

WILL THE EU EVER BECOME A POWERFUL GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR?



By **Arturo Encinar**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook the global geopolitical order. Carnage was back on Europe's doorstep as the Ukrainian people found itself thrust overnight into a war they did not ask for. This was not the first time that war had gotten this close to the European Union in recent years. It was not even the first time that Russia invaded Ukrainian sovereign territory in recent years. However, something about the EU felt different this time. Maybe because of the nature of the war, or maybe because of the fear that a possible expansion of the conflict generated. But European institutions reacted with a degree of sharpness, decisiveness and unity that was unseen to that date. They demonstrated that under the right circumstances, coordinating an adequate response and proving themselves useful could be possible. The threat of an aggression reminded officials and citizens of the relevance of the European project.

Nonetheless, only a few months later, the brutal attacks of Hamas on Israel threw a second hardball the EU's way. In the context of the ever challenging Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this time around, the response was completely different. EU officials and leaders were messy, uncoordinated and were not able to settle on a common message. To the point of seeing European Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen and foreign policy chief Josep Borrell making contradicting statements on the very same day. Seeing thus a more familiar version of the EU. These experiences lead to some key queries: Was what we saw in early 2022 just an illusion? Is the EU then condemned to irrelevance on the world stage or can it wield significant influence and compete with the United States or China?

A LONGSTANDING FIGHT FOR RELEVANCE

Europe's foreign policy weakness is not something new. Combined, EU members total a population of 450 million inhabitants and a GDP of around 25.400 trillion US dollars. Classing global third in both categories only behind the United States and China and way ahead of the Russian Federation. The EU is a global powerhouse in terms of production, innovation and standards of living. However, they have never been able to obtain a position of influence on the world stage. In a world order dictated by the United States, Russia and in more recent years by China, Europe has always struggled to establish a distinct and influential voice, usually eclipsed by the US amid often aligned interests. The main reason behind this is evident, the US and China are nations run by a single government, whereas the EU has to coordinate the interests of 27 member states. Interests that rarely align and that are required to be in complete consonance to act in sensitive matters, given the rule of unanimity imposed at the European Council.

Efforts have been carried out in the last decades to reverse this dynamic. In 1992, as part of the Maastricht Treaty, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was established, allocating for the first time a budget destined to the preservation of what are deemed "EU interests" abroad. Thanks to this policy, the European Union started deploying European missions and special representatives to areas such as Kosovo, the Middle East or Africa in order to strengthen peace and security. Ten years later, external EU representation was for the first time conceived in the form of the European External Action Service (EEAS), that deploys EU diplomats in foreign territories.

A move that was coupled in 2009 with the creation of the position of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the fourth highest authority of the Union that acts as a sort of Minister of Foreign Affairs who coordinates the EEAS and represents the EU abroad. The position is currently held by the Spanish socialist Josep Borrell, previously mentioned.

However, all of these moves are often considered by experts as “baby steps”, since only bold and transformational action could start launching the EU as a main geopolitical actor. Multiple scholars have hypothesized how this action could look like. One possibility that has often been floated is the creation of a European army, an idea long championed by French President Emmanuel Macron and other former EU leaders such as Angela Merkel or Mario Draghi. This would allow the European Union to set strategic priorities, craft more comprehensive peacekeeping missions, wield coercive power or even engage on the battlefield when needed without having to rely on the interests of third parties. Nonetheless this proposition is far from being a reality, since it would mean taking up part of the member states’ sovereignty on matters of defense, an idea towards which national governments do not seem particularly open.

A more attainable modification to increase the EU’s influence on the world stage, as described by Carnegie’s Stefan Lehne, would be the abolition of the unanimity rule that’s currently in place in the European Council when voting for matters considered sensitive. Aligning the interests of 27 national governments with different political ideologies and circumstances sounds like an almost unattainable job. More so with the prospect of an even larger European Union if the candidacies of Ukraine and the Balkans are finally retained. This rule makes the EU slow, ineffective and almost always is the reason behind the poor and late reactions of the European Union to world events. This is why there is an increasing number of voices, notably coming from Paris and Berlin, advocating for the establishment of a qualified majority vote in the Council. This threshold, which requires both the affirmative vote of 55% of member states and 65% of the EU population, is currently in place for less substantive matters and could arguably improve the celerity with which the EU takes action.

THE ILLUSION OF A NEW ERA

Many assumptions have always been made with respect to the potential scope of an intervention of the European Union in matters of foreign policy, all of which were challenged in early 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. The EU shocked the world with the coherence, celerity and impact of their reaction. Member states were committed to the cause and showed an unseen willingness to cooperate and to do it in a rapid way. Scholars and experts even categorized it as the beginning of a new era for European foreign policy.

The EU was able to put forward a number of measures that succeeded to alter the course of the conflict and advance the cause of an Ukrainian people that was seen as the collective ally without any major discrepancies (aside from some nuisances emanating from Viktor Orbán's Hungary). Allowing thus Europe to impose, for instance, an extremely harsh and effective package of sanctions to Russia that included the freezing of assets for Russian chiefs, a strict travel ban, the barring of key exports from the Russian Federation into the EU such as oil, gas or other raw materials or the SWIFT ban for major Russian banks. Additionally, substantial financial and humanitarian aid was provided to Ukraine from EU funds. And the measure that perhaps holds the most relevance is the pooling of weapons and military aid in order to boost the Ukrainian army.

An effort of this sort was yet to be seen from an EU that never before was as effective in defining and supporting an ally, or wielding coercive power to alter the course of a conflict in such a fundamental way. As Josep Borrell worded it: "it was the birth of a geopolitical Europe". A Europe that defines common enemies and is able to show some muscle to defeat them. In a way, the drama in Ukraine gave an additional layer of purpose to the existence of the European Union. Not only as an institution designed for the preservation of internal peace amongst member states, but also, as an effective channel to protect its members from external threats.

AND A RETURN TO BUSINESS AS USUAL

Although this "geopolitical Europe" that Borrell talked about did not hold its credibility for long. In October of 2023, terrorist organization Hamas led a series of brutal attacks on Israeli territories adjacent to the Gaza Strip, producing over 1,000 casualties, 3,500 wounded and saw the capturing of over 100 hostages that are yet to be released. Shaking yet again the global geopolitical equilibrium through one of the most recurrent sources of conflict. If the European Union wanted to prove itself as a relevant actor, they needed to define a stance on the conflict, the same way that powerhouses like the United States or Russia did.

When it came to the invasion of Ukraine, EU member states did not hesitate in coming together and rallying around the Ukrainian people against Vladimir Putin's tyranny. However, the attacks in Israel were different, surfacing deeply fundamental and perhaps irreconcilable differences amongst European governments or even amongst top EU officials in the handling of the conflict. Resulting in an extremely poor and messy handling of the situation that saw contradicting statements, backpedaling of announcements and an overall lack of coordination and decisiveness.

A few days after the attack, Hungarian EU Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi announced that the EU would suspend its aid to Palestine, an announcement that was later contradicted by High Representative Josep Borrell. Only a few days later, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola visited Israel in an unannounced manner to offer Benjamin Netanyahu's government the EU's full and undivided support. A move that was widely criticized and later contradicted by an ulterior visit to Israel of Spanish and Belgian Prime Ministers Pedro Sánchez and Alexander de Croo (as the two most recent rotatory leaders of the Council of the EU) in which they loudly called out the Israeli's government response to the attacks. Not only that, but also Josep Borrell has repeatedly criticized Netanyahu's handling of the attack in public. In sum, still to this day the EU has struggled to define its stance on the conflict, diluting any previous mirage of foreign policy muscle. Proving themselves yet again, incapable of being relevant geopolitical actors.

THE EU'S FATE

Over the course of these last tumultuous months in the geopolitical scene, the European Union has shown its potential, but also its many weaknesses. We asked ourselves if the EU could ever become a relevant geopolitical actor and the answer, as deceiving as it may be, is a maybe. In the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, European leaders showed decisiveness and togetherness, proving that in critical situations in which the member states' interests align, they can wield power and have critical influence. However, when interests do not align, they have shown how messy and unhelpful they can be.

This leads to an even greater question: how can we make all interests align? The answer necessarily calls for further European integration. There will not be a powerful EU until the foreign policy is run at the European level, with member states giving up their foreign policy authority to the EU. The same way that there will not be real coercive power until there is not a European army, which calls for a massive coordinated effort both economic and political from all member states. Some intermediate solutions could be put in place to make decision making easier, such as the aforementioned elimination of the unanimity rule in the European Council. But the bottom line is that there will not be a "geopolitical Europe" without further integration.

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