

# Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World

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ESSAY



## Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World

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### ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) increasingly formulates and implements foreign and security policy under the constraints of internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. While such contextual challenges can inhibit the EU from adopting an ambitious foreign and security policy, this Special Issue shows that the EU and its member states have developed ways of mitigating their impact. Through institutional, functional and diplomatic measures, the EU has managed to reduce the adverse effect of the contextual factors on its foreign and security policy towards conflicts and crises.

### KEYWORDS

European Union; foreign and security policy; contestation; regional fragmentation; multipolar competition

The Russian war against Ukraine is a bleak reminder for the European Union (EU) that it needs to continue to invest in its foreign and security policy. Indeed, with the war marking a *Zeitenwende* or historical turning point in international relations, there is a growing demand – both inside and outside of the EU – that the Union contributes to its own protection in greater fashion than it does today and expands its ability to act proactively in security matters.<sup>1</sup>

Despite incremental institutional improvements over the past decades, including the strengthening of the position of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission (HRVP) and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) under the Lisbon Treaty (in force since 2009), the EU has remained insufficiently equipped to provide a full spectrum foreign and security policy.

In most foreign policy issues, the Union takes decisions by unanimity; the EEAS complements (at best) national diplomacies which remain central to EU governments' foreign and security policy formulation and implementation; competences over foreign and security policy-relevant actions are distributed differently among EU institutions as well as between the latter and member states; intelligence is gathered at the national level and shared irregularly; and obviously no unified armed forces and no clear chain of command exist.

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<sup>1</sup>The notion of a *Zeitenwende* to describe the epochal nature of Russia's war of conquest in Ukraine was introduced by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his speech before the *Bundestag* a few days after the start of the invasion. See Federal Government (2022).

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However, the lingering validity of the unanimity rule in most decisions on foreign policy, institutional shortcomings and lack of resources do not tell the full story of the EU's difficulty in developing a coherent and effective policy. Scholars have long concluded that EU foreign and security policy (EUFSP) is a multi-actor system that encompasses the national foreign policies of EU member states, when they act in accordance with goals and positions set at the EU level (Hill 1998; White 2004; Keukeleire and Delreux 2014; Amadio Viceré and Sus 2023).<sup>2</sup> All this has long ensured that the EU does have a significant international 'presence' (Allen and Smith 1990). The roots of the EU's struggles in foreign and security affairs, which are often on display when it comes to managing crises and conflicts, are therefore not just, and perhaps even not primarily, located in its mostly intergovernmental institutional set-up. In recent academic literature, scholars have increasingly discussed a set of contextual challenges, both internal and systemic, that inhibit the EU from formulating and implementing an ambitious EUFSP.

First, scholars have observed that *internal contestation* in the EU has extended to EUFSP through the politicisation of international affairs for domestic political expedience, resulting in member states struggling to reach consensus (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017; Biedenkopf *et al.* 2021; Müller *et al.* 2021; Petri *et al.* 2020). Another factor hampering EUFSP is that the conflicts and crises that the EU seeks to address are increasingly complex due to the *fragmentation* of state authority and regional governance (Bakke *et al.* 2012; Stollenwerk *et al.* 2021). Finally, the EU increasingly faces active and undermining *multipolar competition* when trying to address crises and conflicts (Alcaro 2018b; Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva 2022). Notably, this concerns rivals such as Russia or China, but at times also partners such as Turkey and even major allies like the United States (US).

The academic literature assumes that these contextual challenges are largely outside the scope of EUFSP institutions. Irrespective of the (in)efficiency of the internal EUFSP machinery – so the argument goes – there is ultimately not much that EUFSP can do about contestation at the domestic level, regional fragmentation or multipolar competition. EUFSP thereby becomes a function of these contextual challenges. That is, EUFSP involvement in conflicts and crises occurs only when the member states agree, when regional fragmentation is moderate and if the global and regional powers do not engage in sustained competition.

While acknowledging the importance of these three contextual challenges to EUFSP, this Special Issue argues that we should not underestimate EU agency and the ability of member states and EU institutions to adapt and deal with internal contestation as well as the effects of the systemic factors. Indeed, the purpose of this Special Issue is to examine *how the EU mitigates the challenges emanating from internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition in the formulation and implementation of EUFSP towards crises and conflicts*. It therefore goes beyond identifying the contextual challenges and focuses on the governance responses of the EU and its member states. The Special

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<sup>2</sup>Christopher Hill (1998, 18) defined European foreign policy as “the sum of what the EU and its member states do in international relations”. Precisely because the EUFSP is a multi-actor system, in which the member states and EU institutions jointly formulate and implement policies, this Special Issue looks beyond Brussels and also considers the role of member states. This is important, as this Special Issue shows, because the institutional formats and boundaries of EUFSP are increasingly fluid in order to deal with a range of contextual challenges.

Issue brings together eight case studies that paint a mixed picture of EUFSP, as adaptation and mitigation have not always worked and at times have failed miserably. However, collectively, they highlight how *the effectiveness of EUFSP is a function of the (in)ability of the EU and its member states to navigate intra-EU contestation, address crisis and conflict complexity and leverage against other powers pursuing diverging objectives from their own.*

We identify three types of measures with which the EU can mitigate the effect of the contextual challenges on EUFSP. First, the EU and its member states use *institutional measures* such as the (informal) delegation of responsibilities to EU institutions or core groups of member states for the formulation, operationalisation or implementation of EUFSP. Differentiated cooperation in EUFSP and ‘Team Europe’ approaches, where selected member states take the lead in joined-up Union-national actions, are also examples of how the EU mitigates contextual challenges through institutional solutions. Second, the EU and its member states resort to *functional measures*, whereby they focus on a limited number of issues (or even a single issue). Through selective engagement (via prioritisation or compartmentalisation), the decoupling of foreign policy issues or issue-linkages, the EU and its member states manage to remain involved in crises and conflicts. Finally, the EU and its member states use *diplomatic/coalitional measures*, where they increasingly engage with flexible coalitions of like-minded partners and multilateral institutions to increase their leverage in crisis and conflict management.

The case studies of this Special Issue show how the EU has made creative use of the different types of mitigation measures. In some cases, this has helped the EU overcome internal divisions, allowed the Union to engage with the different factions in fragmented crises and conflicts, and kept zero-sum game multipolar competition out of (or reduced its impact on) crisis and conflict management undertakings. In other cases, the Special Issue highlights the limits of mitigation measures. These findings collectively call for nuance in the assessment of the effectiveness of EUFSP. The latter ultimately boils down to assessing the adequacy of the mitigation measures that EU member states have adopted to mitigate the contextual factors in the formulation and implementation of policy.

This introduction starts by exploring the three contextual challenges facing EUFSP. It continues by outlining the mitigation typologies to address the adverse effects of these factors on the formulation and implementation of EUFSP. It then discusses the key findings of the Special Issue. The conclusion reflects on the potential and limitations of the mitigation strategies that the EU currently uses.

### Three contextual challenges to EUFSP

On the basis of the academic literature, we identify internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition as non-mutually exclusive contextual factors that make it harder for the EU and its member states to give direction, content and sustainability to EUFSP and especially provide a coherent response to conflicts and crises. While these contextual factors have long impacted on EUFSP, they have become particularly prominent over the last 10-15 years, which we consequently take as the timeframe of this Special Issue (even when acknowledging a longer-standing background in specific cases).

Popular discontent with the EU grew in the wake of the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis (roughly 2010-15). This development has increased mutual distrust between EU countries and diminished the political dividends of pursuing foreign policy at the EU level. While the EU has faced regional fragmentation before – notably in the Balkans – it has never been on the scale of the post-2011 Arab uprisings, which have descended into state failure and fragmentation, civil conflicts, a proliferation of armed non-state actors and increased illicit trafficking (including of migrants) across a vast area bordering the EU. Fragmentation has drawn in regional and global powers vying for re-establishing order in often competing terms. The multiple crises EU countries have gone through since the 2010s have laid bare not just the increased saliency of the three contextual factors but also their tendency to mutually reinforce one another.

In the following, these contextual challenges are discussed, in order to explain how they act as constraints on EUFSP.

### **Internal contestation**

European integration long benefitted from the so-called ‘permissive consensus’ in which the EU rarely featured in domestic debates. Yet since the Maastricht Treaty (1993) and particularly the referendums on the failed Constitutional Treaty (2005) and the Eurozone crisis (2010-15), European integration has become increasingly contested in domestic arenas (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

The ‘backlash’ has also reached EUFSP. Recent academic literature has pointed to its ‘de-Europeanisation’, a consequence of populism and more generally the politicisation of EU-related issues and the EU itself (Balfour *et al.* 2016; Costa 2019; Destradi *et al.* 2021; Lovato 2021; Müller *et al.* 2021; Petri *et al.* 2020). Internal contestation is not always related to the substance of the EUFSP itself, nor is it just about regular disagreements between EU member states. It also encompasses fundamental challenges by actors within the EU to either fundamental norms, long-standing positions or established practices of EUFSP (or a combination of these elements) whose ultimate origin lies in domestic politics (Müller *et al.* 2021). The increased internal contestation of the EU in general provides a context which EUFSP has to deal with. In considering internal contestation, it is important to distinguish between two aspects (see Table 1).

First, the status of the contesting actors. These may be governmental actors, which formally define and defend national interests. Governmental contestation is direct and its impact on EUFSP is severe, given that most decisions pertaining to foreign and security policy are made by unanimity. Contestation may also come from other quarters, though. Non-governmental actors such as Eurosceptic or nationalist political parties (when they are in the opposition), interest groups, opinion-shapers and media players may all oppose EU norms, long-standing positions or established practices (for an overview see Lovato 2021, 11-8). Non-governmental actors indirectly exert political influence by mustering public support for criticism of EU policies or for a negative discursive construction of the EU itself, whereby even pro-EU governments end up with fewer domestic incentives to invest political capital in EUFSP.

The second aspect is the content of the contestation. Domestic actors may challenge a specific policy of the EU, but they can also contest the EU (and consequently EUFSP) as a polity (de Wilde and Trenz 2012; for more on ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ contestation see Adler-

Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 895). Contestation of specific policy issues may come from pro-EU as well as nationalist forces. Pro-EU forces are open to working around their opposition and engaging in practices to mitigate its impact such as negotiation, compartmentalisation or issue-linkage. 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 in individual cases of crises and conflicts.

### **Regional fragmentation**

Regional fragmentation is 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 (Bakke *et al.* 2012; Bargués *et al.* 2020; Levallois 2021; Börzel and Risse 2021; Stollenwerk *et al.* 2021). For the EU and its member states, this has become particularly challenging in the post-Arab Spring period (2011-present), even though the fragmentation of state authority was something that the EU already had to deal with in the Western Balkans and the Middle East.

Fragmentation makes it much harder for EU member states to produce joint conflict analysis and therefore a shared understanding of what their priorities should be. In addition, fragmentation generates a need for the EU and its member states to engage with various counterparts, including non-state actors with which they do not have diplomatic relations. Joint conflict analysis and engagement with non-state actors are particularly difficult for the EU because it lacks several state-like qualities (for instance, intelligence services). Fragmentation implies that policy responses should be multifaceted (that is, spanning different policy areas) and integrated, 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 aspects that are critical to dissecting fragmentation's effects on EUFSP (see Table 1). First is the level at which fragmentation takes place. Fragmentation at the regional level, as is the case most notably in North Africa and the Middle East but also in the Horn of Africa, involves the absence of viable international governance mechanisms to manage interstate rivalries and intra-regional challenges (Valbjørn 2016; Polese and Santini 2018). Thus, EU member states have no natural local multilateral partner to coordinate crisis/conflict management efforts with. In addition, fragmentation of one region may affect neighbouring areas and create a domino effect. Fragmentation at the state level, as in the case of Libya or Somalia, raises questions about whom the EU should deal with as its legitimate governmental counterpart. Even when there is a centrally recognised governmental authority, it is often hard for the EU to make basic arrangements, such as establishing diplomatic missions and negotiating the status of mission agreements, let alone shape events on the ground. Especially when regional governance mechanisms are non-existent or dysfunctional, civil conflicts have the effect of drawing in external state actors (both regional and global), which adds another layer of complexity that EU member states need to address (Levallois 2021).



The second aspect concerns the conflict status of fragmented regions, that is, whether there are peace or ceasefire agreements in place or if hostility between warring actors continues. 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 EUFSP can be more easily deployed.

### **Multipolar competition**

Finally, multipolar competition occurs when multiple major and/or regional powers approach crises and conflicts based on contrasting views of regional (and global) orders (Alcaro 2018b; de Coning and Peter 2019; Dandashly *et al.* 2021; Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva 2022). Crises and conflicts are ‘geopoliticised’ whenever they are no longer construed as transnational problems for which the international community or regional organisations bear responsibilities, but as tactical theatres of systemic strategic contests.

Multipolar competition is also a contextual factor for EUFSP that has emerged strongly over the last decade. The consequences of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the rise of China in political and military terms, and the assertiveness of middle powers such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia have become much more profound in the last ten years. Admittedly, multipolar competition is not always a complicating factor for EUFSP; when the EU is deemed to be the target of adversarial policies, EU member states may close ranks and give greater coherence to EUFSP. The case of the Russian war against Ukraine validates this point. In other instances (as the other case studies of this Special Issue attest), multipolar competition makes it much harder for EU member states to coordinate with external players because it compels them to factor in their broader relationship with such players when addressing a specific crisis or conflict.

Two aspects determine the manner in which multipolar competition affects EUFSP (see Table 1). First is the scope of 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 be more limited in scope. At times, rival poles compete across a wide array of issues. Examples include the war in Ukraine, where no single policy area is left out of the contest between Russia and Western powers supporting Kyiv; but also increasingly Iran, where regional issues as well as the state of human rights inside the Islamic Republic have ended up compounding the nuclear crisis. In other instances, however, competition is more narrowly defined, as is the case with the South China Sea, where EU member states are keen on keeping navigation free without necessarily envisaging a full-spectrum contest with China.

The second aspect is the position of rival powers in crises and conflicts relative to the EU. 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. The Russian war in Ukraine has unmistakably created zero-sum conflict between the EU and Russia on many conflict dossiers. 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 and can therefore be accommodated with EU preferences.



As noted, the three contextual factors are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, increasingly there are interlinkages between these contextual challenges (for an overview, see Alcaro *et al.* 2022). Major powers may exploit regional fragmentation by backing different factions, or try to create internal divisions within the EU (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017). Regional fragmentation complicates conflict analysis, which in turn undermines EU unity. The lack of internal EU consensus allows other major and regional powers to step into crises and conflicts. In crises and conflicts where all three contextual challenges are present to considerable degrees (for example, governmental policy contestation, ongoing hostilities in a strongly fragmented region, as well as zero-sum multipolar competition across a wide scope), EUFSP is heavily constrained. On the other hand, if these contextual challenges are only present to limited degrees, the EU has more scope for manoeuvre.

While these challenges provide the context in which EUFSP is formulated and implemented, it is necessary to zoom in on the EU's own agency to highlight how it (and its member states) adapt to such contextual factors in order to mitigate their adverse effect on EUFSP.

## EU mitigation measures

Over the years, EU member states have experimented with measures to deal with the challenges emanating from internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. We define such 'mitigation measures' as *the strategies, tactics and practices that the EU and its member states have adopted to reduce the negative impact of contextual challenges on the formulation and implementation of EUFSP*. Such mitigation measures may be intentional and signal strategic behaviour on the side of the EU; however, they may also develop over time on the back of positive experiences, path dependencies and feedback loops.

As this Special Issue shows, the EU and its member states use a wide panoply of mitigation measures and have been at times rather creative in dealing with contextual challenges. The conceptualisation of EUFSP as encompassing the EU *and* its member states (Hill 1998, 18) is important because it allows us to trace a greater variety of mitigation

**Table 1.** The contextual challenges for EUFSP: definition and operationalisation.

Contextual challenge	Definition	Operationalisation
<i>Intra-EU contestation</i>	Challenges by domestic actors to norms and/or long-standing positions and established practices of EUFSP	(i) Governmental or non-governmental actors (ii) Policy or polity contestation
<i>Regional fragmentation</i>	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
<i>Multipolar competition</i>	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

measures, which we group under a threefold typology: institutional, functional and diplomatic/coalitional. Just as with the contextual challenges, these different types of mitigation measures are not mutually exclusive. In some crises and conflicts, the EU and its member states use all three simultaneously. They also do not relate one-to-one to the contextual challenges (for instance, institutional measures are not just used to deal with internal contestation). To get a better sense of these mitigation measures, we now discuss this threefold typology and provide examples.

### ***Institutional mitigation measures***

Institutional mitigation measures relate to which actors take the lead in the formulation and implementation of crisis and conflict management policies. For decades, experts have mostly focussed on the attempts by the EU and its member states to pursue a ‘single voice’ strategy based on a ‘politics of scale’ rationale (Ginsberg 1989; see also Nuttall 2000 and Gebhard 2017 on ‘consistency’), where a united EU could punch above the weight of the individual member states in world politics. Much of this logic informed the Lisbon Treaty, the strengthening of the position of the HRVP and the creation of the EEAS (Dijkstra 2013). However, the last 15 years have made clear that EUFSP continues to be much better characterised as a multi-actor and multi-level system (Rieker and Eriksdatter Giske 2021). The flexible arrangements of contact or ‘lead’ groups, rotating presidencies, troikas and envoys speaking for Europe from the 1990s to the early 2010s, has actually been ‘formalised’ through the introduction of a ‘Team Europe’ format where multiple actors can speak for Europe in a semi-orchestrated manner.

While traditionally the multiplicity of European voices was seen as a weakness, it has in fact emerged also as a mechanism to sidestep intra-EU disagreement and contestation, select diplomatic and other resources to address regional fragmentation, and leverage member states into backing EUFSP in a hostile multipolar environment. Indeed, in the literature, the approach of ‘differentiated cooperation’ in EUFSP is currently seen as a practical way for the EU to address contextual challenges (Siddi *et al.* 2022; Amadio Viceré and Sus 2023; Rieker and Eriksdatter Giske 2024).

When intra-EU negotiation and deliberation practices fail, the delegation of responsibilities becomes an appealing mitigation strategy (see Table 2). EUFSP is an area known for non-exclusive delegation (Dijkstra 2017), which means that while the common EU institutions have been delegated EUFSP roles, member states still retain similar foreign and security policy roles. In delegating to EU institutions, member states temporarily and voluntarily ‘abdicate’ such roles to escape whatever political harm (domestic or in their relationship with other countries) and other costs that they may incur if they were to act directly. This practice also allows for the tacit and informal assignment of EUFSP tasks to (groups of) member states (Alcaro 2018a; Alcaro and Siddi 2021; Amadio Viceré 2023). Such a delegation of responsibilities often goes together with a ‘permissive consensus’, as EU governments potentially opposing it struggle to find alternatives (Alcaro 2018a; Bassiri Tabrizi and Kienzle 2020). For this reason, member states tend to accept that the larger member states, such as France and Germany (and the United Kingdom [UK] while it was still an EU member), take the initiative with regard to crises and conflict, including under the label ‘Team Europe’.

### **Functional mitigation measures**

Functional mitigation measures refer to the issues EUFSP focuses on and consequently which aspects of its toolkit are used with respect to crises and conflicts. While the EU has long championed its comprehensive or even integrated approach to crises and conflicts (EU 2016), in practice it often selects the issues (and the corresponding policy tools) with which it prefers to – or can – engage. This is part strategy, part practice. For instance, it is difficult to have a genuine human rights dialogue with China or engage with the Assad regime in Syria beyond humanitarian assistance.

The strategies and practices of issue-linkage as well as prioritisation, compartmentalisation and decoupling (Poast 2012; 2013) are important tools in this respect. They allow the EU to side-step internal contestation on some policy areas (for instance, high politics), while simultaneously pursuing other areas (for instance, low politics), but also to engage with different actors in fragmented conflicts by focusing on relatively uncontroversial areas, and cooperate with major rivals in world politics on areas of shared or common interest (on ‘coopetition’, see Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996; Schunz *et al.* 2018) (see Table 2).

The logic of issue-linkage has traditionally received more attention in international relations studies, from negotiation theory (Tollison and Willett 1979; Haas 1980; McGinnis 1986) to vote-buying within international organisations (Dreher *et al.* 2009; Carter and Stone 2015). This strategy allows states to create positive-sum package deals that benefit all (like the ones the EU has been offering Kosovo and Serbia).

The opposite strategies of prioritising, (temporarily) decoupling or compartmentalising issue areas – that is, selective engagement – have received less attention. These strategies focus on areas of potential convergence, while at the same time agreeing to disagree on other things – or simply refusing to condition progress on one issue with progress on other issues. While compartmentalising issues in crises and conflicts is often a risky strategy, as it is difficult to insulate discussions due to all sorts of potential spoilers, if successful, it helps build confidence between the different parties creating a process of positive feedback. Through functional mitigation measures, the EU and its member states can thus moderate the impact of particular contextual challenges.

### **Diplomatic/coalitional measures**

Finally, diplomatic/coalitional mitigation measures involve steps taken by the EU and its member states to involve external actors, thereby expanding the number of like-minded actors around the conflict to increase their leverage over competitors (Schattschneider 1960). The EU has traditionally relied on two diplomatic mitigation measures, namely building a transatlantic front and teaming up with multilateral institutions (see Table 2). By working with the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the EU can often overcome internal contestation because most EU states accord priority to staying in sync with their largest and most important ally. The involvement of the US, including through NATO, can provide the EU with massive weight when dealing with multipolar competition or the different regional factions in fragmented conflict environments. It also shields the EU from internal contestation and provides more resources and legitimacy, as in conflicts in the Western Balkans.

The other traditional approach taken by the EU is to multilateralise crises and conflicts by working with the United Nations (UN) or other regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Laatikainen and Smith 2006; Renard 2015). This provides the Union with increased legitimacy for addressing the relevant crises and conflicts according to internationally accepted norms and rules rather than on the basis of power differentials between the competing actors.

In addition to the role of the US and the multilateralisation of crises and conflict, the EU and its member states have more recently focused on pragmatic or strategic partnering. The 2021 Joint Communication on Multilateralism explicitly recognises the need to develop coalitions with link-minded actors (Schuette and Dijkstra 2023). This includes deepening relations and global engagement with partners with which the EU has not traditionally engaged, particularly in the Global South. The emerging regional powers, for instance Indonesia, Mexico or South Africa, come to mind.

The ultimate goal of mitigation measures is to increase coordination between EU institutions and member states, the integration of policy instruments and synchronisation of external engagements. In striving for consistency, EUFSP actors ultimately pursue effectiveness. The articles in this Special Issue address the question of EUFSP effectiveness along a spectrum that encompasses output, outcome and impact (Underdal 1992; Young 2001). Accordingly, effectiveness is about whether the EU and its member states can formulate policy (*output*) amidst internal contestation and national vetoes, regional fragmentation and divergent conflict analysis, and multipolar competition. It is also about whether the EU and its member states implement such policies and use meaningful policy instruments (*outcome*). And it is about whether the EU and its members are able to influence crises and conflicts in line with stated policy goals (*impact*) (Underdal 1992; Helm and Sprinz 2000). In the next section, we delve into the case studies included in this Special Issue to trace which strategy, tactics or practice have been used, and to what extent these have been effective in mitigating the challenges of internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition.

## Findings of the Special Issue

The cases included in this Special Issue provide ample empirical material to assess the effects of the three contextual factors on EU conflict and crisis management efforts. Unsurprisingly, the formulation and implementation of EUFSP are much more complicated whenever EU member states and institutions face challenges emanating from more than one factor, especially when these factors interplay with one another.

Counterintuitively, the case studies show that *internal contestation* is not as strong a constraint as is often assumed to be in both the academic literature and the omnipresent

**Table 2.** Different types of EU mitigation measures.

Mitigation measure	Strategies and practices
<i>Institutional</i>	Negotiation and deliberation; delegation of responsibilities to EU institutions; differentiated cooperation through core/contact groups of member states
<i>Functional</i>	Issue-linkage; selective engagement (prioritisation and compartmentalisation); decoupling of issue areas
<i>Diplomatic/ Coalitional</i>	Strategic partnering with like-minded actors, especially the US; multilateralisation of crises and conflict management; reaching out to other potential partners

societal debates on populism and Euroscepticism. Provided there are no other complications – namely, provided internal contestation occurs in isolation from the other contextual factors – the case studies show that EU member states are often able to mitigate the effects of internal contestation. The case studies of Kosovo-Serbia, Venezuela and Iran prove the point.

Pol Bargaés, Assem Dandashly, Hylke Dijkstra and Gergana Noutcheva (2024, this Special Issue) contend that contestation over the Kosovo-Serbia case is profound, as the refusal of Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain to recognise Kosovo's independence out of fear of setting a dangerous domestic precedent is arguably an insurmountable obstacle on the path to conflict resolution. Nonetheless, EU member states have worked around this fundamental disagreement by delegating the task of supporting institution-building in Kosovo and conflict management to EU institutions. Functionally, the Commission and especially the HRVP have focused on issues that are propaedeutic to a final agreement, such as visa liberalisation, the rule of law and security sector reform, as well as facilitation of the Serbian-Kosovar dialogue. The EU has also diplomatically teamed up with the US and worked closely with NATO. However, the authors also find that this approach seems to have run its course. The EU's strategy to deal with internal contestation has lost legitimacy with the Kosovar government and population. Simultaneously, the growing tensions between the EU and Serbia, backed by Russia, have encouraged Belgrade to double down on its refusal to accept Kosovo's secession. Still, EU conflict resolution efforts have built up a structure of incentives and opportunities that Serbia and Kosovo struggle to fully neglect.

EU member states have also overcome internal differences in the case of Venezuela as Anna Ayuso, Tiziano Breda, Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir and Marianne Riddervold (2024, this Special Issue) demonstrate. In 2019 the refusal of Italy and a few other countries to recognise opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president in place of the autocratic incumbent Nicolás Maduro did not extend to other policy actions. EU member states tasked the EEAS and the Commission (thus again resorting to delegation) with providing humanitarian aid and election monitoring. Nor was the EU's decision to impose sanctions on the Maduro regime contested. While delegation was effective in minimising intra-EU divisions, the functional mitigation measures employed by the EU to reduce Venezuela's fragmentation did not reflect a consistent crisis resolution strategy. The authors demonstrate that EU member states have not prioritised any issue and therefore struggled to compartmentalise election monitoring and humanitarian aid. Their policy of conditioning sanctions relief on national reconciliation has suffered from insufficient diplomatic/coalitional engagements to reduce Venezuela's fragmentation but also to contain multipolar competition over Caracas. This was because under former President Donald Trump the US viewed economic pressure as a means to encourage regime change rather than negotiations – as the Europeans did. In addition, neither the EU nor the US adequately factored in the support provided to Maduro by Russia, China, Iran and Turkey.

Iran is another instance of EU member states successfully overcoming internal divisions. Riccardo Alcaro (2024, this Special Issue) explains how France, Germany and the UK, collectively known as the E3, emerged as the main drivers of EU policy towards Iran thanks to their early diplomatic initiative over Iran's nuclear programme. The E3 'lead group', though institutionally unorthodox, received tacit support from

the other member states and was important in the creation of a common European line. Furthermore, Alcaro shows how a functional strategy where the nuclear dossier, as a result of its geopolitical magnitude, was prioritised over and decoupled from other concerns, such as Iran's record on human rights, its ballistic missile programme and support for proxies in the region. These choices resulted in the E3 – joined by the HRVP in the E3/EU format – establishing strong intra-EU leadership on Iran that for years defused potential divisions originating from divergent views of EU-Iran relations.

On the negative side, Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Soli Özel (2024, this Special Issue), who wrote their article before Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel and the latter's brutal retaliatory bombing campaign in Gaza, highlight how internal contestation has proven massively damaging to EU conflict resolution efforts in Israel-Palestine. With several EU countries unwilling to put pressure on Israel for reasons spanning historical legacies and ideological affinities, the EU for the sake of unity remained formally committed to parameters of the peace process – most notably the two-state solution – that had long been overtaken by events. The measures that the EU adopted – providing the Palestinians with border monitoring, police capacity-building and humanitarian aid – did little if anything to advance peace. The authors show that the same applies to European efforts to multilateralise conflict management through various initiatives, from the utterly inconclusive Barcelona Process to the US-dominated (and now defunct) Quartet. The reluctance of EU member states to engage more critically with the moribund Middle East peace process was also a function of their relationship with the US, which did not just shield Israel from international condemnation but provided it with massive military support. Divergence with the Trump Administration over the Israel-Palestine conflict further marginalised the position of the EU.

The weight of the transatlantic link on intra-EU contestation dynamics is indeed significant, as member states tend to avoid clashes with Washington even if that may hamper their crisis/conflict management efforts elsewhere. The EU, for example, was unable to push back against the extra-territorial sanctions with which the Trump Administration threatened EU banks and companies after leaving the Iran nuclear deal of 2015, despite the fact that all EU member states continued to support it.

In a similar vein, the combination of intra-EU differences and refusal to engage in geopolitical competition with Russia compelled member states to keep the EU out of conflict management over the Donbas in the intervening period between Russia's two invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Instead, EU states resorted to a weak delegation strategy. They allowed France and Germany to deal with the issue in the Normandy framework, which never gained much traction because it lacked the added political weight of the EU and was never truly sustained by a strategy of transatlantic partnering.

While the cases of Israel-Palestine, Iran and Ukraine attest to the damaging effect of the nexus between geopolitical rivalries and intra-EU contestation, the interplay between the intra-EU contestation and regional fragmentation is arguably worse still for EUFSP. This has been abundantly clear in Syria. Here, Caterina Bedin, Tiffany Guendouz and Agnès Levallois (2024, this Special Issue) show that the problem has manifested in the shift of EU priorities from conflict management to counter-terrorism and especially border control following the Islamic State's rise in 2014 and the refugee crisis that ensued in the following years. The institutional mitigation strategy of delegation (in



this case to Germany) and prioritisation (in this case of migration management) kept EU member states united but severely weakened the EU's position as a conflict manager.

Indeed, the *fragmentation of state authority and regional governance arrangements* has emerged as arguably the most intractable of the three contextual factors. To some degree, the EU has managed to contain further fragmentation in the Balkans through the promise of integration and eventual accession. Election monitoring and humanitarian aid have provided some modest incentives for Venezuela's regime and opposition to keep negotiating over national reconciliation. But in Ethiopia and Syria the EU has failed to rein in the drivers of fragmentation.

In the case of Ethiopia, Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin Akamo (2024, this Special Issue) show that EU failures also emanate from insufficient knowledge of national and sub-national fault-lines, combined with the proliferation of players controlling parts of the national territory and the uncertainty between adopting a normative or a pragmatic approach to the crisis by the EU and its member states. The latter two trends are visible also in the case of Syria.

Faced with multiple challenges, the EU has employed practices of delegation, selective engagement and partnering with other external players without placing them into single, consistent frameworks (often a consequence of EU member states according priority to issues such as migration control at the expense of conflict management). Adding to all this, in Ethiopia and Syria, external powers – notably Russia and China, but also Turkey, Iran and the Arab Gulf states – have managed to gain more sway than the EU or any of its individual member states. Thus, the combination of multipolar rivalries with fragmentation dynamics has proven as damaging to the EU as the one between internal contestation and regional fragmentation.

While *multipolar competition* is often a powerful constraint on EUFSP, the EU's record in managing this contextual factor also includes some successes. For a long time, Iran was the main case in point. Riccardo Alcaro (2024, this Special Issue) demonstrates how the E3 and the EU managed to navigate the highly agitated waters of Middle Eastern rivalries and the ideological-geopolitical competition between Iran and the US, as well as the transatlantic tensions that emerged during the George W. Bush years which later violently resurfaced under Trump. In fact, the E3/EU's main contribution to nuclear diplomacy with Iran – of which the 2015 nuclear deal was the greatest accomplishment – was a function of their ability to facilitate US-Iranian engagement by pursuing the multilateralisation of the nuclear dispute. It comes as no surprise then that the EU's Iran policy gradually lost relevance after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal greatly damaged the EU's multilateralisation strategy and Iran's repression of protesters and drone sales to Russia made the prioritisation of the nuclear issue obsolete.

Focusing on the South China Sea (SCS), Zachary Paikin (2024, this Special Issue) maintains that multilateralisation – meaning the process of engagement on the basis of international law and the law of the sea – combined with selective engagement – notably by supporting the development of ASEAN countries maritime capabilities – have been useful tactics for the EU and its member states to moderate the effects of US-China confrontation on the management of the territorial disputes in the area. Paikin is persuaded that the EU's balanced approach to the SCS can co-exist with, and can actually be reinforced by, a more competitive stance towards China in the wider Indo-Pacific area.



Kristi Raik, Steven Blockmans, Anna Osypchuk and Anton Suslov (2024, this Special Issue) argue that in Ukraine the EU has found a way to use geopolitical competition to enable a more joined-up and arguably effective conflict response rather than suffering from its constraining potential. Admittedly, this only happened after EU member states went through various unsuccessful adaptations to the growing confrontation with Russia in the years prior to the latter's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Yet, since February 2022 the EU and its member states have not just agreed on the objective – the defence of Ukraine's territorial integrity. They have also integrated actions in various policy areas – military and financial assistance to Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, decoupling from Russian energy imports, acceptance of Ukrainian refugees, promise to Kyiv of EU membership – into a single framework while engaging in sustained transatlantic partnering. Embracing multipolar competition (the 'multi' element here being justified by the involvement of powers who are not fully aligned with either Moscow or the West, most notably Turkey and China) has in fact turned the EU into a nascent 'geopolitical' player, although this evolution seems to have hinged considerably on the leadership provided by the administration of President Joe Biden.

Whether the EU could have given extensive support to Ukraine without US engagement remains doubtful. Similarly, if US-China tensions were to escalate into more open confrontation, any EU mitigation measures in the SCS would certainly be called into question. And in the case of Iran, the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018 triggered a chain of events that resulted in an intensified interplay between multipolar competition, regional fragmentation and internal contestation, under the weight of which EU policy eroded considerably. This continuing dependence on the US jeopardises the ability of the EU and its member states to face multipolar challenges and their interplay, particularly in terms of internal contestation dynamics, in the absence of a 'benign' external actor such as the US. However, this does not *per se* invalidate the point that multipolar competition does not inherently work as a constraint on EUFSP.

## Conclusion

In the recent academic literature, scholars have increasingly discussed a set of contextual challenges that prevent the EU and its member states from formulating and implementing an ambitious EUFSP. Three contextual challenges are particularly important. First, domestic forces in the member states increasingly seem to cause internal contestation of the EUFSP. Second, the conflicts and crises that the EU seeks to address are increasingly complex due to the fragmentation of state authority and regional governance. Finally, the EU faces active and undermining multipolar competition when addressing crises and conflicts. The interplay between these contextual challenges makes it particularly hard for the EU to live up to the high expectations.

In this Special Issue, we ask a relatively general question: How does the EU mitigate the challenges emanating from internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition in the formulation and implementation of EUFSP? We have identified several different mechanisms and have considered these in eight conflict case studies. We suggest that the EU and its member states can use institutional, functional and diplomatic/coalitional mechanisms to mitigate the effects of the increasingly restrictive contextual challenges. Institutional measures focus on negotiation and deliberation, but

also the delegation of responsibilities to the EU institutions or core groups of member states. Functional measures include issue-linkage and selective engagement in the form of prioritisation and compartmentalisation, as well as decoupling of issue areas. Finally, diplomatic and coalitional strategies are related to the partnering with the US, other like-minded states and relevant multilateral institutions.

Throughout the case studies, we find that the EU has managed to reduce some of the adverse effects of these challenges on its foreign and security policies. EUFSP is therefore not just a function of these contextual constraints. The EU and its member states also have clear agency. Undoubtedly, the mitigation measures are applied unevenly across the case studies. The EU's job becomes notably difficult when a number of contextual challenges come together and negatively reinforce each other. We also find that the mitigation measures are not always sufficient over longer periods of time, such as in Kosovo-Serbia and Iran, where they have become less effective as the crises have continued over time. Nonetheless, the case studies show that the prism of these mitigation measures is quite helpful to understand how the EU tries to formulate and implement its EUFSP and assess the effectiveness of the latter.

In terms of the broader literature on the role of the EU in the world, these findings are noteworthy. First, they call for a renewed interest in the governance dynamics behind EUFSP, both formal and informal, in order to try to better understand when the EU has agency in matters of foreign and security policy. Second, the case studies of this Special Issue highlight the breadth of EU activities across the globe (from the SCS to Venezuela), which is relevant in terms of conceptual and policy questions on whether the EU is a regional or global player in a more contested and complex world. Finally, the case studies provide an up-to-date assessment of where EUFSP stands in terms of crises and conflicts. As the EU seeks to re-imagine its EUFSP as a result of strong impetus due to the Russian war against Ukraine, the articles in this Special Issue highlight some of the best practices but also the persistent challenges.

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