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Dear incoming High Representative...

For a foreign policy that Europe can believe in. A letter to the designated EU High Representative Josep Borrell

Now that the confirmation dust is about to settle, it is an excellent time to talk about substance concerning our Union's place in the world. With so much at stake, we cannot postpone injecting a greater level of ambition in foreign policy any longer. Building on the uneven, but at times extraordinary, progress achieved in the last five years, we should break the remaining taboos and set an agenda that leads the EU to walk the strategic talk more boldly and with more unity.

The world is changing and the EU has not been immune to many of the negative effects. Hampered by institutional limitations, insufficient unity, or simply political inertia, the EU's external action often proved out-of-sync with the realities the continent was facing.

The unveiling of the EU Global Strategy in 2016 provided a welcome break from the past, trying to remedy many of these pathologies. It crucially did so by taking into account that foreign policy was no longer the privileged domain of EU elites, but an increasing concern for ordinary citizens – 70 per cent of which, according to recent polls support a stronger role for the EU in the world. Terrorism, climate change, a turbulent neighbourhood: all these issues were dealt with in the Strategy, reflecting the need not for an abstract document but one that would shake things on the ground.

This June, the Strategy turned three years old. These three years have taught us a lot about what works and what doesn't. They have also created ample room to confront some basic questions: What kind of policies should fill in the existing gaps? How to succeed where you have failed?

Below are five main takeaways worth remembering when trying to answer these questions when charting a new course forward.

Five lessons and priorities for the next five years

First, the global flux makes the need to preserve the Global Strategy's legacy and its innovative elements abundantly clear. The EU simply does not have the luxury to wait a further 13 years for another strategic document of this kind. Therefore, having an exercise of this magnitude and scope under every new Commission mandate is also necessary.

Second, it's simply too easy to engage in endless navel-gazing about the instances where Brussels did not live up to the task set out in the Strategy. Nonetheless, it's vastly more important to take care of the seeds that were planted and have started blooming. Take defence for example: Once seen as the ultimate taboo topic, the EU's progress, illustrated but not restricted to the establishment of PESCO, presents a formidable opportunity for raising the bloc's ambition.

Now, instead of distracting discussions about an EU army, let's focus on getting the defence architecture right. The current intergovernmental institutional framework should be carefully restructured, with the creation of a Council of Defence Ministers chaired by the EU High Representative and supported by the Steering Board of the European Defence Agency. The European Commission should provide much-needed resources, while a defence committee in the European Parliament could exercise proper oversight on capability development and missions.

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Third, qualified majority voting needs to be introduced in foreign and security policy now, starting with decisions related to human rights and civilian missions. Unfortunately, unanimity has too often meant collective silence, while the vacuous rhetoric of unity has frequently paved the way for further disunity, inaction and irrelevance. This change needs to be backed up by proper compliance procedures, to avoid the disastrous consequences of free riding and unequal burden sharing among member states and to show that rights are inextricably linked to responsibilities.

Fourth, Europe is what it says on the tin: EU institutions need to continue standing firm on violations of the Union's fundamental principles within European borders, starting with rule of law and solidarity. How is this relevant for foreign policy? It's about credibility: the EU cannot but defend these values across its territory, while

continuing to advocate in favour of them outside of it.

Finally, if we want to see the implementation of a foreign policy that delivers, let's not be content with muddling through. Instead, let's take actionable steps towards achieving another taboo concept, strategic autonomy. We should be sincere about pursuing this objective but this does call for a much more comprehensive understanding of the term: not merely its undeniable link to security and defence, but rather one encompassing other important policy areas. This is as much about defence as it is about trade, 5G, countering foreign (digital) interference, or a country's energy grid. All elements should complement the EU's capacity to decide on its own, on the basis of its own interests and values, what priority actions it will pursue, and with which international actors.

Is this all easy you might ask – of course not.

But what can be the alternative? There's now more than sufficient evidence that the EU's member states need each other to succeed, especially on strategically relevant areas such as diplomacy, security or climate adjustment.

Moving towards these five objectives is a necessity, as otherwise Europe risks becoming irrelevant at the international level. Sooner or later, this realisation will sink in. But instead of simply waiting for it to hit, let's prepare for it. This should form the very core of the EU foreign policy we aspire to see, a foreign policy with an impact, ultimately, a foreign policy we can believe in.



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