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The EU's Common Foreign & Security Policy

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Introduction

The days are past in which the Member States of the European Union can expect decisively to influence world events on their own. The European Union countries share a wide range of interests, values and objectives and they can in most cases achieve more in foreign policy through working together than separately. They have long acted together in relation to the Western Balkans, they are developing common policies in relation to their neighbours, notably in eastern Europe and the southern Mediterranean and they routinely co-ordinate their positions in the UN General Assembly and other UN bodies. In areas such as Middle East policy and over Iran, the EU is a key player, working with the UN, Russia and the United States.

Unlike most EU policies, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) proceeds by consensus and majority voting applies only to the implementation of policies already agreed by all Member States.

This paper is an outline of the EU's Common Foreign & Security Policy. Other Senior European Experts' papers' cover some of the major foreign policy topics of recent years, for example Iran, and there is a separate and more detailed paper on the EU's External Action Service, the agency which provides EU representation in third countries. A sister paper considers the closely related subject of the EU's Common Security & Defence Policy (CSDP).

The Purpose of the CFSP

As the introduction above suggests, the purpose of the CFSP is to increase the influence of its Member States in world affairs by working together. As the world's largest economy whose Member States include two permanent members of the UN Security Council and several countries with powerful armed forces, the EU has considerable potential influence.

But EU action in the foreign policy field can only happen, let alone be effective, when the Member States are agreed. There were some early successes, such as the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and the Venice Declaration on the Middle East in 1980 but coherence was often difficult to achieve. Greater convergence of policy positions between Member States and the development of an institutional framework to manage it has taken place gradually over the years and is still a work in progress. The Treaty of Lisbon made further changes to the institutional framework which may yet result in greater convergence but the degree of political will shown by Member States will continue to determine whether common positions can be agreed.

This common diplomacy is now an important element in the national foreign policies of Member States. When it is achieved by unanimity there is naturally a requirement that Member States should act in accordance with it; it would be illogical to do otherwise. But this does not mean that Member States lose the right to act or speak in international bodies, for example in the UN Security Council. Where agreement has not been reached, Member States continue to have full freedom of action, although there is an obligation to consult. The aim of the CFSP is to increase the influence which individual EU Member States, including the UK, can have in the world by putting the weight, resources and efforts of the whole EU behind agreed policies.

Institutional Structure

Common Foreign and Security Policy is the term used to denote the commitment to achieve joint policies and common actions by the Member States of the EU. Its origins go back to the informal co-ordination of national foreign policies between the Foreign Ministries of the then six Member States, begun in 1970 and known as European Political Co-operation (EPC). The Single European Act of 1986 brought foreign policy co-ordination into the Treaty framework for the first time. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 transformed it into the CFSP and integrated its small secretariat, hitherto provided by diplomats seconded from Member States, into the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. The main decision-making body remains to this day the Foreign Ministers meeting in the General Affairs and External Relations Council, supported now by a Political & Security Committee, composed of ambassadors resident in Brussels and answerable to national Political Directors, the senior officials in the respective foreign ministries responsible for the political and security aspects of foreign policy.

Under the Maastricht and subsequent treaties the rotating Presidency was responsible for the management and implementation of the CFSP, answerable to Member States' foreign ministers in the External Relations Council. The CFSP remains intergovernmental in character and authority remains with the Council at all times but the Lisbon Treaty introduced some important changes (outlined in the next section). Decisions are taken by unanimity, except that when the Council has adopted by unanimity so-called common strategies or joint actions, implementing decisions may be (but so far never have been) taken by QMV. The intergovernmental structure means that the European Commission, the Parliament and the European Court of Justice do not have authority over CFSP, although this does not preclude the Parliament debating such issues. And the Parliament has some influence over the CFSP through the budgetary mechanism.

The High Representative

In the light of the inadequacies revealed by the EU's performance in the Western Balkans in the 1990s, the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty created a new post of High Representative for the CFSP (HR/CFSP) who would also be the Secretary General of the Council. In June 1999 the European Council in Cologne appointed to that post Javier Solana, formerly Secretary General of NATO (and prior to that the Foreign Minister of Spain). Under the Treaty his sole authority was limited to "assisting" the Council and the Member State holding the Presidency. But over the years, due largely to Solana's own efforts and skills and with the somewhat reluctant acquiescence in the early days of successive Presidencies, he was increasingly charged with negotiating and acting on behalf of the EU in foreign policy. He

was notably effective in the Balkans, he earned the confidence of successive United States administrations, was seen as a crucial interlocutor on behalf of the EU in the Middle East and latterly negotiated with Iran over its nuclear programme on behalf of the EU (and sometimes also the US as well).

The success of Solana could not disguise the EU's dysfunctional external affairs structure however. The High Representative had to work with the members of the Commission who had responsibility for the EU's aid, trade and enlargement policies to ensure that those policies were consistent with the furtherance of the EU's foreign policy objectives, but this was not always easy to achieve.

The Lisbon Treaty made some innovative changes to remove the latent frictions between having different people with leading CFSP roles in the Brussels institutions, and thus to create better leadership and coherence. It removed entirely the rotating Member State Presidency from external relations (the Presidency was preserved in modified form elsewhere in the Council). It gave to a single person, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy, the functions of chairing the Council, managing the CFSP and, within the Commission (of which he or she becomes Vice President) running the Commission's external relations responsibilities. It also provided for him or her to have the support of the External Action Service, both in Brussels and overseas in EU Delegations in more than 120 countries, which have replaced the Delegations of the Commission.

The new full-time President of the European Council, whose main role is to manage the European Council's business and provide continuity of leadership between its meetings, can represent the EU abroad at his or her level (*i.e.* that of a head of state or government) specifically without prejudice to the High Representative.

Conclusion

Disagreements over the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and over support for the anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya in 2011 were prominent examples of a failure to reach a common position in the EU on a foreign policy issue of the first importance. In the case of Iraq, no attempt was even made to reach a common position. There is no doubt that the EU's influence on both occasions was diminished by this lack of agreement but the CFSP has been achieving some real successes in recent years. The EU has been instrumental in reducing the risk of conflict in the Balkans and has been playing a key role in the common approach of the western powers to the Iran nuclear issue.

The role played by the EU-3 (France, Germany, UK) with the involvement of the High Representative acting under an EU mandate over the nuclear negotiations with Iran, even though they have not so far been successful, could be a model for the future development of how CFSP can work both internally within the EU and in relation to the outside actors, in this case notably Iran itself as well as partners like the US, Russia and China.

There are challenges ahead, not least from the new structures established by the Treaty of Lisbon, but the CFSP is a relative success story for the EU which the UK has greatly influenced and strongly supports. The Member States need to continue to make the effort of political

will to make it work. That includes a giving greater priority to achieving common policies and better leadership, decision-making and interface with third countries.

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Senior European Experts

The Senior European Experts Group is an independent body consisting of former high-ranking British diplomats and civil servants, including several former UK ambassadors to the EU, and former officials of the institutions of the EU.

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