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A joined-up Union, a stronger Europe

A Joined-Up Union, a Stronger Europe. A Conceptual Framework to Investigate EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World

Riccardo Alcaro, Pol Bargués and Hylke Dijkstra

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Abstract

Fractious domestic debates, the fragmentation of regional politics and growing interstate competition all affect the capacity of the EU to forge a joined-up and sustainable foreign and security policy (EUFSP) in crises and conflicts. The problem is amplified by EUFSP governance structures, which have evolved irregularly, with a multiplicity of actors resorting to an increasingly diverse array of policy instruments when engaging with external players on multilateral, regional and bilateral levels. The potential for improved action depends on the capacity of EU institutions and member states to work within the multi-dimensional perimeter of the EUFSP governance system to create the conditions to mitigate the effects of intra-EU contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition.

* Riccardo Alcaro is JOINT Coordinator and Research Coordinator and Head of Global Actors programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Pol Bargués is a Research Fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB). Hylke Dijkstra is Associate Professor at Maastricht University.

Introduction

Challenges to the foreign and security policy of the European Union (EU) have been mounting in recent years. The emergence of nationalist forces within member states often espousing Eurosceptic views has complicated efforts to reach intra-EU consensus on international security matters.[1] The collapse or severe weakening of state authority in the EU's neighbourhood (and beyond) has created interconnected and ever more complex challenges extending into policy areas outside the traditional remit of diplomacy and military policy.[2] Perhaps most importantly, systemic shifts in the international order such as the oscillating global engagement of the United States and the growing assertiveness of Russia and China have hampered the ability of the EU and its member states to shape multilateral rules and have compelled them to rethink their role along new patterns of multipolar interactions.[3]

Fractious domestic debates, the fragmentation of regional politics and growing interstate competition all affect the capacity of the EU and its member states to reconcile security priorities and allocate the needed resources to pursue these. Both individually and in connection with one another, these three factors constitute the volatile domestic, regional and international context in which the EU and its member states currently operate. Intra-EU contestation and regional fragmentation have clear hindering effects on the effectiveness of EU foreign and security policy. Multipolar competition has certainly generated momentum for a stronger global role of the EU, as attested to by the Union's robust response against Russia's aggression in Ukraine, yet in most cases the Union has suffered from the effects of increasing great powers rivalry.

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[1]   Marianna Lovato, "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy: A Literature Review of the Implications of Intra-EU Contestation on Crises and Conflicts", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516.

[2]   Agnès Levallois, "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639.

[3]   Assem Dandashly et al., "Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy: Divergent Approaches to Conflict and Crisis Response", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 6 (December 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=697.

All this invokes the fundamental question of how EU foreign and security policy governance structures can be made more joined-up and sustainable in the face of these constraints. The problem is amplified by the peculiar nature of such governance structures, which have historically evolved irregularly, with a multiplicity of actors resorting to an increasingly diverse array of policy instruments when engaging with external players on multilateral, regional and bilateral levels.

Indeed, the term "EU foreign and security policy" (EUFSP) can no longer be limited to the formal output of institutionalised foreign policy–making processes, be they the Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policies (CFSP/CSDP) or other external actions carried out by EU institutions. The national foreign policies of member states are a constitutive part of EUFSP, at least insofar as they drive or complement EU efforts.[4] EUFSP actors make use of various policy tools spanning such different policy areas as diplomacy, security-related policies (including operations abroad) and policy sectors that do not traditionally fall into the remit of foreign and security policy (trade, migration, climate etc.).[5] This enlarged concept of EUFSP defines the broad framework (EU and extra-EU) within which the Union and its member states handle security matters and engage with external partners.[6]

EU foreign and security policy is thus inherently characterised by multi-dimensionality: it is multi-actor, because it involves EU institutions and member states as distinct drivers of action; multi-sector, because it spans across multiple policy areas; and multi-layered, as it unfolds through different partnerships with external players as well as through sustained actions, carried out by EU institutions and member states. Consequently, a more joined-up EUFSP involves synergies between the foreign policies of EU institutions and member states, integration of instruments across external and internal policy domains, as well as building

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[4] Pernille Rieker and Mathilde Tomine Eriksdatter Giske, "Conceptualising the Multi-Actor Character of EU(rope)'s Foreign Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 2 (October 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=538.

[5] Kristi Reik et al., "Not Yet Fit for the World: Piecemeal Buildup of EU Military, Cyber and Intelligence Assets", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 4 (November 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=648; Kristina Kausch, "Collateral Damage: How EU Internal Policies Shape Crises and Conflict Abroad", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 5 (December 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=689.

[6] Dylan Macchiarini Crosson et al., "Multi-Layered Actions? Sustaining Partnerships in the EU Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 7 (December 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=835.

mechanisms for coordination with external players over long-term periods of time. A more joined-up EUFSP is also the condition for a sustainable EUFSP, which indicates the relative continuity of policy positions combined with an inbuilt capacity for adjusting objectives and instruments to changing circumstances.

An area in which the potential for a joined-up and sustainable EUFSP can be meaningfully investigated is the involvement of the EU and its member states in crisis and conflict resolution, prevention and mediation. Contemporary crises and conflicts are difficult to handle due to their diffusion, protractedness and variety of dimensions and effects. They are the loci in which the interplay between the constraining factors to a more joined-up EUFSP – intra-EU divisions, fragmentation of regional politics and interstate competition – are manifest to the greatest extent, and thus where the problematic context of EUFSP can be analysed in greatest detail. Besides, crises and conflicts have compelled EU strategists and policymakers to revisit the functioning of EUFSP as a complex exercise involving greater coordination between actors (EU institutions and member states), of policies (security and non-security, external and internal) and with external players (multilateral organisations, great powers, regional and local actors).

It follows from the above that an attempt to investigate the EU's and member states' action in international crises and conflicts should start with an understanding of the limits imposed on them by any one of the three contextual factors, or by the interplay between two of them or even all three. The potential for improved action depends on the capacity of EU institutions and member states to work within the multi-dimensional perimeter of the EUFSP governance system to create the conditions to mitigate the effects of the constraining factors.

1. Contestation, fragmentation and competition: The constraints on EU foreign and security policy

The context in which the EU and its member states operate has become increasingly complex and volatile due to the three processes of internal contestation, especially from nationalist parties often espousing Eurosceptic views; regional fragmentation, notably in areas across the EU's external borders; and increased interstate competition between regional and global powers or "poles". These

factors make it harder for the EU to give direction, content and sustainability to its foreign and security policy, and especially to provide a coherent response to conflicts and crises.[7] An operationalisation of these concepts will help clarify how they affect EUFSP in greater detail.

1.1 Internal contestation

The literature has pointed at the "de-Europeanisation" of EU foreign and security policy, a consequence of populism and more generally processes of politicisation of EU-related issues and the EU itself.[8] These trends can be collected under the label of intra-EU contestation, which encompasses challenges by actors within the EU to either fundamental norms or long-standing positions and established practices of EUFSP (or a combination of these elements).

Two important variables qualify the nature of intra-EU contestation. The first is the status of the contesting actors. These may be *governmental actors*, who formally define, construct and defend the national interests, or *non-governmental actors*, such as populist political parties, interest groups, opinion-shapers and media players, who advocate opposition to EU norms or long-standing positions and established practices. The distinction is of the utmost importance. Non-governmental actors may exert political influence by mustering public support for criticism of EU policies or for a negative discursive construction the EU itself, but do not have the legal means to obstruct government action. Only governmental actors have a seat at the EUFSP table. Governmental contestation is thus direct and its impact much more severe.

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[7] Marianna Lovato, "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.; Agnès Levallois, "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.; Assem Dandashly et al., "Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

[8] This section builds on the literature review by Marianna Lovato, "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit. See also three recent special issues: Patrick Müller, Karolina Pomorska and Ben Tonra, "The Domestic Challenge to EU Foreign Policy-Making: From Europeanisation to de-Europeanisation?", in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (2021), p. 519-534, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1927015; Sandra Destradi, David Cadier and Johannes Plagemann, "Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda", in *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (December 2021), p. 663-682, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4; Franziska Petri, Elodie Thevenin and Lina Liedlbauer, "Contestation of European Union Foreign Policy: Causes, Modes and Effects", in *Global Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 4-5 (2021), p. 323-328, https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2020.1863159.

The second variable is the content of the contestation. Domestic players may challenge a specific foreign and security *policy* of the EU, but they can also contest the EU (and its foreign and security policy) as a *polity*. Contestation of specific policy issues may equally come from pro-EU as well as nationalist forces. While, on balance, such contrasting positions tend to be firmly entrenched in national administrations, pro-EU forces are open to work around them and engage in practices mitigating the impact of their opposition, such as negotiation, compartmentalisation or issue-linkages. For instance, five EU member states have consistently resisted the prevailing view in the EU that Kosovo's independence should be given formal recognition, for fear of setting a precedent that domestic separatist forces in their own country may seize upon. Yet they have been supportive of an EU policy of political-economic integration of Kosovo. When actors do not want to engage at all with EUFSP, however, it is more difficult to handle contestation through such mitigating strategies. Eurosceptic forces have an incentive to frame disagreements with the EU as evidence of a larger irreconcilability of national sovereignty with EU membership, whereby intransigence is seen as more politically rewarding than compromise. The policy/polity distinction is therefore critical to understanding the severity of intra-EU contestation.

1.2 Regional fragmentation

The crises that the EU engages in, especially in its wider neighbourhood, have become more complex due to fragmentation, which can be defined as the process by which state authority (the state holding the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence and the ability to set and enforce rules) and regional rules of engagement erode or collapse altogether.[9] Fragmentation makes it much harder for EU member states to generate joint conflict analysis and therefore a shared understanding of what their stakes are. In addition, fragmentation generates a need for the EU and its member states to engage with various counterparts,

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[9]   This section builds on the literature review by Agnès Levallois, "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.; see also Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Lee J.M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars", in *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 2012), p. 265-283; Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, *Effective Governance Under Anarchy. Institutions, Legitimacy, and Social Trust in Areas of Limited Statehood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021; Pol Bargués et al., "Resilience and the EU's External Action Instruments: Towards Multiple, Sustained, and Indirect Actions", in *EU-LISTCO Working Papers*, No. 7 (November 2020), https://www.eu-listco.net/publications/resilience-and-the-eus- external-action-instruments.

including nonstate actors with which they may not have traditional diplomatic relations. Unsurprisingly, coordination, mediation and diplomacy between different stakeholders have become increasingly central to the EU's "Integrated Approach" to crises and conflicts. Finally, fragmentation implies that policy responses themselves should be multi-faceted (that is, spanning different policy areas) and coordinated, which in turn creates a problem of coordination (including between the EU and the member states) as well as resource allocation and distribution.

There are – again – two important variables that are critical to dissecting fragmentation's effect on EUFSP. First is the *level* on which fragmentation takes place. Fragmentation at the *regional level*, as is the case most notably in North Africa and the Middle East, involves the absence of viable international governance mechanisms to manage interstate rivalries and intra-regional challenges, which weave an intricated web of regional shifting alliances. In addition, fragmentation of one region may affect neighbouring areas to such an extent that domino effects may ensue, with the mosaic of fragmentation extending across regions and not just within them. This creates immense problems of consistency and impact for EU crisis/conflict management efforts, as the Union and its member states cannot rely on formal or even established practices of regional consultation and coordination. Fragmentation at the *state level*, such as in the case of Libya or Somalia, raises questions about who the legitimate governmental counterparts are that the EU needs to deal with. Even when there is a centrally recognised governmental authority, it is hard for the EU to bring the basics in order, such as establishing diplomatic missions and negotiating status of mission/forces agreements, let alone shape events on the ground. Fragmentation at the *subnational level* presents the EU with different challenges, including its ability to interact with both national governments and (potentially rebellious) subnational actors, or the extent to which it has resources to reach out and engage with subnational forces.

The second variable is the conflict status of fragmented regions, that is, whether there are peace or ceasefire agreements in place or hostility between warring actors still goes on. If a *peace or ceasefire agreement* is in place or there is some degree of understanding between warring parties, EU member states have greater chances to reach internal consensus on policy goals and therefore the tools of EU foreign and security policy can be more easily deployed, including conflict prevention and peacebuilding measures such as diplomacy and mediation, project and

development assistance, capacity-building and training, monitoring and other elements of the Integrated Approach. If there is no "peace to keep" because of an *ongoing conflict*, engagement becomes much more challenging, as planning and enforcement are constantly hampered by the complexity challenges mentioned above.

1.3 Multipolar competition

Multipolar competition occurs when multiple major and/or regional powers approach crises and conflicts with divergent views of what an acceptable end state looks like.[10] Crisis/conflict mediation and management efforts become embroiled in larger rivalries, whereby crises or conflicts are no longer construed as transnational problems for which the international community or regional organisations bear management responsibilities, but as tactical theatres of systemic strategic contests. Multipolar competition makes it much harder for the EU and its member states to coordinate with external players and compels them to factor in their overall relationship with individual external players when addressing conflicts and crises.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the EU and its members often (but not always, the 2003 Iraq war being the greatest exception) implemented crisis and conflict management policies in relative harmony with like-minded actors, such as the United States, the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the African Union (AU) and even non-governmental organisations. These days, the Union oftentimes encounters competitors on the ground, and even coordinating with traditional partners has become more difficult.[11] The United States has remained the main foreign policy partner of the Europeans, but the wide oscillations in its foreign policy orientation have made transatlantic cooperation more irregular and at times even almost impossible – a major instance of this was the EU's difficulty

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[10]   This section builds on the literature review by Assem Dandashly et al., "Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit. See also Riccardo Alcaro (ed.), *The Liberal Order and Its Contestations Great Powers and Regions Transiting in a Multipolar Era*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018; Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter (eds), *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99106-1.

[11]   Petar Petrov et al., "All Hands on Deck: Levels of Dependence between the EU and Other International Organizations in Peacebuilding", in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 41, No. 8 (2019), p. 1027-1043, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1622542.

in supporting the 2015 Iran nuclear deal after the Trump Administration abruptly and unilaterally ceased US compliance with it in May 2018. Global powers, such as China and especially Russia, but also regional powers including Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others have all become more assertive. Besides, multilateral institutions have lost much of their capacity of initiative, as interstate competition results in the paralysis of their decision-making systems, which erodes not just their authority but their legitimacy too.

Two variables determine the manner in which multipolar competition affects EUFSP. First is the *scope of multipolar competition* in particular crises or conflicts. Global and regional powers can engage in a crisis or conflict area through a broad range of policy instruments, but their engagement can also have more limited scope. The EU generally seeks to provide a broad scope to peace and security efforts. These include a variety of instruments from its Integrated Approach in the pursuit of larger "milieu" objectives, namely a broad transformation of the whole relationship of the EU with the country or countries undergoing a crisis or conflict (as explained in the next section). Similarly, China engages with countries in conflict-affected regions through political and economic relations. Other powers take a narrower focus, however. This is the case, for instance, for Russia's intervention in Libya or the Sahel, or Turkey's sales of drones to conflict parties (Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Ethiopia). The Chinese approach to certain conflict countries is more systemic and provides much more of an alternative to EU foreign and security policy than those countries that engage with others more narrowly. But the latter, while limited, may nonetheless have the potential to scupper the EU's broader approach. Russia's support for Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro, for instance, has worked as a powerful disincentive for the latter to engage in the national reconciliation process advocated by the Europeans.

The second variable is the *positioning of rival powers* in crises and conflict relative to EU foreign and security policy. The global/regional powers may actively undermine the policies of the EU through a zero-sum game or may simply pursue alternative approaches which diverge in some respects but may be complementary in others. For instance, the crisis over Ukraine, which started in 2014 and has escalated into open war in 2022, rests on a fundamentally irreconcilable strategic construction of the former Soviet space as either an area of special interest to Russia (on the part of Russia itself) or as a collection of sovereign states free to seek their own

foreign policy alliances (from the perspective of the EU and the United States).[12] This differs notably from, to cite another example, Chinese investment in African countries, which indirectly reduces the EU's leverage with local governments, but which may bring economic benefits. The same applies to the Iran nuclear issue, in which all powers – the United States, Europe, Russia and China – have an interest in cooperating even though they have a different appreciation of their broader relationship with Iran (more cooperative Russia and China, more competitive the Europeans and Americans).

Table 1 | The constraints on EUFSP: Definition and operationalisation

Constraint	Definition	Operationalisation
Intra-EU contestation	Challenges by domestic actors to norms and/or long-standing positions and established practices of EU foreign and security policy	(i) Governmental or non-governmental actors (ii) Policy or polity contestation
Regional fragmentation	Erosion or collapse of state authority and rules of engagement within regions, states and communities	(i) Regional, state or sub-state level of fragmentation (ii) Peace agreement/ceasefire or ongoing hostility
Multipolar competition	The involvement of multiple major and/or regional powers in conflicts with divergent approaches to peace and security	(i) Narrow or wide scope of multipolar competition (ii) Zero-sum multipolar politics or compatible approaches

1.4 Interlinkages between the constraining factors

The contextual constraints vary from one crisis to the other and may also vary across time. At one particular moment, intra-EU contestation may be low, regional fragmentation medium and multipolar competition high, while at another point in time the balance may change. There are also interlinkages between the three

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[12] Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Post-Cold War Order Is No More", in *JOINT Briefs*, No. 12 (February 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=927.

variables and in the worst case they may all go hand in hand. For instance, in the case of Ukraine, there is clear multipolar competition between the West and Russia, but Moscow also actively aims to destroy state authority in Ukraine while also trying to exacerbate intra-EU contestation and create internal divisions. It is therefore important to outline how the three contextual constraints are linked. There are four potential combinations (see Table 2).

The combination of *intra-EU contestation* and *regional fragmentation* occurs when individual member governments have domestic incentives to block or hamper EU action over areas at risk of conflict. An example of this might be a situation in which a member government believes it has a domestic advantage in blocking or hampering the EU enlargement process, which in turn complicates EU efforts to address fragmentation dynamics in a region such as the Western Balkans, where the prospect for EU membership is arguably critical to regional stability. Domestic incentives to resist common EU action may also have a normative grounding. For instance, refusal to recognise unilateral declarations of independence (as has been the case with Kosovo) or opposition figures as legitimate leaders of third countries (as in the Venezuela case) descends from different constructions by member governments of the norm of national self-determination. In either case, domestic-rooted intra-EU disagreements hamper the development of fully cohesive EU policy and thus contribute to regional fragmentation (if only by way of inaction).

The contestation-fragmentation dynamic also works the other way round. Regional fragmentation fuels intra-EU divisions, as member governments do not share a common understanding of the causes of fragmentation and set conflicting priorities for their action in the fragmented areas. This has been most obviously the case in Libya, where divisions between Italy and France long hampered a more cohesive EU policy. Regional fragmentation also generates challenges – most notably increased migration flows – that become so domestically salient that some EU governments find it advantageous to prioritise them even if that undermines efforts to manage conflicts or crises (again Libya and possibly Syria come to mind).

Intra-EU contestation is also linked to *multipolar competition*. Member governments may have domestic incentives to contest EU foreign and security policy in order to gain advantage with extra-EU countries. Most EU member states, for instance, have long avoided large investment in security and defence

integration out of concern that this may alienate the United States, their main security provider. In other cases, vested interests may be at play, as for instance when EU member states doing business with Russia or China block or dilute EU common positions critical or punitive of either country. Besides, it is worth emphasising that internal contestation of EU foreign and security policy is never entirely internal. Other great powers meddle with the domestic politics of EU member states, including through persuasion, influence campaigns, societal connections, offer of benefits, as well as more troubling tactics like disinformation, election meddling and financial support for Eurosceptic parties. Divide-and-rule tactics and the active undermining of EU foreign and security policy are long-standing strategies employed by external players who see a more cohesive EU as problematic. The United States has often made use of its special security and military relationships with individual EU member states to steer EU policy towards greater alignment with it. In recent years Russia and China have often been said to cultivate "Trojan horses", that is, friendly EU countries that can act from within the Union to defend the great power's interests.[13]

The next interplay is the one between *regional fragmentation* and *multipolar competition*. The erosion or collapse of state authority presents an invitation to global and regional powers to step into the security vacuum, thereby multiplying the theatres of multipolar contest and resulting in more entrenched interstate rivalries. The Middle East is a main case in point, as following the US-led invasion of Iraq and the general turmoil after the Arab Spring the region has become a competitive arena for all sorts of powers.[14] The logic also works the other way around. Global and regional powers actively encourage and provide tangible support to breakaway regions, factions, and rebel and terrorist groups with the aim of increasing fragmentation and undermining state authority and governments, as well as to gain advantage over rivals. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ostensibly carried out in defence of the self-styled separatist republics of the Donbas, is a main example. In whatever direction the logic works, the result is equally challenging for the EU and its member states, which face not just problems of complexity but

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[13] Mitchell A. Orenstein and R. Daniel Kelemen, "Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (2017), p. 87-102.

[14] Kristina Kausch, "Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (September 2015), p. 1-15.

also foreign actors that may have an interest in undermining Europe's goals in the crisis/conflict areas.

The most significant challenge, of course, is the *combination of all three constraints*. When multiple global and regional powers compete in a conflict, undermine state authority and also try to divide the EU and its members, the difficulties for the EU and its member states to provide coherent and effective policies grow considerably. A tragic example of this is the conflict in Syria. The EU and its member states have never managed to determine the order of their priorities there, be they opposition to the Assad regime or the fight against the Islamic State, eventually suffering a strategic setback from Assad's main ally Russia while also being exposed to mass migration flows.

The three contextual constraints on EU foreign and security policy have become considerably more important over the last decade due to a number of factors, including a "constraining dissensus" within the EU, a much more complex conflict landscape following the Arab Spring, Russia's growing propensity to back its foreign policy posture in Eastern Europe with military force, the growing rivalry between the United States and China, as well as the assertiveness of regional powers such as Turkey, Iran or the Gulf Arab states.[15] By operationalising these constraints on EU foreign and security policy and reviewing how they are potentially linked, it also becomes clear that they can vary considerably across conflicts. Rarely are all the constraints present with the same degree of severity in conflicts that the EU engages with. However, the constraining factors tend to mutually reinforce one another and are therefore always present in some combination. Determining the extent to which each constraint or a combination of them limits EU foreign and security policy is the first step to ascertain what potential for improvement there is. The second step is to make sure that any prescriptive analysis reflects the complex governance system of EUFSP.

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[15] Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus", in *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2009), p. 1-23; Tanja A. Börzel, Assem Dandashly and Thomas Risse, "Responses to the 'Arabellions': The EU in Comparative Perspective", in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015), p. 1-17, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2014.975986.

Table 2 | The interlinkages between the constraints on EUFSP

Combinations	Logics of interlinkages
Intra-EU contestation and regional fragmentation	Individual member governments have domestic incentives to block/hamper EU action, whereby problems of regional fragmentation are either unaddressed or exacerbated Alternatively, regional fragmentation is subjected to politicisation within the EU, thereby fuelling domestic and intra-EU divisions and resulting in EU inaction
Intra-EU contestation and multipolar competition	Individual member governments have domestic incentives to side with external powers at the expense of EU unity Alternatively, global/regional powers undermine common EU positions through receptive member states
Regional fragmentation and multipolar competition	Regional fragmentation creates a security vacuum that draws in global/regional powers, often backing different conflict parties Alternatively, competing powers promote or contribute to fragmentation in order to gain advantage over rivals
Intra-EU contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition	Individual EU governments have domestic incentives to block/hamper EU action, whereby problems of fragmentation are either unaddressed or exacerbated. External powers may offer such incentives to individual member states in order to weaken the EU's hand Alternatively, regional fragmentation may be subjected to intra-EU politicisation, thus resulting in EU inaction. External powers fill the vacuum, which further reduces EU room for manoeuvre Finally, multipolar competition contributes to fragmentation which in turn contributes to intra-EU contestation (or the other way round)

2. Multi-actor, multi-sector, multi-layered: The EU foreign and security policy system

EU foreign and security policy has become a complex governance system characterised by multi-dimensionality: "multi-actor", "multi-sector" and "multi-layered". Multi-actorness means that EU institutions and member states make EUFSP in a non-linear process of differentiated integration or cooperation, where EU institutions increasingly play a role but member states complement EU structures and at (critical) times act on their behalf or in parallel to them. Multi-sectorness implies that instruments from different policy sectors are deployed to address conflicts and crises, including areas traditionally understood to have an internal nature such as agriculture, justice and home affairs, monetary, competition or culture. Finally, multi-layeredness qualifies the various levels on which EUFSP unfolds: through different partnerships with external players as well as through sustained actions, carried out by EU institutions and member states. This governance system seeks to adapt to problems of internal contestation, as well as to a world affected by multipolar competition and regional fragmentation, but its inherent complexity creates problems in terms of prioritisation, planning, coordination and implementation.

2.1 Multiple actors

Multi-actorness has always been a distinctive feature of EUFSP.[16] Since the early 1990s, when EU foreign policy began to make its first steps to adapt to the post–Cold War security landscape, member states have engaged in both coordinated EU action and ad hoc formats alongside EU institutions.[17] EUFSP has unfolded along these two tracks, with the centre of gravity oscillating according to the crisis and conflict and the specific policy area of action. The Contact Group for the Balkans that coordinated conflict management and post-conflict stabilisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, with participation of Germany, France, Italy

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[16] This section is based on Pernille Rieker and Mathilde Tomine Eriksdatter Giske, "Conceptualising the Multi-Actor Character of EU(rope)'s Foreign Policy", cit.

[17] The Commission, the Council and European Parliament are the main EU institutions shaping EUFSP, although when it comes to security and conflict management, the Council is the most prominent. For a seminal study on the emergence of EUFSP, see Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, *Multi-level Governance and European Integration*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.

and the United Kingdom (alongside the United States and, for a while, Russia); the Franco-German Normandy duo that brokered a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine in 2014–15; and the E3/EU group, involving France, Germany and the United Kingdom plus the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which has addressed Iran's nuclear issue, are all examples of member state initiatives taken alongside EU structures and frameworks.[18]

While the literature has long acknowledged the "multi-actor" nature of EU foreign and security policy, mainstream International Relations theories (such as realism, neo-functionalism or liberal intergovernmentalism) struggle to capture how the complex interaction between member states and EU institutions produces EUFSP.[19] Some scholars have used the lens of "differentiated integration" to account for EUFSP as a non-linear process whereby member states cooperate with EU entities in flexible and non-homogenous ways both inside and outside EU legal frameworks.[20] These accounts frame EUFSP in a broad way, encompassing multiple processes of cooperation by member states and EU institutions, as well as external players.

Clearly, not every action by the foreign ministry of an EU member state can be considered as EUFSP. National actions constitute EUFSP insofar as member states act alongside EU institutions with regard to an issue that is relevant to European security and in keeping with pre-existing goals, positions or established discourse set or developed at the EU level. This broader understanding of EUFSP encompasses processes where member states complement the EU or compensate for the shortcomings of unanimity-based decision-making by acting on behalf of or in parallel to EU institutions. Thus, these processes bolster the EU's profile as a

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[18]   Riccardo Alcaro and Marco Siddi, "Differentiation in EU Foreign and Security Policy: EU Lead Groups in the Iranian Nuclear Dispute and the Ukraine Crisis", in *EU IDEA Policy Papers*, No. 11 (December 2020), https://euidea.eu/?p=1432. See also Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran Nuclear Crisis. Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, especially chapter 2; and Christoph Schwegmann, *Die Jugoslawien-Kontaktgruppe in den internationalen Beziehungen*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2003.

[19]   Pernille Rieker and Mathilde Tomine Eriksdatter Giske, "Conceptualising the Multi-Actor Character of EU(rope)'s Foreign Policy", cit.

[20]   Jolyon Howorth, "Differentiation in Security and Defence Policy", in *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (April 2019), p. 261-277; Pernille Rieker, "Differentiated Integration and Europe's Global Role: A Conceptual Framework", in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 26, Special Issue (August 2021), p. 1-14.

player in security crises, as has been the case with the E3/EU group's involvement in the Iran nuclear issue.[21] Not all initiatives carried out by groups of member states are extra-treaty, especially when it comes to creating a more permanent capacity for EU foreign and security action rather than acting upon an EU-set position (as contact groups do). In a notable example, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) has been formally established as a differentiated integration instrument where 25 member states (all except Denmark and Malta) would develop synergies in a number of military projects.[22]

Thus, when examining EUFSP it is important to understand it as a dynamic interaction between different actors that may play different roles – leading/ supporting, complementary, synergic. There are several role types that actors may take.[23] Member states may act as leaders, which drive EUFSP action forward; followers, which are generally passively supportive of EUFSP action; laggards, which slow down EUFSP action; and disruptors, which oppose EUFSP action. These roles are heuristic categories that simplify complex interactions between members states and EU institutions. Member states cannot be permanently identified with any of the above. Member states are not uniformly affected by the way they construct national interests, frame geostrategic considerations, perceive domestic advantages, define norms or are enmeshed in path dependency processes, and can therefore perform as leaders or followers, laggards or disruptors depending on the crisis at hand.

2.2 Sectorial policy tools

Besides political and military tools deployed in conflict-affected areas, including military and civilian missions under the CSDP, there is a set of other instruments that have become relevant to EU conflict and crisis management.[24] The need to

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[21] Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal: Less than a Success, More Than a Failure", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2021), p. 55-72, https://doi.org/10.1080/03 932729.2021.1876861.

[22] Sven Biscop, "European Defence and PESCO: Don't Waste the Chance", in *EU IDEA Policy Papers*, No. 1 (May 2020), https://euidea.eu/?p=1018.

[23] See Pernille Rieker and Mathilde Tomine Eriksdatter Giske, "Conceptualising the Multi-Actor Character of EU(rope)'s Foreign Policy", cit.

[24] This section is based on Kristi Reik et al., "Not Yet Fit for the World", cit., and Kristina Kausch, "Collateral Damage", cit. See also Pol Bargués et al., "Resilience and the EU'S External Action

use "a mixture of instruments" was in fact acknowledged by the European Security Strategy in 2003[25] and then re-emphasised in 2013 with the adoption of the so-called "Comprehensive Approach" to crises and conflicts. Since the 2016 Global Strategy, an extensive, deep and integrated multi-sector foreign and security policy has become part and parcel of the EU crisis and conflict management discourse.[26]

The EUFSP expansion beyond the diplomatic-military remit responds to both an internal functionalist logic of integration, whereby common action in one policy area generates a demand for action in another, and an external need to address increasingly complex crises. In an international environment increasingly shaped by multipolar competition and in which regional fragmentation abounds, conflicts and crises have become fundamentally diffused, at once internal and external to the EU. They bring about unpredictable risks and challenges such as economic crises, disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks or the flows of migrants, amongst others.[27]

On the diplomatic-military level, the EU and its member states have been involved in a number of diplomatic endeavours to address crises and conflicts, ranging from the now defunct Quartet on the (equally defunct) Middle East peace process to the negotiations over Iran's nuclear issue, from peace support in Colombia to the (now failed) Normandy framework over Ukraine. In the framework of the EU, they have also deployed military and civilian missions abroad under the CSDP, which have become an important part of the EU's response to conflicts in the neighbourhood and beyond. Since 2003 over 30 civilian and military missions have been deployed in – amongst others – the Western Balkans, Georgia, Ukraine, Libya, the Sahel (Mali and the Central African Republic), Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia. Currently there are 11 active civilian missions and six military operations. The former are involved in activities such as conflict prevention,

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Instruments", cit.

[25]   Council of the European Union, *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003, p. 9, https://europa.eu/!JrpXqH.

[26]   European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, p. 28, https://europa.eu/!Tr66qx.

[27]   Kristi Reik et al., "Not Yet Fit for the World", cit. See also Roger Mac Ginty, "Conflict Disruption: Reassessing the Peaceandconflict System", in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2022), p. 40-58, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1889167.

prevention of violent extremism, strengthening the rule of law, policing, border management, and confidence- and capacity-building.[28] The latter pursue politico-military objectives such as stabilisation, disrupting illegal trafficking or piracy, or supporting, advising and training local security forces.[29] In an attempt to build greater strategic autonomy in military affairs, the EU has recently developed tools for the planning and conduct of military operations (like the EU battle groups) and tools to enhance the development of common military capabilities, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the already mentioned PESCO.[30]

In dealing with crises or conflicts, the EU has increasingly resorted to instruments such as trade, border management and development aid, often linking them (or trying to link them) to broader diplomatic and crisis management efforts. Furthermore, in recent years the EU has paid much attention to cybersecurity and intelligence capabilities as indispensable elements of the management toolkit to address the increasingly digitalised nature of contemporary conflicts. For example, the EU Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade, which the Council adopted in March 2021, puts the emphasis on strengthening European resilience to cyberthreats. Critically, it also frames cybersecurity as a foreign policy tool in conflict management – that is, as a diplomatic tool to set international norms in cyberspace and counter authoritarianism and malicious practices.[31] Finally, internal policies such as agriculture, migration, climate regulations (and more) are increasingly relevant to EU foreign and security strategic goals. Facing increasingly connected challenges, it is important to acknowledge that internal sectors often have a socio-economic and geopolitical impact, and may even exacerbate human insecurity abroad.[32]

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[28] Nicoletta Pirozzi, "The Civilian CSDP Compact. A Success Story for the EU's Crisis Management Cinderella?", in *EUISS Briefs*, No. 9 (2018), https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2270.

[29] Trineke Palm and Ben Crum, "Military Operations and the EU's Identity as an International Security Actor", in *European Security*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2019), p. 513-534.

[30] Douglas Barrie et al., *Protecting Europe: Meeting the EU's Military Level of Ambition in the Context of Brexit*, London, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), November 2018, https://dgap.org/en/node/31640; Steven Blockmans and Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, "PESCO: A Force for Positive Integration in EU Defence", in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 26, Special Issue (August 2021), p. 87-110, https://www.ceps.eu/?p=34001.

[31] European Commission and High Representative of the EU, *The EU's Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade* (JOIN/2020/18), 16 December 2020, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020JC0018. See also Kristi Reik et al., "Not Yet Fit for the World", cit., p. 17-19.

[32] Kristina Kausch, "Collateral Damage", cit.

2.3 Multi-layered action

While multi-actorness and multi-sectorness relate to who and what makes EUFSP, "multi-layeredness" qualifies how EUFSP unfolds. The 2016 Global Strategy introduced the Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises, which, besides being a mechanism to coordinate actors and tools from various sectors in response to conflicts, underlined the need to build partnerships with other relevant players and act in all phases of the conflict cycle.[33] Thus, the EU has sought to expand the responses to conflicts and crises across two "layered" dimensions.[34]

EUFSP is expected to extend across "spatial" layers in that the EU and its member states partner with multiple actors and operate at different levels of governance (global, regional, national and local). This is important to align the EU with other international crisis responders such as the UN, NATO or the OSCE, other regional organisations, as well as third states and subnational actors. In conflict management, the EU recognises the need to cooperate horizontally with government and civil society actors in countries in which it is active, since local ownership of conflict management and resolution efforts is key to long-lasting peace.[35]

EUFSP is also supposed to unfold in "temporal" layers, by sustaining interventions through an extended period of time. The assumption is that in an increasingly complex and contested world, conflict is not just diffuse but also protracted and, therefore, solutions cannot be imposed hastily. Sustained engagements are necessary to strive towards long-term peace.[36] This includes operationalising conflict prevention efforts long before the conflict erupts. But it also entails sustaining peace after peace agreements have been reached. When facing non-

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[33]   EEAS, *The European Union's Global Strategy. Three Years On, Looking Forward*, June 2019, https://europa.eu/!Qf88CQ.

[34]   This section builds on Dylan Macchiarini Crosson et al., "Multi-Layered Actions?", cit.

[35]   Elena A. Korosteleva and Trine Flockhart, "Resilience in EU and International Institutions: Redefining Local Ownership in a New Global Governance Agenda", in *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2020), p. 153-175, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2020.1723973.

[36]   Thania Paffenholz, "Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding", in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2021), p. 367-385, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1925423; Pol Bargués-Pedreny, *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding. Difference, Resilience and Critique*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018.

linear and complex conflicts, these actions need to be taken simultaneously and sustainedly, as episodes of violence and instability resurge unpredictably and phases of conflicts blur.[37]

2.4 The structural limitations of EUFSP governance

The multi-dimensionality of EUFSP as a multi-actor/sector/layer system of governance creates a number of problems related to prioritisation, coordination, planning and implementation. These problems present themselves, in different forms, across all three dimensions of EUFSP.

Multi-actorness is affected by two limitations that need to be considered when examining case studies. First is *paralysis*. EU institutions are subordinated to member states preferences, while member states are constantly engaged in bargaining processes to project their own foreign policy agendas onto the EU level. This dynamic not unfrequently generates paralysis (especially because most foreign and security policy decisions must be taken unanimously) and an inability to act quickly or boldly. Laggards and disruptors prevent not just further integration but also action, depending on whether they contest EUFSP as such or specific issues. Paralysis may be the direct result of intra-EU divisions, when member states assess their interests in a given crisis or conflict in incompatible terms (as was the case with France and Italy in Libya, for instance). Or it may be the indirect outcome of a poorly integrated institutional set-up (as is the case with member states reluctant to pursue greater defence integration, ranging from Denmark and the Netherlands to Poland).

Second comes *consistency of extra-treaty actions* with EUFSP discourse and practices. Some member states may act on their own to get around lengthy EU processes or to break the stalemate, thereby compensating for EU institutions' inability to act. However, this may come at the cost of a more cohesive EUFSP. Member states' initiatives may erode internal consensus, generate unintended effects or contribute to the destabilisation of areas abroad. France, which has pushed hard to lead the way in conflict management in the Sahel, is seen by other

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[37]   Cedric de Coning, "Adaptive Peacebuilding", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (March 2018), p. 301-307, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251.

member states as too reliant on military means and too focused on counterterrorism at the expense of more comprehensive efforts to build intra-communal peace and support socio-economic development. There are also cases where member states' initiatives and cooperation with regional groups have undermined common EU positions and fed incoherence and inconsistency, resulting in an incapacity to help solve conflicts, as is the case with the largely ineffective EUFSP contribution to the Middle East peace process or EUFSP inaction over Syria.[38]

Multi-sectorness presents three structural limitations. The first concerns *diverging institutional logics*. Different decision- and policy-making procedures preside over the various policy sectors. Bending policy silos may be a stated commitment but it is hard to realise in practice with sensitive topics that require holistic responses, such as conflict management.

A similar problem stems from *diverging sectoral logics*. The management of the multiple dimensions of crises and conflicts requires a degree of synergy and coordination that is extremely difficult to achieve because of potential contradictions between the logics of different policies. For example, border controls may well conflict with effective crisis and conflict management efforts. Sectors are driven by different timelines such as, for instance, short-term humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance.[39] Furthermore, policy sectors traditionally understood as internal are not connected with crisis management in a coherent fashion. At times, such connections may be impossible or irrelevant. At other times, however, the lack of conflict-sensitivity in some sectors may obstruct the capacity to manage conflicts. For example, the Common Agricultural Policy may bring about destabilising effects in conflict-affected countries, thereby indirectly undermining security and peacebuilding efforts.[40]

Scarcity of resources is another significant limitation. There is a clear imbalance between EU resources vs. national resources (financial, operational, human).

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[38] Giovanni Grevi et al., "Differentiated Cooperation in European Foreign Policy: The Challenge of Coherence", in *EU IDEA Policy Papers*, No. 5 (August 2020), https://euidea.eu/?p=1192.

[39] For example, European Commission, *Lives in Dignity: From Aid-Dependence to Self-Reliance* (COM/2016/234), 24 April 2016, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52016DC0234.

[40] Kristina Kausch, "Collateral Damage", cit.

Political disunity blocks cooperation and the sharing and deployment of resources in the area of security and defence. The EU has increased the level of ambition and has committed to integrating the "harder end" of foreign and security policy instruments, but integration is differentiated and weak when compared to other policy tools. The EU's ability to act in hard security matters depends largely on national contributions and is therefore subordinated to national agendas. There is a nascent but yet not well entrenched common strategic culture in the EU, which is reflected in diverging threat perceptions. Initiatives such as the European Security Strategy, the Global Strategy and most recently the Strategic Compass are meant to mitigate this problem, but they will hardly solve it.[41]

Finally, the multi-layered dimension of EUFSP – that is, the degree to which the EU and its member states seek to coordinate with external players consistently and over an extend period of time – is limited by the intensity of the three contextual factors illustrated above. This is visible in both the "spatial" and "temporal" layers of EUFSP. *Domestic factors* such as public opinion trends, civil society mobilisation and lobbying by interest groups may all create incentives for member states to pursue separate, even conflicting, foreign policy engagement with external players.[42] The fragmentation of regions may result in EU institutions and member states *prioritising interaction with different third actors which may even pursue competing policies*. For example, in Libya most EU member states and the EU itself for years lent support to the Tripoli-based government, whereas France was keen on cultivating ties with the rival warring part based in Cyrenaica. In addition, partnerships with local actors are not straightforward in situations where such local actors are not willing to facilitate or implement reforms or engage in peace and reconciliation talks. It is also difficult in situations where some local actors challenge EU norms and strategies, resist EU involvement or merely prefer other great powers' assistance. A top-down technocratic approach to conflict-management is no longer an option, while support for a bottom-up project for peace is also not possible at times. Consistent engagement with third parties is even more complicated when multipolar competition is factored in.

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[41] EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. For a European Union That Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security*, 9 November 2021, https://i2.res.24o.it/pdf2010/Editrice/ILSOLE24ORE/ILSOLE24ORE/Online/_Oggetti_Embedded/ Documenti/2021/11/11/st13638_en21%20SC%20DRAFT%200.pdf.

[42] Marianna Lovato, "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

Table 3 | Limitations of the EUFSP governance system

Dimension of EUFSP	Structural limitations
Multi-actor EUFSP	*Paralysis*: as most foreign and security policy decisions must be taken unanimously, intra-EU disagreements block action *Consistency of extra-treaty action with EUFSP*: ad hoc formats may compensate for paralysis of EU institutions but may erode internal cohesion
Multi-sector EUFSP	*Diverging institutional procedures*: different decision- and policy-making procedures drive (siloed) policy sectors *Different sectoral logics*: policy areas are driven by different logics (e.g., trade vs. security) and sometimes respond to potentially conflicting timelines (e.g., short-term vs. long-term) *Scarcity of resources*: member states allocate insufficient resources to crisis and conflict management – especially in hard security related sectors
Multi-layered EUFSP	*Domestic constraints*: public opinion, civil society, interest groups as well as societal ties and path dependencies shape engagements with external players differently across EU member states *High number of interlocutors*: fragmentation of regions complicates engagement with interlocutors, who are multiple and pursue different agendas *Inability to perform balancing acts*: the EU struggles to manage "geopolitical" competition with multiple external players across various policy fields *Unsustainability of protracted involvement*: EU and member states' commitment is volatile, resources are finite and priorities change

The complex, multi-dimensional nature of EUFSP is too rigid to allow for the kind of *balancing acts and flexible adjustments* warranted by the management of conflicts in areas deeply penetrated by multipolar rivalries. Finally, the long-term and sustained deployment underlying the Integrated Approach is constrained by the obligation to deal with short-term emergencies. A sustained response to address the *multiplication and long duration of crises* is difficult, as political focus is volatile, resources are finite and priorities may change when a new crisis erupts.[43] In short, a sustained involvement is not always sustainable. It tends to lose momentum and be perceived as too light to have any significant impact on conflict/crisis resolution.

3. Conclusions: A framework to investigate EUFSP in action

The concepts of "context" and "governance" of EU foreign and security policy set the terms of reference for any empirical research attempt to investigate the crisis or conflict management, mediation and resolution efforts by EU institutions and member states. The exercise should always involve two levels of analysis, starting with accounting for the contextual factors constraining EU and member states' action and then tailoring potential mitigating strategies to the specificities of the multi-dimensional governance of EUFSP.

The first step for researchers is to identify the contextual factors that constrain EUFSP in a specific crisis or conflict. If intra-EU division plays a role, it should be determined whether that involves opposition to specific policies or a wider contestation of EUFSP as such, while also ascertaining the intensity of opposition. It is critical to have a good grasp of the impact of the contesting actor(s) on government policies to determine whether it is strong enough to create a preference for paralysis at the EU level. This analysis should then inform the assessment of the potential for success of mitigating strategies – that is, whether contestation may be overcome through peer pressure (persuasion), mitigated through issue-linkages (negotiation)

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43   EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, cit.

or worked around (compartmentalisation).

When EUFSP is constrained by fragmentation, research efforts should indicate the level on which fragmentation of a given conflict or crisis area takes place – regional, state or subnational – and how fragmenting dynamics on one level influence the others. It is also important to trace the connections between the actors, drivers and modalities of fragmentation in order to ascertain how fragmentation can be reduced – whether, for instance, reconstruction of governance systems should start at the regional level or, alternatively, emanate from the state or subnational level.

Multipolar competition has at times generated a dynamic of intra-EU approximation, as the EU's resolute response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine attests.[44] However, historical evidence so far points to multipolar competition as more of a constraint than an enabler of joint EU action. Specifically, multipolar competition constrains EUFSP differently depending on whether the positions of the regional and global powers involved in the crisis/conflict area are compatible or conflicting with those of the EU (converging positions obviously work as an enabler rather than a constraint). Compatibility of positions involves an effort to investigate the conditions, as well as the diplomatic framework(s), for an accommodation between the EU and the third parties. When positions are conflicting, the focus should be on the balance of power in the given crisis or conflict to ascertain the potential for achieving leverage over competing actors.

The second step of an empirical research on EUFSP in action is about tracing the mitigating strategies of the contextual constraints back to the multi-dimensional governance structure of EUFSP itself. With member states' foreign policies construed as potential enablers of EU policy, consensus can be built not only through the a priori unanimous definition of common objectives, but also along more bottom-up trajectories. This case involves individual member states engendering intra-EU approximation of policy objectives through differentiated integration or even actions run outside the framework of EU policy. To determine the chances of success of using differentiated integration mechanisms or extra-

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[44]   Riccardo Alcaro, "The EU and the Ukraine War: Making Sense of the Rise of a 'Geopolitical' Union", in *JOINT Briefs*, No. 13 (March 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=962.

treaty practices (such as contact groups), research efforts should assess the balance of interests in the given crisis or conflict between member states as well as their relative power vis-à-vis one another. Large member states have greater capacity to project their preferences onto the EU level or take the initiative so as to indirectly compel other countries to adapt and follow. However, small countries have significant blocking power, whereby use of formal differentiated integration mechanisms may be discouraged and extra-treaty practices may erode intra-EU trust.

With EUFSP straddling the security/non-security and external/internal divides, EUFSP capacity is not just a function of capabilities but also of the degree to which such capabilities are integrated into single policy frameworks. The conceptualisation and operationalisation of crisis responses should therefore investigate the extent to which such integration is realistically possible, including by taking account of the different procedures and different logics presiding over the many EU policies that may fall into the EUFSP remit.

Finally, different formats of engagement of external players – in formal and informal settings, bilaterally and multilaterally, through persuasive or coercive means and at different levels of governance (local, national, regional and international) – are all possible options to shape outcomes in line with EU preferences. The research should determine which format(s) of engagement has the greatest chance of success to accommodate divergent views. It is also necessary to identify the external actor(s) to whom the EU and its member states should accord preference in order to build greater leverage on competing actors. The assessment of the policy tools that the EU and its member states can realistically use in a given crisis should inform the EU's partnership strategies to achieve accommodation with or leverage over external players, whether for instance the EU should seek to forge a common front with like-minded third players or opt for a division of labour.

Multiple possible arrangements exist – at the level of actors, policy sectors and formats of engagement – to mitigate the effects of the constraining factors on EUFSP. The challenge for individual researchers investigating the EU's and member states' policies towards individual crises or conflict areas is to identify the specific arrangement that can best advance EUFSP goals.

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