

Why are we discussing this?

The EU says: [“The EU champions multilateralism and a rules-based global order. It seeks a coordinated approach to external action - from trade and international partnerships to foreign security and defence policy - that secures a stronger and more united voice for Europe in the world. We also work closely with neighbouring countries, introducing a comprehensive strategy for our relations with Africa and reaffirming the European perspective for the countries of the Western Balkans.”](#)

But what do you think?

What are the key issues?

Foreign policy: The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is the EU’s joint foreign and security policy.

It seeks to:

- preserve peace;
- reinforce international security;
- promote international cooperation, democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The EU has a diplomatic service, the European External Action Service (EEAS), which was formally launched in 2011. The EEAS acts under the authority of the EU’s High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP), a position currently held by Josep Borrell Fontelles. The High Representative represents the EU internationally (together with the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission), chairs the EU Foreign Affairs Council and serves as a Vice President of the European Commission.

Security and defence: The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is an integral part of the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP). It includes the progressive framing of a common EU defence policy, which aims at allowing the EU to enhance its military capacities and deploy missions outside the EU for peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter. The CSDP is covered by Articles 42-46 of the Treaty on European Union. These articles state that the CSDP shall respect the obligations of certain Member States which see their common defence realised in NATO. They also contain a clause stating that the defence provisions shall not prejudice the ‘specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States’ (for example, the neutral status of some Member States). Decisions relating to the CSDP are taken by the Council of the European Union by unanimity. However, it is possible for some Member States to deepen their cooperation within CSDP via the Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defence (PESCO).

External Trade Policy: The European Union is the world's largest exporter. With around 450 million consumers, a single market with common rules, it also represents an attractive export market for non-EU countries. Since the 1950s, the EU has had exclusive power to legislate on trade matters and to conclude international trade agreements, based on World Trade Organisation rules, on behalf of its Member States. Its policy covers trade in goods and services but also matters such as commercial aspects of intellectual property and foreign direct investment. It has enacted trade defence and market access instruments mainly with the purpose of protecting EU businesses from obstacles to trade. Lastly, it assists developing countries to trade by means of lower duties and support programmes and since 2001 has operated on the ‘Everything But Arms’ principle where all imports to the EU from the Least Developed Countries are duty-free and quota-free, with the exception of armaments.

Neighbourhood Policy: First created in 2004, the European neighbourhood policy (ENP) seeks to establish special relations with 16 of the EU's neighbours in the South and East of Europe. The ENP partially overlaps with the EU enlargement policy, but focuses specifically on four priority areas:

- good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights;
- economic development;
- security; and
- migration and mobility.

The objective is to enhance the resilience of states and societies in the EU's neighbourhood. The ENP includes the principle of differentiation and tailor-made approaches with each partner, including greater mutual ownership.

Development: The European Union is a key player as regards international development aid. The main objective of this policy is to reduce and then eradicate poverty, targeting countries in greatest need and focussing on aspects such as social protection, health, education, jobs, business development, sustainable agriculture and energy. EU development policy has developed gradually: at the outset, it covered only overseas countries and territories associated with the EU but was then extended to include all developing countries.

Humanitarian aid : The European Union is the world's leading humanitarian aid donor. This aid, in the form of financing, provision of goods or services, or technical assistance, aims to help prepare for and deal urgently with crises that seriously affect populations outside the EU.

EU action is based on the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, and comprises three elements: emergency aid, food aid, and aid for refugees and displaced persons.

Enlargement: The EU has grown from the six original members to 27 Member States as a result of seven enlargements. EU enlargement policy currently concerns those countries applying for EU membership, and the potential candidates from the Western Balkans.

The Treaty on European Union (Art. 49) and the Copenhagen criteria provide the framework for enlargement, the objective being to prepare applicant countries so that they can assume their obligations as Member States on accession. The EU's stabilisation and association process aims over time to bring the potential candidate countries' legislation and standards closer to those of the EU.

What has the EU been doing?

The emergence of a concrete and cohesive framework for foreign policy was a gradual process, starting as far back as 1970 with the establishment of European Political Cooperation (EPC). In 1992, the [Treaty of Maastricht](#) established the foundations of a formal foreign policy platform through the introduction of the [Common Foreign and Security Policy](#) (CFSP). The CFSP placed primary responsibility for foreign policy with the Council of the European Union, i.e the Member States. In the early 1990's, policies included the promotion of peace and political stability in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle-East, electoral observation in post-Soviet Russia and post-apartheid South Africa and the provision of aid to the Balkans

EU foreign policy has evolved gradually. [The Treaty of Amsterdam](#), adopted in 1997 and entering effect in 1999, introduced the post of High Representative which was intended to improve the international visibility of the EU and to improve the coherence and coordination EU foreign policy.

[The Lisbon Treaty](#) (2009), significantly reinforced CFSP structures including the role of the High Representative. The Treaty introduced the [European External Action Service](#) (EEAS), an EU administration dedicated exclusively to foreign affairs.

A number of attempts have been made to bring greater strategic direction to the EU's global role. The [European Security Strategy](#) was adopted in 2003 and aimed to establish clear objectives for advancing the EU's global security interests. The [Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy](#), adopted in 2016, was a more comprehensive attempt to improve the effectiveness of the EU as a global player.

However, significant challenges remain and the EU is often criticised for being an economic giant but a political dwarf in foreign affairs. While the EU plays a large role in trade policy and its regulatory standards often set rules across the globe (e.g. privacy, competition, environment), the EU sometimes struggles to act as a single actor in foreign, security and defence policy

A major obstacle in terms of policy implementation is the divergence of interests and approaches between individual EU Member States, rooted in their respective histories, geography and foreign policy traditions. Therefore, a further obstacle to the EU's ability to play a global role results from the decision-making mechanisms. CFSP is an 'intergovernmental' policy area, in which individual Member States decide on policy positions [unanimously](#). However, given the divergence of interests between individual EU Member States and additionally, between EU Member States and EU institutions, the EU often is paralyzed and unable to take action rapidly and effectively. As such the EU is frequently criticised for its limitations arising from the difficulty of reaching unanimous agreement on some subjects. This can result in a delayed response. For example, in 2020, a proposal to impose [sanctions](#) on Belarus initially failed to find agreement among all Member States and this led to a delay in imposing sanctions.

According to the Treaties, the Council could decide unanimously to trigger a so-called '[passerelle clause](#)' and change decision-making to '[qualified majority voting](#)' (QMV). However, this exception - included in the Treaty of Lisbon - is limited in application and the problem is compounded by the fact that all Member States would have to unanimously agree to use qualified majority voting.

In the area of defence policy, the EU is often termed a 'civilian power' in contrast to a 'military power'. Often considered to be more effective in the use 'soft power' or non-coercive power, EU action has primarily focused on humanitarianism, social stabilisation and democratisation. While EU investment in 'hard power' has evolved recently, the EU's ability to effectively implement policy in an international landscape increasingly dominated by geopolitical competition remains challenged- it is for this reason that the EU has renewed its focus on defence integration in the face of new and evolving threats.

Looking to the future

COVID-19 is expected to magnify existing geopolitical dynamics including a decline in multilateralism, upheaval in neighbouring countries, strained relations with Russia and China, the weaponisation of international trade and instability in the Middle East and North Africa. A decline in democracy is a further foreign policy consideration for the EU, both internally and externally. Globally, cyber-security and data-security remain concerns. The cyber-environment is increasingly precarious, particularly in terms of cyber espionage. Disinformation arising from state and other malicious sources is another relevant issue.

One of the primary challenges for EU foreign policy will be what is termed the EU [neighbourhood](#) – the EU's eastern and southern neighbouring countries. Further instability there has the potential to affect the EU in different ways, for example, increased migration, political instability and creating a fertile ground for terrorism. In addition to economic issues created by COVID-19, the Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods have existing serious difficulties. For example, continued violence in Libya, the ongoing civil war in Syria and Russia's occupation of parts of Ukraine.

Increasing the EU's defence capability through the [Common Security and Defence Policy](#) (CSDP) is also regarded as important to foreign policy efficiency. Defence cooperation is an area where significant advances have been made in recent years particularly with the establishment of [Permanent Structured Cooperation](#) (PESCO) in 2017. PESCO aims to deepen defence cooperation between Member States across a number of areas but only if they are capable and willing to do so. Ireland engages in 2 out of 47 PESCO projects related to training and maritime surveillance. The Irish defence forces have also taken part in EU military operations related to peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts, for example in Mali, Chad, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU naval mission in the Mediterranean. The European Council gave guarantees in 2009 that "the EU's security and defence policy does not affect or prejudice Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality."

This drive for progress extends beyond defence capability to its ability to act in other areas. The pandemic exposed the EU's dependence on far-flung medical and raw material supply chains. The EU is also attempting to reinforce relationships with EU partners in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.

The question of how to progress strategic relationships with other major global actors will be another important consideration for the future of the EU's global role. Relations with Russia and China are increasingly strained and those same countries complicate the EU's relationships with neighbouring countries and beyond, particularly in Africa. Joe Biden's election as President of the United States was welcomed in Europe in the hope he would re-establish and reinvigorate the historically strong ties between Europe and the United States. While there are some signs that cooperation has become more productive since his election, relations continue to be strained in some key areas, particularly trade. While outside the EU, the UK remains a part of Europe and a key partner in Europe's security and defence infrastructure. The EU and UK will have to cooperate on global issues into the future.

There are also questions around the EU's commitment to the [enlargement](#) process, following a number of delays in progressing the applications of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, to give just one example. Current candidate countries include Albania, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates. EU enlargement has traditionally been viewed as a positive and stabilising force in candidate countries. However, uncertainty over the commitment of current Member States to further enlargement has undermined the process.

EU foreign policy is entering an era of re-definition. In responding to the realities of the post-COVID political landscape, the EU will have to consider recalibrating certain policy instruments in order to increase the effectiveness of its foreign and external policy. To that end, the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and High Representative Josep Borrell have expressed an interest in expanding qualified majority voting. Regardless of instrument reform, the EU will also have to work to reconcile differences between Member States.

Questions for consideration

1. Which global relationships should the EU prioritise?
2. In foreign policy what areas should the EU be able to decide on and what should be left to Member States? Who should represent the EU internationally?
3. What values should guide the EU's international action?
4. What should be the focus of EU defence policy?
5. Should the EU enlarge further?

More information

Listen:

- The future of EU-China-US relations: This podcast episode from the European Council on Foreign Relations examines the prospects for transatlantic cooperation on China, now that there is a new US administration, and is available [here](#).
- What Role for the High Representative for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy post-2019?: This podcast from UACES, the academic association for Contemporary European Studies, includes David O'Sullivan, former EU ambassador to the US and Ben Tonra of University College Dublin, and is available [here](#)

Read:

- The geopolitical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic: This 2020 report from the European Commission examines relations with China, Russia, US, Western Balkans and offers scenarios by 2025, and is available [here](#).
- Foreign policy consequences of coronavirus: This short 'At A Glance' 2020 briefing note from the European Parliament highlights how the pandemic has impacts the future of multilateralism, a primary concern of EU foreign policy, and is available [here](#).

- Qualified Majority Voting ([here](#)) and Unanimity ([here](#)): Here brief outliners are presented on two of the EU's voting procedures, qualified majority voting and unanimity.

Watch:

- The Future of EU Foreign Policy: This 2018 event at the Institute for International and Europe Affairs (IIEA) with Stefan Lehane looks at the future of the EU's foreign policy, and is available [here](#).
- European Defence: This short video from the European Parliament looks at the EU's defence policy, and specifically looks at PESCO, and is available [here](#).
- Qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy: Pros and Cons: This 2021 video from the European Parliament looks at the advantages and disadvantages of the use of the EU voting system of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It is available [here](#).