It is therefore logical to assign that leadership role primarily to the Commission (and notably the President), on the condition that the Commission provides greater transparency in its workings and that it does justice to its role as guardian of the Treaties.
- ✓ To improve cooperation within the Commission and enhance its manageability, it is recommendable to continuing working in so-called Commissioners' and project groups. Yet, make the choices for clustering more transparent and prevent the President to define increasingly more topics as *Chefsache* to avoid overly centralisation.

- ✓ It is recommendable for the EUCO to decide on reducing the size of the Commission via rotation or through hierarchical differentiation of Commissioners in lead and regular Commissioners. The second option would require a treaty reform.

Cooperation between the Commission and the EEAS:

- ✓ In order to improve cooperation between the Commission and the EEAS it is recommendable that the EEAS (higher and lower working levels) and the EUSRs are better integrated in the Commission's project groups dealing with foreign policy and external action, as well as in EXCO.

Box 2. An EEAS with a clearer yet more facilitative role

- ✓ The mandate of the EEAS could be brought back to its core role of supporting the Member States and Commission. This is done through three interrelated roles: building coherence between the EU institutions and Member States, facilitating the HR/VP's power of initiative by formulating ideas and proposals (for example with regard to revise the EUs common strategies), and representing the Union abroad as its diplomatic service.
- ✓ To fulfil these requires the EEAS to have sufficient resources, a modernized HR-policy to attract equipped staff, the promotion of inter-institutional mobility and a common diplomatic training to all EEAS' staff.
- ✓ As long as the CFSP and CSDP remain intergovernmental, it makes sense for the EEAS to remain a separate institution. When supranationalised (which would require a treaty reform), it would be more logical for the EEAS to be integrated into the Commission.

Box 3. Stronger coordination between *Team Europe* and *Team National* partners

- ✓ For Global Gateway to be more than the sum of Member States' interest and priorities abroad, it is crucial to facilitate structural exchange between *Team Europe* and *Team National* partners. Linking both would do justice to the specific characteristics (and advantages) of national approaches.
- ✓ The HR/VP could play a coordinating role in mobilising and pooling resources from Commission, Member States and the EIB to achieve effective implementation of Global Gateway.

- ✓ It is important that the Commission is given the scope to strategically set EU priorities and objectives, and to negotiate on these in an increasingly transactional international setting.
- ✓ Member States, the EEAS, and the EP could be better positioned to ensure that the Commission does so without compromising EU values. Although adhering to these values is becoming increasingly difficult in the current geopolitical context, they still constitute the Union's comparative advantage. Enhanced democratic oversight can strengthen the EU's normative approach while reducing democratic deficits.

Box 4. Maximising the potential of a multi-speed Europe

- ✓ Actively support and facilitate a multi-speed Europe by so-called leading groups and voluntary initiatives on foreign, security and defence policy.
- ✓ The possibility of granting certain Member States an opt-out from the CFSP and CSDP could be kept open in case of future treaty reform (albeit with caution), because this can prevent vetoes, and because countries can be persuaded to agree to moving towards QMV.

Box 5. Accelerating decision-making in the EU by reducing the risk of vetoes

- ✓ Actively continue the discussion on extending QMV to the CFSP. Despite lacking political will, there is untapped potential in the Lisbon Treaty to make more use of QMV in certain areas of the CFSP.
- ✓ Avoid the use of emergency clauses as much as possible.
- ✓ Proposals to extent QMV could be accompanied by safety measures such as an emergency brake, using a super-qualified majority and allowing opt-outs.
- ✓ More can also be done to prevent vetoes, for example by making greater use of so-called constructive abstention, by requiring countries to explicitly explain their veto, by introducing collective vetoes, or by negotiating in a more transactional manner. In addition, more can be done to improve political preparation of decision-making in the Council's preparatory bodies and possibly in a yet to be established European Security Council.

Box 6. Stronger democratic control and accountability

- ✓ For effective and coherent decisions, it is important that the EP moves in step with the changing foreign policy field and institutional landscape. Giving the EP a larger role in EU foreign and security policy through consultation and budgetary oversight would add a new player in an already overcrowded institutional landscape but would improve the quality of decisions.