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Mogherini's legacy

Federica Mogherini has remained a pale figure as the EU's chief diplomat over the years. So what can we expect next?

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A difficult legacy awaits Josep Borrell. On 1 November 2019, he will succeed Federica Mogherini as High Representative (HR) of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. During Mogherini's five-year term of office, the external conditions for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) have changed radically: Russian foreign policy has become revisionist; China is no longer just an extended production line but a systemic rival; and US President Donald Trump pursues a transactional foreign policy and sees the EU as an opponent. The politics of rival great powers is increasingly calling into question the EU's foreign policy model, which is based on multilateralism and a rules-based international order.

If the EU is not to become a mere pawn in this game, but to actively shape international politics, it must act more than ever as a unified global player in the future. In recent years, however, the EU member states have in practice found it increasingly difficult in almost all policy areas to resolve their differences and find joint European compromises. What's more, the Europeans simply do not have the means, especially in the field of security and defence policy, that enable them to pursue a truly sovereign foreign policy.

The challenges facing the CFSP in general and the future High Representative Borrell in particular are enormous. Faster decision-making processes are needed to enable the EU to act more effectively, and consensus needs to be forged where until now particular national interests have dominated. In terms of substance, the main priorities must be to maintain multilateralism in an increasingly national, unilateral world, to devise a policy for dealing with the US and China that does not result in the EU falling between the fronts, and to push forward with greater energy in the race to catch up with new technologies.

One of Borrell's first actions in office should therefore be to begin

revising the EU Global Strategy and to ensure that member states identify more strongly this time with the outcome. In the course of this process, Borrell should launch a debate on the controversial concept of 'strategic autonomy'. The concept should be defined, and a clear level of ambition should be set for the objectives that the EU itself wants to achieve at global level in areas such as defence, trade or technology. Of course, it's not enough just to develop such a strategy. The EU must also improve its capacity to realise its objectives.

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If the foreign policy record of Mogherini's term of office is taken as a yardstick for the future viability of the CFSP, then the extent of the gulf between ambition and reality quickly becomes clear. The EU has often had no answers to the foreign policy crises of recent years, and its influence on the international system as a whole has declined. Only rarely have the heads of state and government managed to act together quickly and decisively.

In retrospect, even the few major successes of Mogherini's tenure now seem to be at risk. This applies first and foremost to the so-called Iran Deal concluded in 2015, which the Europeans are unlikely to be able to salvage following its termination by the US. Another success, the mediation of direct talks between Serbia and Kosovo ('the EU-facilitated dialogue') to normalise relations between the two sides, has been faltering since 2016. The conflict remains unresolved. Only Europe's sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea represent a clear success story – at least so far.

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Meanwhile, the EU has not succeeded in transforming its neighbouring countries on its own model. To date, the EU has shown itself to be totally impotent at this, especially in the Middle East. In the Syrian conflict, which remains the worst trouble spot in Europe's southern neighbourhood, the EU has remained a spectator, even though it's directly impacted by the conflict. In Libya, the EU has not been even remotely able to stabilise the country. Even worse: instead of helping to build a unified European position, the EU member states most directly engaged – France and Italy – have in recent months preferred to undermine each other. It has just become clear again how difficult it is to send so much as a single

European observer mission to the Strait of Hormuz. The fact is that the EU has not played a significant role in resolving the majority of the external and security crises of the last five years.

The future of European foreign policy

However, the meagre track record of Federica Mogherini's time as High Representative can only be laid to a limited extent directly at her door. She certainly paid too much attention to balancing the interests of the member states and preferred to avoid awkward issues and disputes with the heads of state and government. Instead of vigorously driving European foreign policy, she preferred to be the EU's chief diplomat overseeing foreign relations. What remains from Mogherini's work is above all the EU Global Strategy published in 2016 and her strong commitment to the mobilisation of PESCO and the creation of the European Defence Fund.

Like Catherine Ashton before her, Federica Mogherini has remained a pale figure in office over these years, especially when compared to the former 'Mr CFSP', Javier Solana. This is not mere chance: following the extension of the High Representative's powers in the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the member states were apparently unwilling to appoint an experienced European leader to the post. When Federica Mogherini took office, she had little experience of government and had only worked as Italian Foreign Minister for eight months. In addition, neither Jean-Claude Juncker nor Donald Tusk made foreign policy a top priority, nor did they give Mogherini any special support.

The scope afforded to Mogherini to influence and design policy was therefore very limited from the outset. Although on the one hand the Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the Brussels level in order to make European foreign policy more coherent and effective, the member states did not in practice want to give up major competences. Consequently, all important strategic decisions under the CFSP are still taken on the basis of unanimity at the level of the heads of state or government in the European Council. The CFSP is often no more than the expression of the 'lowest common denominator' among diverging interests. Moreover, Mogherini had no effective means of preventing the member states from pursuing their own independent foreign policy in parallel with the Union, even if it ran counter to European interests – for example, when Greece prevented a joint declaration on Chinese human rights violations at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2017.

Josep Borrell may be able to lend more energy and charisma to European

foreign policy in the future. He has considerably greater experience than Mogherini and is known for not shying away from conflict. In Ursula von der Leyen, he certainly has a partner at the head of the Commission for whom Europe's ability to conduct foreign policy enjoys the highest priority. But Borrell cannot achieve anything without the support of the member states. We have to hope that they will increasingly recognise the extent to which it is in their own interests for the EU to play a bigger role in international affairs.



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