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JOINT  
Research Papers No. 24

February 2024

## Unlocking EU Foreign and Security Potential: Measures to Mitigate Internal Contestation, Regional Fragmentation and Multipolar Competition

Sarah van Bentum  
and Gregor Walter-Drop



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N. 959143.

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# Unlocking EU Foreign and Security Potential: Measures to Mitigate Internal Contestation, Regional Fragmentation and Multipolar Competition

Sarah van Bentum and Gregor Walter-Drop\*

## Abstract

This paper investigates the potential avenues available to the European Union in implementing innovative strategies to mitigate challenges within its foreign and security policy (EUFSP) arising from three primary contextual elements: internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. The paper emphasises the significance of achieving a delicate equilibrium between ameliorating disagreements within the EU and among member states while simultaneously addressing global issues and international crises shaped by the fragmentation of state and regional governance mechanisms as well as great power rivalry. These issues often intersect with fundamental national interests and identity of EU member states, thus creating or exacerbating internal contestation. The paper identifies mitigation measures that have already been applied by the EU in international conflict and crisis management, yet sometimes in a more ad-hoc fashion than as a structured and planned procedure. The paper highlights institutional, functional and diplomatic-coalitional measures that can reduce the negative impact of these factors and enhance the long-term viability of EUFSP.

\* Sarah van Bentum is Research Fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin and Scholar-in-Residence at the Federal Foreign Office of Germany. Gregor Walter-Drop is Managing Director of the Peace Academy Rhineland-Palatinate, University Kaiserslautern-Landau (RPTU). Until summer 2023 he was Director of the Knowledge Exchange Lab (KEL) at the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script" at the Freie Universität Berlin. This paper is a fundamentally revised version of a report published within the JOINT project to which Caterina Bedin, Zachary Paikin, Steven Blockmans, Agnés Levallois and Tiffany Guendouz contributed.

# Introduction

In a context of multiple simultaneous crises of global dimension, in which geopolitical competition is intensifying and armed conflict is on the rise,<sup>1</sup> the European Union and its 27 member states are increasingly confronted with the need to effectively operate on the international level – and that primarily means: coherently and in unison. However, agreeing on and implementing a coherent and effective foreign and security policy (EUFSP), namely a policy course to which not just EU institutions but also member states contribute, has proven to be an enormous challenge. Research has shown that the EU's ability to unlock its full potential as a significant global actor is influenced by a multitude of factors, three of which have emerged as particularly salient: internal contestation, regional fragmentation, and multipolar competition.

The EU employs various strategies, tactics and practices to both leverage and mitigate these factors – yet mostly in an ad-hoc fashion and not always systematically framed as such.<sup>2</sup> This paper presents an analysis of such mitigation measures. Building upon the typology introduced by Alcaro and Dijkstra,<sup>3</sup> the paper argues that the mitigation strategies can be clustered in three categories: institutional, functional and diplomatic-coalitional measures. Which measures have already proven useful to deal with the constraining factors, which show limitations and which bear further potential for the EU?

## 1. The context of EUFSP

*Internal contestation* describes a condition that hampers EU member states consensus due to diverse – sometimes conflicting – (domestic) interests that

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<sup>1</sup> Niklas Bremberg et al., *The Everyday Making of EU Foreign and Security Policy. Practices, Socialization and the Management of Dissent*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789907551>; Claudia Baumgart-Ochse et al., “Peace Is a Long Way Off”, in *Peace Report 2023*, June 2023, p. 12-19, <https://www.friedensgutachten.de/en/2023/ausgabe>.

<sup>2</sup> As exemplified in the nine case studies conducted as part of the JOINT project. For information see the project website: <https://www.jointproject.eu>.

<sup>3</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, “Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Heavily Contested World”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming).

reflect back on shaping and agreeing on international policies.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the EU struggles to develop a unified approach to foreign policy issues, leading to inconsistent and sometimes contradictory positions or even blockages between different EU institutions and/or certain member states. Internal contestation can appear on three different levels: within one or more member states, among EU member states and between EU institutions.

*Regional fragmentation* is basically characterised by two elements.<sup>5</sup> The first one refers to the erosion of state institutions or – in the extreme – the complete collapse of state authority within a country, while the second one is the regional spillover effect that draws neighbouring countries and/or regional powers into the ensuing conflicts or subject them to destabilisation themselves – be it via refugees, migration, armed groups (operation across borders) or ‘mere’ (regional) power politics. In general, the internal erosion of state authority (and, in particular, its collapse) forces the EU to pick sides in ensuing conflicts. The erosion usually goes hand in hand with significant humanitarian crises that pose political challenges in their own right. The problem of politically navigating through these conflicts is exacerbated when regional actors are drawn into these conflicts – each of them with their own political agenda and their own history of relations with various EU member states.<sup>6</sup> The extent of the erosion of state authority, the level on which it appears (regional, state or sub-state level of fragmentation) and the degree of regional destabilisation thus characterise regional fragmentation in its hampering effect towards a more effective and coherent EUFSP by multiplying the issues, actors and strategies that have been agreed upon and that are the object of interests of member states.

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<sup>4</sup> Marianna Lovato et al., “The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy. A Literature Review of the Implications of Intra-EU Contestation on Crises and Conflicts”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516>.

<sup>5</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, “Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

<sup>6</sup> Agnès Levallois et al., “Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639>; Stephan Klingebiel, Timo Mahn and Mario Negre, “Fragmentation: A Key Concept for Development Cooperation”, in Stephan Klingebiel, Timo Mahn and Mario Negre (eds), *The Fragmentation of Aid. Concepts, Measurements and Implications for Development Cooperation*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 1-18.

*Multipolar competition* refers to the interplay among existing and emerging global powers – in particular the United States (US), Europe, China and the other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa) countries<sup>7</sup> – but also regional powers such as Turkey, Iran and the Arab Gulf states (with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates invited to join the BRICS in August 2023). Multipolar competition can result in a process in which previously agreed upon international regimes and established norms and procedures for conflict resolution become weaker, which leads to a setting where existing power dynamics are challenged and, eventually, shift.<sup>8</sup> These complex geopolitical dynamics challenge the EUFSP actors and affect their ability to position themselves while seeking to balance their relationships with global players. When analysing the presence and influence of multipolar competition, two aspects stand out: the intensity of multipolar competition (the framing of competition as a zero-sum game) and the scope of multipolar competition as either narrow (issue-focused) or wide (geopolitically overarching).<sup>9</sup> The presence of an enabling international partner, who supports the EU's position (usually the US) often plays a fundamental role when it comes to the effectiveness of EUFSP in the context of multipolar competition.<sup>10</sup>

All three factors raise difficult questions: how can the EU shape and influence the outcome of international crises and conflicts when it simultaneously has to deal with a significant level of disagreement and contestation “at home” *and* with an increasingly challenging (and sometimes outright hostile) international environment?

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Roberts, “The BRICS in the Era of Renewed Great Power Competition”, in *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 49, No. 6 (2019), p. 469-486, DOI 10.1080/09700161.2019.1672930.

<sup>8</sup> Assem Dandashly et al., “Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy: Divergent Approaches to Conflict and Crisis Response”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 6 (December 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=697>.

<sup>9</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, “Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah van Bentum et al., “How to Reduce the Impact of Internal Contestation, Regional Fragmentation and Multipolar Competition on EU Foreign and Security Policy”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 21 (May 2023), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1675>.

## 2. Mitigation measures: Limitation and potential for EUFSP

When thinking about how the EU can gain greater agency in international crisis management against the backdrop of the three factors outlined above, one starting point is to consider what the EU has already been doing to manage these problems. In the following, we present a systematised set of mitigation measures. Most of these have significant potential to enhance EUFSP beyond the context in which they were originally applied.

As highlighted by Alcaro and Dijkstra, measures to mitigate the negative impact of the contextual factors can be classified in three categories.<sup>11</sup> *Institutional measures* include all mitigation strategies and practices centred on the EUFSP actors themselves, that is, EU member states and/or EU institutions as well as their roles and competences. *Functional measures* relate to strategies and/or practices whereby the EU and its member states focus on a limited number of issues or even a single issue. Finally, *diplomatic-coalitional measures* aim to increase the EU and its member states' leverage over other states by reinforcing their engagement through coalitions of like-minded partners (strategic partnering) and multilateral institutions (multilateralisation).

### 2.1 Institutional mitigation measures

Institutional measures aimed at mitigating the negative impact of the three contextual factors, particularly internal contestation, hold significant potential. They encompass negotiation and deliberation, initiatives focused on enhancing internal EU policymaking processes as well as strategic delegation, which also includes indirect delegation.

Engaging in *negotiation and deliberation* among member states can be effective in reframing issues, interests and identities. Intra-EU disagreements often stem from differences in national interests and foreign policy identity constructions, often deeply rooted in history. This type of internal contestation is unavoidable,

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<sup>11</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, "Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy", cit.

given that the EU consists of twenty-seven rather different member states, and is at times particularly difficult to mitigate, as member states are very reluctant to compromise on their perceived national interests or even identities. At the same time, all EU policies have undoubtedly encountered this issue and member states' interests never align easily – be it in foreign policy or any other policy field. In fact, it has been a core role of the EU to find common ground for member states via compromise (in return for creating joint policies in commonly perceived interests), or via reframing interest construction by means of deliberation.

In this context, it is important to note that while variances between member states' foreign policy preferences can sometimes be seen as the logical result of material differences between them (such as geographical location or material resources), there is no automatic connection between such variances and their interpretation in terms of policy preferences. As a matter of fact, policy preferences can be – and often are – based on a political interpretation that can be subject to both negotiation and deliberation. These two terms summarise the core mitigation strategies for member-state level contestation.<sup>12</sup>

*Negotiation* is the process by which member states engage in internal conflict resolution, which can inter alia imply (re-)framing and linking foreign policy strategies.<sup>13</sup> This happens in such a way that a consensus can be found by concessions to opposing member states. From the perspective of *deliberation*, conflict resolution occurs through the attempt to convince each member state of the merits of a particular type of approach.

Not surprisingly, negotiation and deliberation as core elements of EU politics are omnipresent in EU crisis and conflict management efforts.<sup>14</sup> Two interesting examples come from Kosovo-Serbia and Israel-Palestine. In the first case, the strategic delegation (see below) of conflict management to EU institutions was,

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah van Bentum et al., “How to Reduce the Impact of Internal Contestation”, cit.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Hill, Michael Smith and Sophie Vanhoonacker, *International Relations and the European Union*, 4th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023; Marianne Riddervold, Jarle Trondal and Akasemi Newsome (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; Jan Zielonka (ed.), *Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy*, The Hague/London/Boston, Kluwer Law International, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah van Bentum et al., “How to Reduce the Impact of Internal Contestation”, cit.

in fact, a deliberate move and, as such, the result of member state negotiation – primarily addressed at overcoming resistance from Spain, Romania and the other non-recognisers of Kosovo’s independence.<sup>15</sup> While the EU has generally been supportive of a two-state solution in the case of Israel and Palestine, there have been disagreements among EU institutions over how to achieve this. This led to a blockage on the level of EU institutions, which was eventually resolved by *negotiations* on the member state level. Inter-services bodies do exist to resolve conflict between EU institutions – e.g., the Commissioners’ Group ‘A stronger Europe in the World’ to mediate between Commission Directorate-Generals, or the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) to synergise the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission. However, in the case of Israel and Palestine the blockage could only be resolved upon the intervention of EU member states, which highlights member state’s ability to act effectively when necessary.<sup>16</sup> The ensuing call for reforms of the competences and portfolios of EU institutions can be seen as the result of a (non-strategic) *deliberation* about the adverse political effects of the existing policy-making mechanisms.

It should also be noted that the very existence of the inter-service conflict-mediation bodies illustrate the severity of EU-level contestations. This points to another mitigation measure with significant potential, the *enhancement of policy-making processes* EUFSP. Enhancements in these processes help clarify roles, reduce institutional competition and enhance communication and collaboration, as well as the effective utilisation of policy instruments. The case of Ethiopia highlights how a lack of communication, analysis, information gathering and sharing among EU institutions put the EU into a poor position to act promptly when the war in Tigray broke out in late 2020.<sup>17</sup> By more precisely defining the various tools, platforms, and means of action for intra-EU dialogue, a more accurate and effective approach to formulating European foreign policies can be achieved. By aligning efforts and streamlining objectives, the EU can ensure that its actions are conducive to the

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<sup>15</sup> Pol Bargués et al., “Engagement against All Odds? Navigating Member States’ Contestation of EU Policy on Kosovo”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 12 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2295893>.

<sup>16</sup> Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Soli Özel, “EU Policy Towards Israel-Palestine Conflict: Are Mitigation Actions Also Limited?”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, “EU Policy towards Ethiopia amidst the Tigray War: The Limits of Mitigating Fragmentation”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 17 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2302473>.



interests of its member states, foster cooperation and prevent any adverse effects that could arise from competing interests. An enhanced policymaking process also prevents engagement in domains where positive outcomes are less likely and minimise the depletion of the EU's geopolitical capital. Explicit calls for such enhancement have been made not least in the context of the Israel-Palestine case, in particular.<sup>18</sup>

Strategic or *direct delegation* of tasks or issues to EU institutions often proves beneficial for EU member states, as it diminishes the prominence of conflicts between member states. An example where the EU has applied the strategy of delegation is the Kosovo-Serbia dossier, where the EU institutions manage the daily operations in response to the conflict, which relieves those member states (Spain, Romania, Cyprus, Greece and Slovakia) that have not yet formally recognised Kosovo's independence from engaging directly in status-relevant issues and avoids blockage.<sup>19</sup>

Another strategy involves informal or *indirect delegation* of responsibilities to a limited number of member states.<sup>20</sup> This measure is often quite effective in mitigating internal contestation-related challenges. These lead groups often gain recognition from other member states and benefit from enhanced legitimacy through collaboration with EU institutions. A prime example is the Contact Group for the Balkans, which has played a significant role in promoting stability and reconciliation in the region. Another notable instance is the E3/EU Iran team, comprising France, Germany, the United Kingdom (before and after it left the EU) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP). The group was instrumental in addressing concerns related to Iran's nuclear programme, eventually contributing to the 2015 agreement called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The E3/EU remained committed to the agreement even after the United States withdrew

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<sup>18</sup> Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., "Stalled by Division: EU Internal Contestation over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 19 (February 2023), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1575>.

<sup>19</sup> Pol Bargués et al., "Engagement against All Odds?", cit.

<sup>20</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran's Nuclear Crisis. Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy Making*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; Riccardo Alcaro and Marco Siddi, "Lead Groups in EU Foreign Policy: the Cases of Iran and Ukraine", in *European Review of International Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (August 2021), p. 143-165, <https://doi.org/10.1163/21967415-08020016>.

in 2018. The position of the lead group and the EU only shifted more recently following the Iranian's government response to public protests in 2022.<sup>21</sup>

While the EU lead group on Iran has enjoyed a good measure of recognition and legitimacy within the EU, there are also less legitimate forms, such as the Normandy format on Ukraine, created by Germany and France in 2014 with the aim of negotiating a peaceful resolution of the Russian-induced war in Ukraine's Donbas region.<sup>22</sup>

These forms of lead groups raise questions about inclusivity and representation. Nonetheless, whether more or less legitimate, they demonstrate the EU's flexible approach in leveraging ad-hoc coalitions to address specific foreign policy challenges beyond the scope of formal treaty arrangements. This 'lead group' approach has been recently somewhat formalised in the 'Team Europe' formula, which showcases the Union's unified representation in a semi-coordinated manner. One example is when EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte met with Tunisian President Kais Saied to address African migration concerns.<sup>23</sup>

Table 1 summarises the use of institutional mitigation measures for the subset of case studies where they were used (or demanded). *Negotiation and deliberation* are virtually omnipresent (as in all EU politics); the cases of Kosovo-Serbia and Israel-Palestine are highlighted here because of the apparent link to other mitigations measures. This particular approach remains applicable to all constellations of contextual factors; it can be seen as the 'default' of EU politics from which EUFSP is no exception.

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<sup>21</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "Weathering the Geopolitical Storm: The Ever-elusive Success of EU Policy towards Iran", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 6 November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2273852>.

<sup>22</sup> Kristi Raik et al., "EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 10 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>.

<sup>23</sup> European Commission, *Press Statement by President von der Leyen with Italian Prime Minister Meloni, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and Tunisian President Saied*, 11 June 2023, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/4483\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/node/4483_en).

The potential of the *enhancement of EU policy-making processes* was particularly visible (also to member states) in the Israel-Palestine and Ethiopia cases,<sup>24</sup> which are marked by the coincidence of member state level contestation and inter-institutional competition between EU institutions. When these forms of contestations coincide, the deficiencies of EU-level processes become particularly visible, and the need for reform is particularly palpable.

Looking across the case studies, it is probably no accident that *direct delegation* was particularly successful in the case of Kosovo, over which contestation happens at the purely domestic level because conflict resolution efforts may create dangerous precedents for individual member states, with Spain and four other member states fearing to fuel their own secessionist movements. Strategic delegation helps reduce the pressure on the affected member states and at the same time weakens the link to the domestic analogy (which suggests itself less if the dominant player is the EU rather than the member states).

**Table 1** | Institutional mitigation measures by applicable case study

Case	Direct delegation	Indirect delegation	Negotiation and deliberation	Enhancement of EU policy-making
Kosovo-Serbia	X		X	
Ukraine		X (pre-2022)	X (post-2022)	
Iran		X	(X)	
Israel-Palestine			X	X (need identified)
Ethiopia			(X)	X (need identified)

*Indirect delegation* to “contact” or “lead groups” could be observed in the Ukraine and Iran cases. It might have had limited success (in an otherwise rather adverse environment in terms of multipolar competition), but it was a productive way to handle both internal disagreements, the origin of which is both purely domestic (e.g., Germany’s aversion to use force against Russia for historical reasons) or resides in different constructions of the national interest (with many EU countries

<sup>24</sup> Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al., “Stalled by Division”, cit.; Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Soli Özel, “EU Policy Towards Israel-Palestine Conflict”, cit.; Francesca Caruso and Jesutimilehin O. Akamo, “EU Policy towards Ethiopia amidst the Tigray War”, cit.

unwilling to harm their ties to the US to pursue non-proliferation objectives in Iran).

## 2.2 Functional mitigation measures

Functional mitigation measures encompass a range of strategies, tactics and actions designed to minimise the impact of the three contextual factors by focusing on the issues rather than the EUFSP actors. These measures can manifest themselves in the form of selective engagement (decoupling, compartmentalisation and prioritisation) or issue-linkages.

*Decoupling* involves temporarily setting aside contentious issues while focusing on attainable goals and aiming to achieve positive spill-over effects. This strategy was used in the case of Kosovo-Serbia to mitigate domestic level contestation. The core of the intra-EU contestation in that case is a structural similarity between the issue at the centre of the conflict and a domestic conflict in one or more member states. Contestation arises because the affected members want to avoid a dangerous precedent for their own country and, in effect, block or delay coherent EU policies. In such cases, decoupling is geared at breaking the connection and – if possible – even the analogy between the international conflict and the respective problem. The most contentious issue – formal recognition of Kosovar independence – was ‘parked’ while focusing on pragmatic ‘lower hanging fruits’ and hoping for eventual positive spill-over effects.<sup>25</sup> Decoupling may also involve improving the delivery of humanitarian aid as a relatively uncontroversial aspect of EUFSP and thus again a ‘low hanging fruit’ – clearly visible in the cases of Venezuela and Syria.<sup>26</sup>

*Compartmentalisation* is a step up from the ‘setting aside’ strategy of decoupling. It implies strictly separating diplomatic activities by topic. An example is the case of Iran, where most global actors from Russia to China to the US and the EU

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<sup>25</sup> Pol Bargués et al., “Engagement against All Odds?”, cit.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Ayuso et al., “Constraints, Dilemmas and Challenges for EU Foreign Policy in Venezuela”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 5 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2289647>; Caterina Bedin, Tiffany Guendouz and Agnès Levallois, “From Conflict Management to Shielding EU Stability: How Syria’s Fragmentation Diverted the EU(FSP) from Action to Reaction”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 20 November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2277212>.

compartmentalised their diplomacy with Teheran around its nuclear activities.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the E3 and the HRVP also used *prioritisation* of the nuclear issue to get around internal contestation deriving from various member states having special interests in their bilateral relations with Iran.<sup>28</sup>

*Issue-linkage* is the opposite of selective engagement. The point is that more problematic issues are linked to less problematic issues to make agreement on the problematic ones easier. Issue-linkage can come in two variants. Firstly, it can be used to facilitate agreements among member states by linking certain issues to other issues to address differences in their interests and identities. Secondly, it can be used to leverage the EU's preferences over its external interlocutors in crisis management. Sometimes the two variants go hand in hand. An interesting example is the Venezuela case, where demands for the re-establishment of democratic processes in Venezuela was linked to a restart of the summit between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (CELAC). These agreements were not only in the interest of Venezuela; they were also a long-standing preference for various member states who could be brought 'in line' with regard to their position vis-à-vis the Venezuelan regime.<sup>29</sup> Similar mechanisms were used in the Syria case, though with lesser success.<sup>30</sup>

Table 2 summarises the use of functional mitigation measures for the subset of case studies where they could be identified. Looking at the contextual factors, it is apparent that selective engagement can be used to address member state level contestations – independent of the question whether they are rooted in domestic level contestations or not. It is easy to see why: selective engagement takes the dissenting members states (or their respective audiences) out of the 'line of fire'. The question remains, however, to which extent positive spill-overs eventually occur. This is by no means obvious as the recent deterioration in the Kosovo-Serbia relations and the EU's rather feeble reaction to it illustrate. It seems that the success or failure of selective engagement is not least dependent on the context

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<sup>27</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "Weathering the Geopolitical Storm", cit.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Anna Ayuso et al., "Constraints, Dilemmas and Challenges for EU Foreign Policy in Venezuela", cit.

<sup>30</sup> Caterina Bedin, Tiffany Guendouz and Agnès Levallois, "From Conflict Management to Shielding EU Stability", cit.

in terms of regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. In the face of large regional fragmentation or fierce multipolar competition, selective engagement will remain rather ‘selective’ indeed.

Issue-linkage was ultimately not successful in the Venezuela case either, but that does not change the fact that it can be considered a powerful tool if the positive ‘prize’ is right. Here, the EU has strong assets, in particular trade relations and – ultimately – the prospect for EU membership (as in the case of Serbia and Kosovo and Ukraine).

**Table 2** | Functional mitigation measures by applicable case study

Case	Selective engagement			Issue-linkage
	<i>Decoupling</i>	<i>Compartmentalisation</i>	<i>Prioritisation</i>	
Iran		X	X	
Israel-Palestine	X			
Venezuela				X
Kosovo-Serbia	X			
Syria	X			X

## 2.3 Diplomatic-coalitional mitigation measures

Diplomatic-coalitional measures encompass mitigation strategies that involve multilateralisation and strategic collaboration or partnering. These measures aim to leverage the international level by establishing robust partnerships, both within (multilateralisation) and outside formal organisations (strategic partnerships).

*Multilateralisation* becomes an option wherever institutionalised partnerships are present and a unified response is feasible. The decisive point is that the momentum of a multilateral response makes it hard for dissenting members states to maintain opposition. A classic example is Germany reluctantly but gradually going along with arms deliveries to Ukraine – despite significant domestic-level contestation in the context of deeply divided public.<sup>31</sup> The various components of EUFSP – chiefly EU sanctions against Russia based on the violations of the principles of

<sup>31</sup> Kristi Raik et al., “EU Policy towards Ukraine”, cit.

the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations Charter, the deployment of the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine, the opening of EU accession talks with Ukraine, as well as arms deliveries funded through the European Peace Facility – were all part of the same deeply multilateral process. Germany could eventually not resist the momentum and joined in.<sup>32</sup>

Another instance of multilateralisation is to be identified in the case of Iran, at least until the collapse of the talks on the restoration of the JCPOA in August 2022.<sup>33</sup> The E3/EU group explicitly anchored its work in the Non-Proliferation Treaty and closely cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency while intensively involving the United Nations Security Council. The principles and norms informing these regimes and institutions were so universally accepted that member-state level contestation was rather difficult, while at the same time common membership in these institutions served as an ‘antidote’ to multipolar competition.<sup>34</sup> Making these principles and regimes the object of great rivalry conflict would have come at a high price even for global players – regrettably, this cost did not deter former President Donald Trump to quit the JCPOA unilaterally in 2018.

*Strategic partnerships* are established on a case-by-case basis, ideally considering the local context and the presence of cooperative partners. The EU has assumed a supportive role for local actors in mediation processes by endorsing bilateral and regional dialogues. An example is the Venezuela case, where the EU coordinated with neighbouring states such as Colombia and Brazil to unfreeze the political dialogue with CELAC to facilitate engagement between Venezuela’s government and opposition.<sup>35</sup> Placing greater reliance on local stakeholders and neighbouring countries is crucial as they possess unquestionable legitimacy in their respective regions and possess a deeper understanding of local dynamics. Therefore, identifying the relevant stakeholders and determining the appropriate level, be it local, national, regional or international, is vital to establish local actors as the primary reference point for mediation and peace processes. These partnerships

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, “Weathering the Geopolitical Storm”, cit.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Anna Ayuso et al., “Constraints, Dilemmas and Challenges for EU Foreign Policy in Venezuela”, cit.

with local/regional actors can be helpful to mitigate both regional fragmentation (by stabilising neighbouring countries) and multipolar competition (by establishing the EU as a – benign – regional player).

While recognising the importance of having cooperative partners to counter multipolar competition, it is crucial to maintain or gradually establish channels for dialogue with systemic rivals. In situations where the EU's influence is limited, cooperating with regional countries strengthens its action, opens up new channels for multi-track diplomacy and reduces potential misunderstandings with other actors involved.

When a benign partner is present, the contextual factor of multipolar competition can also have an EUFSP enabling function. The 'benign' actor element, particularly in the context of the transatlantic partnership between the EU and the United States, increases the EU's effectiveness but also its dependencies. It is thus a special asymmetric form of a strategic partnership.

The most notable example is Ukraine, where the EU refrained from engaging in sustained competition with Russia (and cooperation with the US) up until February 2022.<sup>36</sup> Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the alliance with the US made it much easier for the EU to reach internal consensus and put together a holistic response combining different levels of support for Ukraine (military, financial, up to opening membership talks) and diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia. Similarly, in the case of Iran, the EU's pursuit for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis was always premised on the facilitation of US-Iranian nuclear diplomacy. Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA recreated a tension between the transatlantic partnership and the EU's commitment to keeping the nuclear deal alive, which eventually contributed to the substantial failure of EUFSP towards Iran.<sup>37</sup> In the South China Sea, the EU has consistently advocated for the rule of law, inter-regional cooperation, trade, and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, as opposed to embracing the more zero-sum power confrontation between the US and China.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kristi Raik et al., "EU Policy towards Ukraine", cit.

<sup>37</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "Weathering the Geopolitical Storm", cit.

<sup>38</sup> Zachary Paikin, "Multipolar Competition and the Rules-based Order: Probing the Limits of EU



Table 3 summarises the use of diplomatic-coalitional mitigation measures for the subset of case studies where they could be identified. It comes as no surprise that these mitigation measure speak in particular to the challenge of multipolar competition. They highlight that the challenges of a multipolar world can be mitigated with multilateralism and international strategic partnerships. However, it should also be emphasised that the international level is also highly relevant for regional fragmentation and internal contestation. Concerning regional fragmentation, forming the right partnerships can have an important stabilising effect – particularly when it comes to containing spill-over effects (consider the refugee crises in the countries neighbouring Syria). Likewise, international (consensual) norms form a powerful argument to overcome contestation and multilateral institutions create a momentum that is difficult to resist without challenging the institutions themselves (a political price too high in many contexts).

**Table 3** | Diplomatic-coalitional mitigation measures by applicable case study

Case	Multilateralisation	Strategic partnering
Ukraine	X	X
Iran	X	X
South China Sea	X	
Venezuela		X

### 3. Assessing the mitigation potential of EUFSP

The challenges the EU is confronted with are immense – both internally and externally. It is no overstatement that the demand (i.e., the need) for a coherent and effective EUFSP is higher than ever before. At the same time, the supply of (i.e., the capacity for) a coherent and effective EUFSP remains insufficient.

This paper has explored the role of internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition as contextual factors influencing EUFSP. The goal was

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Foreign and Security Policy in the South China Sea”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (March 2024, forthcoming); published online on 13 December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2280598>.

to analyse and systematise the mitigation the measures that have been employed by the EU and its member states to offset the adverse effects of these three contextual factors and to look into their potential for the future.

## Conclusions on mitigation strategies

Following the conceptualisation by Alcaro and Dijkstra, the differentiation between institutional, functional and diplomatic-coalitional mitigation measures has been used to analyse which mitigation strategies and policies has been applied by the EU actors in a number of cases.<sup>39</sup> This examination allows us to formulate some hypotheses about the connection between the contextual factors and the mitigation measures – in the spirit of an inductive, hypotheses-generating design.

(1) *Institutional mitigation measures* focus on the actors in EUFSP, i.e., member states and EU institutions. Four specific such measures were identified:

- *Negotiation and deliberation* are the EU's default modes for the ubiquitous conflicts (of interests) between member states. They can work in EUFSP as well as in any other policy field. Two questions are key: Can dissenters be offered a (policy) compensation? Or, alternatively: can dissenters be convinced of the overarching value of a coherent EUFSP?
- The *enhancement of EU policy-making processes* was demanded in a number of the cases mentioned in this paper. In fact, there seems to be significant potential in overhauling EUFSP institutional processes. This includes questions of information analysis and sharing and the clearer distribution of tasks and responsibilities.
- *Direct delegation* to EU institutions seems to be particularly well-suited to mitigate the effects of domestic level contestation because it takes the pressure off the respective member state(s).
- *Indirect delegation* to a sub-set of member states and/or the EU is equally useful for domestic level contestation, but is also very helpful for member-state level contestation – essentially for the same reason: dissenting actors are not forced to openly dissent while EUFSP can move on.

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<sup>39</sup> Riccardo Alcaro and Hylke Dijkstra, “Re-imagining EU Foreign and Security Policy”, cit.

(2) *Functional mitigation measures* focus on the issues rather than the actors of EUFSP. The following strategies stand out:

- *Selective engagement* is helpful in addressing internal contestation on the domestic or member state level because by applying it one can 'park' contentious issues, focus on achievable goals and hope for positive spill-over effects. It seems, however, that these spill-over effects (a classic EU logic) can be severely hampered by adverse conditions in terms of regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. In other words: selective engagement works fine, but ultimately, it will not achieve much if regional fragmentation and/or multipolar competition work the other way. Ideally, it should be coupled with measures to address these.
- *Issue-linkage* can work vis-à-vis member states as well as vis-à-vis the country in crisis. It can thus address both internal contestation and regional fragmentation. Its prospects, however, hinge on the availability of an 'attractive' object for this linkage that will convince (EU) dissenters and move the country in crisis. Traditionally, the EU's strong suit in this regard is its attractiveness as an economic partner and – in select cases – the benefits of membership.

(3) *Diplomatic-coalitional mitigation measures* aim to leverage the international level – be it by multilateralisation or strategic partnering.

- *Multilateralisation* uses multilateral institutions and widely accepted norms, which have a positive effect on all three contextual factors because these institutions and norms are much harder to call into question than a specific policy, they reduce the disaggregating dynamics in fragmented regions and channel interstate rivalries into formal and accepted conflict management mechanisms.
- *Strategic partnering* with international partners can be helpful to mediate regional fragmentation (as it can be helpful to mediate the negative spill-overs typical for this contextual factor) and it can also 'harness' multipolar competition when the EU successfully forms such a partnership with a benign player (typically the US). This, however, is rarer than one might expect.
- These mitigation strategies speak in particular to the challengers associated with multipolar competition as they use the logic of multipolar competition and reverse it for the purposes of a more coherence and effective EUFSP.



The EU's foreign and security policy is significantly influenced by internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. This paper offers a framework to understand these based on observations on how a large set of mitigation strategies has been used and can be used to mediate the adverse effects of the three contextual factors on EUFSP. The understanding and analysis of these contextual factors as well as of the corresponding mitigation strategies offers a significant potential to improve the coherence and effectiveness of EUFSP – a crucial step to unlock the EU's full potential in shaping global affairs.

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N. 959143. This publication reflects only the view of the author(s) and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.