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The Ukraine Crisis: Where is the European Union?

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With 150,000 Russian troops massed on the border of Ukraine in an escalation of a conflict that has been simmering since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Europe is facing the biggest threat to its peace and security since the Cold War. This is a fact that is not lost on its citizenry. In a [pan-European poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations \(ECFR\) at the end of January](#), remarkable consensus was found as to the seriousness of the crisis for European security more broadly, and not just for that of Ukraine. Further, with the exception of Germany, in all countries surveyed, significant majorities saw a leading role for the European Union (EU) alongside NATO in responding to the crisis. So with such extensive support for an EU voice on the evolving situation on the Ukrainian border, why has the Union been relatively silent ([notwithstanding its own protestations to the contrary](#))?

The answer can be found in the nature of European integration itself. Far from a unified and monolithic entity, the EU is a variegated structure in which integration is expressed in different ways depending on the arena of cooperation. In fields such as trade, agriculture, fisheries and an array of other policy areas, the Union operates according to a system of Qualified Majority Voting, in which individual Member States can be outvoted by their peers. This facilitates decision-making among the 27 Member States at the European level. It is on the basis of such cooperation that the EU has been able to establish itself, for example, as a global economic and trade actor. However, the flow-on effect of the EU's significance and global impact in such areas often leads to an expectation of significance in other policy fields too. This is particularly the case with foreign policy where, as is discussed further below, the nature of cooperation and integration in Europe is markedly different. Quite simply, this means that more is often expected or demanded of the European Union than it is, in practice, capable of achieving – a situation termed by the academic Chris Hill as the [‘Capability–Expectations Gap’](#).

While such excessive expectations are often the result of a lack of understanding of European integration among observers and commentators, this is also a trap into which the EU itself has, unfortunately, fallen. In 1991, as the former Yugoslavia was descending into civil war, Luxembourg's Foreign Minister Jacques Poos was sent as part of an official EU mediation mission to the region. Prior to his departure he famously asserted that “This is the hour of Europe. It is not the hour of the Americans”. He was wrong, and what followed saw communities and the country torn asunder, and ethnic cleansing and genocide leaving up to 140,000 dead and millions displaced in a conflict the consequences of which are still being felt today. It brutally exposed the inability of the then 12 Member States to reach agreement on action to stop the fighting, which was, in the end, only suppressed when American air power was brought into play. Such an inability to reach agreement on collective action remains the major challenge to EU capability in the foreign policy field today.

Foreign Policy Making in the European Union

Foreign policy is traditionally seen as being among the core executive powers of states, an expression of national sovereignty on the global stage. As such, authority for policy making in this area has been jealously guarded. This has also been the case with the Member States of the European Union, notwithstanding the level of integration and supranational ‘pooling of sovereignty’ that they have been able to achieve in other areas. Thus Europe’s first attempt at foreign policy coordination – the *European Political Cooperation* (EPC) framework, launched in 1970 – was largely consultative, involving no transfer of powers to the European level, with Member States remaining fully in control of their individual foreign policies. This template has largely stuck. Even as the EPC was replaced by the more ambitiously titled *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP) in 1993, the EU was not able to move substantially beyond this early pattern of engagement – the underlying nature of foreign policy coordination in the EU remains purely intergovernmental, premised upon unanimity decision-making in which, as a consequence, each Member State possesses an effective veto over any collective action. This means that even in situations where agreement is able to be reached, this is usually in the form of the lowest common denominator – not a formula for impact and effectiveness on the global stage. As a result, the Union has frequently been accused of punching below its weight in foreign affairs.

Further innovations, such as the establishment in 2009 of a putative foreign ministry in the form of the *European External Action Service* (EEAS) and of the post of *High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy* (in effect an EU foreign minister-lite), have also failed to substantively shift the nature of cooperation. Having been expected to beef-up the EU’s foreign policy role, these institutions have been a disappointment, though in reality the outlook looked grim even as pen was put to paper in their creation: where, for example, some had expected the first nominee to the position of High Representative to be an individual with global prominence, thus giving strength to the EU foreign policy voice, the reality was arguably the opposite, with Member States preferring their own pre-eminence not to be challenged by too strong an office holder. Even the attempt to dilute, to an extent, the unanimity requirement through the introduction of so-called *passerelle* clauses allowing decisions on particular issues to be taken by Qualified Majority Vote in the Council – though requiring unanimous agreement to initially implement the clause – have proven ineffective. In the thirteen years since its establishment, the *passerelle* clause on CFSP has never been implemented, leading former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to refer to it as [a ‘lost treasure’ of European integration](#).

United in Diversity?

The foreign policy voice of the European Union therefore remains one that requires unanimous agreement among its Member States, a bar that proves too high to achieve on most issues of substance. While the Union proudly proclaims itself to be [“united in diversity”](#), the reality is that the array of political regimes and values that characterise the Member States prevent unity in significant areas of foreign policy. And differences among Member States have seemingly become more deeply entrenched over the last decade, responses to the global economic crisis having made clear a north-south divide, and the

immigration crisis one between east and west. This has also been clear in relation to the Ukraine crisis where, in broad terms, views on the Russian threat are conditioned by geographical proximity and by the historical experience of the Cold War.

Further entrenching these differences in relation to Ukraine's border has been the lack of coordination and leadership from key Member States. Historically, foreign policy decision making at the EU level has been preceded by informal discussions among the big three – France, Germany and the United Kingdom – on the basis of which collective decisions with the remaining Member States are taken. Following BREXIT, one leg of this triumvirate has been removed. While the UK's action on the global stage since its departure have been less than impressive, the absence of its voice and military capability nevertheless impacts upon foreign policy leadership in the European Union, reducing the weight of this leadership group in relation to the other 25 Member States, and increasing the significance of any failure by France and Germany to reach agreement on the path forward.

With France currently holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union, in which foreign policy decisions at the European level are largely made, French President Emmanuel Macron has been robust in pushing for European leadership, spurred on by the forthcoming presidential election and the desire to distract from [domestic challenges](#) and to demonstrate statesmanship to an electorate with which he has fallen somewhat out of favour. His call for the EU to lead the debate on security and stability on the continent, [establishing its own vision to present to NATO and on the basis of which to negotiate with Russia](#), has, however, thus far gone unanswered.

Germany's own dithering on the Ukraine crisis has contributed significantly to the absence of leadership at the European level. In Berlin, the new coalition government is divided. Notwithstanding their advocacy during the election campaign for greater EU involvement in foreign affairs, and more active German confrontation of Russian aggression (including advocating cancellation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline), the Greens seem not to have succeeded in shifting the dial as part of the coalition government. The second junior coalition partner, the Free Democrats, have appeared more ambivalent: while having taken a [somewhat soft stance on annexation of the Crimea](#), they became more critical of Russia during the 2021 campaign. However, as a party traditionally representing business interests, there is strong internal pressure in favour of avoiding measures that might harm the trade relationship. And the Social Democratic Party of new Chancellor Olaf Scholz, since the days of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, have favoured strengthening political, economic and cultural ties with Russia as a mechanism for reducing tensions. However, these divisions within the coalition, and Scholz's softly-softly approach, have placed Germany in a difficult position with regard to its Western allies. Scholz has been tentative at best around the place of Nord Stream 2 cancellation in any sanctions regime, and the country has come under increasing criticism for its failure to provide substantive support, including the provision of arms ([even refusing to issue the permits that would allow Estonia to send weapons of German origin](#)).

The result has been that the European Union has not been a forum within which substantive action on the Ukraine crisis has been expected or possible. Indeed, for Russia, the EU is not seen as a significant foreign policy actor – its [2021 National Security Strategy omitted any mention of the European Union](#). On Ukraine, Stefano Sannino, the Secretary-General of the EEAS, has openly acknowledged that [Russia does not take the EU seriously](#), and Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, has [bemoaned the fact that the Union is not part of discussions](#).

The Upside

But not all is grim. While the actions of Russia have once again exposed the fact that EU foreign policy and security cooperation significantly lags behind that in other fields, some positives may yet be identified. In the absence of EU-level cooperation, discussions among Member States have occurred elsewhere. Germany, France and Poland have made use of the so-called Normandy Format (which also includes Russia) established in 2014 to address the Donbas conflict in eastern Ukraine. And 21 EU Member States are also members of NATO. In this respect, even if not taking place in the Union context, coordination and cooperation among these states is greatly facilitated by their experience of ongoing and broad engagement within the EU. If not a sense of bonhomie, this has at least enabled them to develop an understanding of each other, and a recognition that they are, in many ways, in the same boat. This is a benefit of European integration that is not to be underestimated. And this sense also extends to the broader public: while the ECFR poll mentioned at the outset demonstrated a trust in NATO to defend Europe, this trust did not extend to the United States. This raises the possibility that it is European cooperation within NATO that generates the trust factor among domestic publics, not the US presence.

Finally, while the European Union is seemingly only able to observe the Ukraine crisis from the margins, the Russian action is potentially a trigger for deeper European cooperation. The crisis has put European security firmly on the agenda, and brought home the absence of Europeans from the conversation to date, one in which key decisions concerning the continent have been taken in the context of US–Russia engagement. Coming off the back of the Trump presidency in which US commitment to Europe was brought into question, the need for a greater European role in its own security architecture is becoming clear. The European Union is an obvious arena within which cooperation in this sphere may be strengthened.