

# Adapt to a harsher world: Memo to the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy

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## Executive summary

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**THE JOB OF** High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP) was designed for a different world than the one the European Union now grapples with: a world built on principles and governed by law, in which the EU was a force of attraction because of its mass, prosperity and good governance.

**TODAY'S EU IS** weaker. It faces Russian aggression on its borders and a conflict in the Middle East where it has little influence. Economic security has become a much bigger priority. Whoever is elected as the next US president will continue the rivalry with China, and be more absorbed with the Indo-Pacific than with Europe. In the EU, China is widely acknowledged to be a rival, and even a threat. Yet it remains an essential trade partner and has also become a formidable economic competitor.

**THE HRVP'S ROLE** is constrained by a confusing and contested institutional structure, with prominent roles for the President of the Commission and President of the European Council in EU external representation. At the same time, the EU's external policy is more important than ever. A stark choice must be made on how to adapt the HRVP role to a world dominated by intimidation and brute force. There are two possible options.

**THE FIRST AND** best option is for the European Council to give the HRVP a stronger mandate to act on matters on which member states have decided to take common action. This would require stronger legal and financial capabilities to coordinate relevant policies in the EU institutions. In this model, the HRVP would be 'first among equals', both among the foreign ministers and among all commissioners with portfolios that touch on EU external relations.

**A SECOND OPTION** would be to accept that the authority of the HRVP is more circumscribed than envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty, but to clarify the functions that the HRVP will keep. This requires a clear division of labour with other commissioners whose portfolios have an external dimension and implies forsaking responsibility for trade policy, development, enlargement and neighbourhood, and even defence procurement.

**WE BELIEVE THE** first model is preferable. But most important is that the EU makes a choice and breaks the bad habit of nominally assigning powers to the HRVP while depriving her of the ability to exercise them in practice. Disempowering the HRVP's position would make the system even more dysfunctional.

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**The EU has become more vulnerable, facing Russian aggression on its borders and a conflict in the Middle East where it has little influence**

# 1 State of affairs

The job of High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP) was designed for a different world than the one Europe now grapples with: a world built on principles and governed by law, where the European Union was a force of attraction because of its mass, prosperity and good governance. Five years ago, few Europeans worried about their reliance on Russian energy and Chinese supply chains, and engagement in conflicts was largely a matter of choice.

Today the EU is weaker and more vulnerable, facing Russian aggression on its borders and a conflict in the Middle East where it has little influence. Economic security has become a much bigger priority since the COVID-19 pandemic and the realisation that dependency on other countries can become toxic. Not even the largest EU countries have much clout in the United States-China rivalry. Internal problems with rule-of-law violations and democracies undermined by disinformation have reduced Europe's self-confidence in defending its values abroad.

Since 2022, the EU has made some progress in its security policy. It is no longer dependent on Russia for energy. Defence spending has risen as member states have sought to replenish stocks of weapons donated to Ukraine and to reduce dependence on the US for their own security. This is adding to pressure on public finances, increasing the need for better coordination of spending. A flurry of economic security-related instruments have been put in place: to reduce import dependency (Chips Act, Critical Raw Materials Act), to deter coercion (Anti-Coercion Act) and to protect sensitive technology and infrastructure (screening of foreign direct investment, export controls, the Cyber-Resilience Act). However, the effectiveness of these instruments remains to be tested. In the meantime, the EU's relative economic weight is falling as others grow faster.

The 2024 US election could force Europe to develop its strategic autonomy. Whoever is elected as the next US president will continue the rivalry with China, and Washington will continue to be more absorbed with the Indo-Pacific than with Europe.

On foreign policy, the EU still finds it difficult to build and maintain consensus. Its quest for strategic autonomy from the US is not balanced by enough engagement with other regions. It has failed to win the support of the Global South for Ukraine. The rise of anti-western and anti-European narratives in many parts of the world has been boosted by three consecutive shocks: Europe's failure to share COVID-19 vaccines at the start of the pandemic, the rise in energy and food prices globally in 2022 as Europeans sought to buy whatever they could after the full-scale Russian invasion, and the EU's unwillingness to break with the US on the Middle East. The EU now finds itself in the unenviable position of having almost no influence over Israel yet being blamed for the suffering of the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, many European leaders focus on transactional relationships with neighbouring countries to contain and control migration. There is a lack of EU long-term thinking about the major pressures that are causing people to move, most notably demographic change (such as fast-growing young populations in Africa) and climate change, and the corresponding policy responses. Economic needs to fill labour shortages in Europe are not matched by political willingness to build win-win relationships with the countries of origin and transit.

China is now widely acknowledged to be a rival, and even a threat, by most EU governments. It is perceived as reshaping the rules-based international order and building an alternative power centre. Yet it remains an essential trade partner and has also become a formidable economic competitor, thanks in part to massive industrial policies. While President Trump was engaged in a trade war with China, many in Europe believed they could remain bystanders. In 2020, the EU even signed a landmark deal with China, the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). But in March 2021, the EU decided not to ratify CAI after China imposed sanctions on European parliamentarians and civil society. Then China decided to lean towards Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

However, the broad consensus within the EU around the need to 'de-risk' the relationship

with China is not matched by an agreement on how to achieve it. Politically powerful sectors such as the car industry are keen to maintain their access to the Chinese market, and European economies still depend heavily on Chinese supply chains. China's influence on EU candidate countries and even a member, Hungary, is undermining values and the rule of law, and challenging cohesion within the EU.

Your substantive role will include the climate transition as a major issue. The EU needs to prepare for the changes in its economic relationships resulting from European Green Deal policies. Climate justice will be a recurring theme in relationships with countries affected by EU climate measures and with those that want more help with adaptation. Climate diplomacy, led by you, will need to be linked to more conditional funding to help partners along their transition paths to sustainability, particularly with the goal of phasing out fossil fuels as quickly as possible.

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## 2 Challenges

### 2.1 Confronting the EU's major foreign policy problems

#### **Reconciling a strong transatlantic alliance with EU autonomy**

Reconciling the role of the United States as protector and close ally with EU autonomy has become much more challenging. First, attitudes to China are different. As a global power, the US sees China as a threat to its supremacy, while Europe is concerned about its security and competitiveness, but has no supremacy to defend. Second, the US has been increasingly distancing itself from global rules that it helped create, particularly in international trade. The EU remains committed to these rules, partly because it is more trade-dependent, and partly because unconstrained exercise of discretion is not a plausible strategy for a union of sovereign countries, which often disagree. Third, US commitment to Europe has declined structurally – because of the rising importance of Asia – and it has become more volatile. A second Trump presidency might mark a return to isolationism of a kind not seen since the 1920s.

#### **Manage threats from China while maintaining a constructive relationship**

While the three terms coined by the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook – partner, competitor and systemic rival – continue to apply (European Commission/HRVP, 2019), another aspect needs to be added: the threat. China's acts of economic coercion, and its support for Russia in its war against Ukraine, show that China is itself a potential security threat to the EU. Your challenge will be to manage this threat while preserving cooperation on trade and climate change, and in international forums.

#### **Building stronger relations with the Global South**

The EU's prosperity depends much more on the Global South than it used to for three main reasons: 1) to meet global emissions reduction targets, rapidly growing economies such as India need to accelerate their decarbonisation; 2) to diversify trade relationships away from China and ensure stable supply chains that support the EU's green transition; (3) for controlled immigration that helps address the EU's demographic and skills challenges while avoiding social and political backlash. Your challenge will be to strengthen all three aspects of the relationship at a time when the Global South needs the EU less than in the past.

## 2.2 Addressing the internal challenges to the HRVP's role

Your role is constrained by a confusing and contested institutional structure in which multiple external representatives speak on behalf of Europe and control different external instruments. The prominent roles of the President of the Commission and President of the European Council on the world scene have shrunk the space for the HRVP. Presidents and prime ministers seek the limelight, leading to competition, and even contradictions, in the EU's positions. Even where the EU can wield external instruments, its capacity to use them strategically is limited by the diversity of its members. Some are former global powers that want to shape EU external policies in ways that promote their national interests, while others are smaller countries primarily concerned with their immediate neighbours.

The original intention for the HRVP role was policy coordination through 'double-hatting' as chair of the Foreign Affairs Council – on the assumption that substantive decisions would be taken by the foreign ministers – and as the second most senior Commissioner. However, since the post was established 15 years ago, many more foreign policy decisions have moved up to the European Council instead, with heads of state and government taking them over from their foreign ministers. Meanwhile, the HRVP position inside the Commission has been demoted from first vice-president to one among many with that title.

This smaller role for the HRVP contrasts with the growing interlinkages between economic and hard security. For example, the Biden Administration's economic-security doctrine was set out by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. The HRVP, meanwhile, does not control the most powerful external instruments of trade, development funding, enlargement and neighbourhood policy, or representation in the G7. Paradoxically, Ursula von der Leyen's ambition to create a 'geopolitical Commission' has further marginalised the HRVP's role. If she creates a new defence commissioner who reports directly to her, your job could be eviscerated of its substance also on security.

For the moment, the EU is mostly sticking together on providing support to Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia. But with the growing external challenges, internal fragmentation and the dispersal of external policy resources and representation are increasingly costly.

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# 3 Recommendations

## 3.1 Confronting the main foreign policy challenges

**You need to work on options for the EU's response to the US becoming a more unpredictable and unreliable partner**, especially if President Trump returns to the White House. Risks could include withdrawal of US troops from European bases.

**You must work to bring member states together around a common vision for relations with the US**, developing a transatlantic economic security strategy that creates more common ground (if the next president is a Democrat).

**You must play a crucial role in reshaping EU strategy on China as rivalry intensifies and Beijing continues to support Russia**, while also conducting massive industrial policies with negative consequences for European exports and for the functioning of the single market. Furthermore, the use of EU defensive tools is hampered by differing views across countries and fear of retaliation. You should widen the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue with China from trade to economic security, and aim to clarify the EU's position on Taiwan as well as boosting its role in a free and open Indo-Pacific.

**Relations with India could be a highlight of your mandate.** You should engage with the new governing coalition (still led by Prime Minister Modi) to regain momentum on negotiations on a comprehensive economic package, following the example of the Economic Comprehensive Agreement signed between European Free Trade Association members and

India in March 2024. Use the EU-India Trade and Technology Council as a platform to deepen technology cooperation and also broader economic security.

**Your basic job is to build and maintain relationships. This is especially important in working with the majority of the world,** beyond the advanced, industrialised economies. Presence is vital. You simply won't have time to maintain meaningful relationships with enough leaders in many parts of the world. Your best tactic is to appoint deputies with specific regional responsibilities, ideally from EU member countries without a colonial past in that region.

Now that other powers are also building ties in the Global South, the EU has to move on from post-colonial relationships based on resource extraction and donor-driven aid. The establishment of the Global Gateway (European Commission, 2021) was the first step in defining a new paradigm, and you should work with the commissioner responsible for international partnerships on a follow up that brings together your diplomacy with the EU's money and other external instruments. That means leveraging Council relationships as well as coordinating policies run by the Commission, such as trade and development.

**You will need to take a more sophisticated approach to two issues where some EU countries would like to have primarily transactional relationships:** raw materials agreements, where resource-rich countries now find themselves in a sellers' market, and migration, on which longer-term thinking is needed on the EU's strategic goals and options for steering the movement of people and responding to EU labour-market needs.

On climate diplomacy, make sure partners are not surprised by EU moves, as they were by the Deforestation Regulation<sup>1</sup>. The regulation was itself needed, as the carbon border adjustment mechanism will be, but partner-country leaders felt betrayed by lack of forewarning and discussion. You will need to work with the commissioners responsible for climate and environment to show that the EU really does support partners' own chosen transition paths.

### 3.2 Better defining the HRVP role

A stark choice has to be made on how to adapt the HRVP role to a world dominated by intimidation and brute force, where European influence is declining and its engagement needs to intensify in many regions simultaneously. Unfortunately, the Treaty on European Union lacks a precise definition of the powers of the HRVP<sup>2</sup>. There are two possible options.

The first and best option is for the European Council to give the HRVP a stronger mandate to act on matters on which member states have decided to take common actions. In a world in which security and economic threats are linked, this would require stronger legal and financial capabilities to coordinate relevant policies in the EU institutions. In this model, you would be 'first among equals', both among the foreign ministers and among all commissioners with portfolios that touch on EU external relations.

- On the Commission side, you would reassume the role of First Vice-President of the Commission (HRFVP), with responsibility for supervising the commissioners responsible for trade, international partnerships, enlargement and the neighbourhood, crisis and humanitarian operations, and defence. You would convene these commissioners regularly to set a strategic direction and coordinate the use of Commission instruments.
- On the Council of Ministers side, you as HRFVP would chair the foreign affairs, defence and possibly development and trade councils, to bring more coherence to the discussions among these different ministers. If an Economic Security Council is created (as proposed by Letta, 2024), it would also be chaired by you. To make the job manageable, you should designate other commissioners and/or individual foreign ministers as deputies respon-

1 See for example Noé Hochet-Bodin, 'Le café éthiopien menacé par la réglementation européenne sur la déforestation', *Le Monde*, 18 May 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/05/18/le-cafe-ethiopien-menace-par-la-reglementation-europeenne-sur-la-deforestation\\_6233990\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/05/18/le-cafe-ethiopien-menace-par-la-reglementation-europeenne-sur-la-deforestation_6233990_3212.html).

2 The TEU only defines the role of the High Representative on the Council side, not her/his other hat as Vice-President of the Commission.

**A stark choice has to be made on how to adapt the HRVP role to a world dominated by intimidation and brute force**

sible for particular issues and/or geographical relationships, reviving a tradition used by previous HRVPs.

- In the European Council, you as HRFVP should use your seat rather like the National Security Advisor does in the US Cabinet, preparing external policy packages for leaders to decide, working closely with the European Council President to link the external policy Councils (including trade, development and defence) to that power centre, and doing the preparatory work across the institutions. That would require the European External Action Service to support you with strategic thinking and more innovative proposals.

The President of the Commission could still decide to keep within her exclusive domain certain matters belonging to EU competence, while the President of the Council would always be able to move issues up to the European Council for decision. The two Presidents and you as HRFVP would have to work together closely as a team.

A second option would accept that your authority as HRVP is today more circumscribed than envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty, and could shrink further if the role of the commissioner responsible for defence extends beyond military procurement into defence policy. The aim would be to establish a clear division of labour between yourself and other commissioners whose portfolios have an external dimension, to avoid turf battles. This would imply forsaking responsibility for trade policy, development, enlargement and neighbourhood, which would remain the remit of dedicated commissioners.

To maintain coherence on hard security, the commissioner responsible for defence would take over the military staff and intelligence, mirroring the division between foreign and defence ministers at national level, and replace you as chair of the Steering Board of the European Defence Agency, in order to link security and industrial policies. In this minimalist model – which is less than the responsibilities given to you on defence under the EU treaties – you would be assigned a leading role in just three fields: 1) coordination of common positions on foreign and security matters where the 27 member states can agree, 2) external representation of EU common positions and the diplomatic network of EU delegations through the European External Action Service (EEAS), 3) proposing and announcing economic sanctions once decisions have been taken by member states.

The second option would change the institutional balance. Lack of coordination on the Council side would increase the dominance of the Commission in relationships that are both geo-economic and geopolitical. That could increase free-riding and hostage-taking, as member states would be more reluctant to expand the use of qualified majority voting and constructive abstention in Council decisions. Under the second model, you would not play a significant role in policy relating to the US, China or other crucial relationships, where the Commission president and large member states would lead.

The advantage of the first model is its efficacy, as you would have the space to take initiatives – largely still regarding coordination – and to improve the functioning of the EEAS and its relationship with the Commission. Responsibility for sanctions, which now lies with you, would be coordinated better with the activation of economic-security instruments, which is the responsibility of the Commission. With this model working more effectively, it would be easier for you to argue for an increase in external-action funding in the next EU budget.

Even if only the second model proves to be feasible, several improvements should be made to the current situation. In particular, EU delegations should be upgraded in terms of personnel and expertise, and should be given stronger roles in coordinating EU instruments on the ground. Furthermore, you should have a final say in the appointments of heads of delegations (together with the Commission President), so that these top diplomats have personal links to you.

We believe the first model is preferable. But most important is that the EU makes a choice and breaks the bad habit of nominally assigning powers to you while depriving you of the ability to exercise them in practice. Disempowering your position would make the system even more dysfunctional.

**EU delegations should be upgraded and given stronger roles in coordinating EU instruments on the ground**

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