FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 07.03.2018 | Ana Palacio

Juncker's dangerous defence strategy

The European Commission wants to dictate defence policy in the EU. We mustn't let it.

These days, there are just three events that bring together all of the main actors in international politics: the annual General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly, G20 summits, and the Munich Security Conference (MSC). That makes it all the more disappointing that the latest MSC, which took place in mid-February, brought only one big idea – and not a good one.

The MSC has long been a place not just to see and be seen, but also to hear and be heard. Yet despite much handwringing about the state of the world, this year's meeting produced few initiatives to speak of.

This stands in stark contrast to years past. In 2015, the MSC helped to generate momentum for the subsequent deal on Iran's nuclear programme. In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin famously used the MSC to present his stark worldview, in a speech that presaged Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine.

At this year's conference, the one big idea was European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's call to shift authority over foreign and defence policymaking in the European Union from the member states to the Commission.

While Juncker is right to assert that the EU should take steps to ensure that it can act effectively in world politics, his approach is deeply flawed.

To assume a leading role in the world, the EU needs a culture and incentives that support genuine cohesion and cooperative action. Rather than take the time to achieve that, Juncker wants to take a short cut, arguing that, when it comes to foreign and defence policies, the EU cannot be required always to achieve unanimity.

Foreign and defence policy are areas where EU

And yet the EU is founded on an agreement that, in exchange for membership, states relinquish a certain degree of sovereignty in

member states are supposed to retain authority.

some areas. But foreign and defence policy are areas where states are supposed to retain authority. Flippantly attempting to change that bargain threatens to set the European project on a dangerous course.

Juncker's proposal at the MSC echoes similar recommendations on the single market, which he floated in his 2017 State of the Union address. Both are part of a broader effort to shift power from the European Council to the Commission – an effort that Juncker buttressed by recently appointing his Svengali, Martin Selmayr, as the Commission's secretary-general, the body's top civil-service job.

Now, Selmayr – who, as Juncker's chief of staff, has been compared to figures like Machiavelli and Rasputin – will have far greater influence, including over the selection of a new Commission president next year. The way the appointment was carried out – shrouded in secrecy, in order to avoid the involvement of member states – should do more than raise eyebrows.

But such machinations are merely a symptom of a deeper problem with Juncker's approach. The problem is not that his approach may succeed – a functioning United States of Europe would achieve a lot – but rather that it cannot. Europeans are simply not prepared to cede more sovereignty to the EU.

Europeans are simply not prepared to cede more sovereignty to the EU.

Since the global financial crisis erupted a decade ago, Europe has been firmly in inter-governmental mode. The last thing it needs is another grand-sounding scheme that it is not in a position to carry out. Between the Economic and Monetary Union, the Banking Union, and the Energy Union – each of which was launched with great fanfare and is now adrift – the EU already has plenty of those.

Rather than politely applauding castles in the sky, EU officials and member governments need to work, with a frank and realistic mindset, to build consensus on foreign and security issues. This means not changing the rules at the top, but rather building cohesion from below.

To ensure that this effort does not end up being dragged out interminably, as so many EU discussions do, we should begin with concrete objectives. The Permanent Structured Cooperation in the field of defence – agreed by the European Council last December – is a good

place to start, with countries increasing, for example, joint strategic planning at the European level. Inspired by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's recent proposal to tie EU funding to the acceptance of migrants, member states should also work to create stronger incentives for cooperation.

There is no question that it is difficult for 27 sovereign countries to act as one. But, as tempting as it may be, trying to paper over differences or avoid dissent – let alone destroying the compact at the core of the European project – will not make matters any easier. The only way to get where Europe needs to go is through a realistic and gradual effort to build unity. For Europe, it is this that should be the key lesson of the MSC.

(C) Project Syndicate



Ana Palacio
Madrid

Ana Palacio, a former Spanish foreign minister and former Senior Vice President of the World Bank, is a member of the Spanish Council of State, a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University, and a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the United States.