Clingendael
Netherlands Institute of International Relations

Policy Brief

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JUNE 2022

Europe cannot wait for unity

Teaming up to improve EU foreign policy effectiveness – and what the Netherlands could contribute to it

The EU is not always united and visible in foreign policy. This policy brief argues it could make more use of leading groups of member states under the coordination of the High Representative and European External Action Service (EEAS), the type of strategic thinking that guided the development of the Strategic Compass, and a Team Europe approach to a wider range of international activities, going beyond development cooperation. One idea would be to formulate a European Council Forum on Economic Security and Sanction policy. The Netherlands could contribute proactively, for instance by advocating for a strategic conversation on the topic of economic power at the level of the European Council.

The challenge: engaging member states in a united EU foreign policy

Foreign policy is at the core of national sovereignty and identity. It is for this fundamental reason that, although great strides have been made, the formation of a 'more visible, more coherent, and more effective' EU foreign policy – an ambition to which all member states have committed[1] – was bound to be problematic and has indeed proved to be so.

Member states as well as EU institutions need to embrace rather than deny this fact: a more common EU foreign policy will only be forged out of the diverse European playing field if the distinct strengths of national players are leveraged. The formation of Leading Groups led by member states, coordinated by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security (HR/VP), coupled with Strategic Compass Forums and, where appropriate, fuelled by a 'Team Europe' approach, could help break through the inertia of EU foreign policy.

A 'Leading Group Strategy' will not solve the problem of different positions and interests in foreign policy matters overnight, but it might lead to the EU becoming a more united and powerful geopolitical actor in the long run. Crucially, this requires member states to take a proactive approach to priority issues in the present. The Netherlands could play an active role in contributing to more effective EU foreign policy formation by leveraging its strengths in specific areas.

1 European Commission, "Europe in the World – Some Practical Proposals for Greater Coherence, Effectiveness and Visibility", Communication (2006) 278, 8 June 2006.

The playing field: visibility, coherence, effectiveness

The Lisbon Treaty commits all member states to a tripartite ambition for EU foreign policy: that is, more visible, coherent, and effective. These are conceptually distinguishable but practically inseparable aspects of the EU as a global player. When unity is reached, we see stronger coordination, stronger leadership, and a more visible and effective EU on the global stage. However, at times division undermines leadership, resulting in weak institutions that fail to coordinate and do not deliver.

Visibility

In the sphere of foreign policy, EU leadership is divided chiefly among three offices: the President of the European Council, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security (HR/VP), and the President of the European Commission. None of these offices, nor the trinity, is near to reaching a stage of institutional maturity fit to compete with, for instance, the Oval Office or Zhongnanhai.

Potentially, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has an important role to play in shaping EU foreign policy, but so far, all presidents have been more focused on the internal implications of the financial crisis, Brexit and now the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, little time remains for the European Council to discuss foreign policy issues beyond the crises in hand.[2] At other times, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has claimed a leading geopolitical role. For instance, she recently launched the Global Gateway, which ought to empower the EU to compete geo-strategically with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The two presidents compete with national leaders – Macron being the prime example – who, at times, claim to represent Europe on the global stage. All in all, too often the visibility of the EU is hampered by a lack of uniform external representation linked to clear positions and policies.

Coherence

The most significant obstacle faced by the EU is diversity among its member states, along at least three dimensions: identity, capabilities and interests.

National identities matter to European foreign policy. Harmonising the foreign policies of 27 member states is a process both interrupted and driven by differences in history, geography and culture.[3] Another Clingendael policy brief on the role of Hungary in China-related EU policy formation shows how Prime Minister Orbán leverages narratives of national identity to obstruct unified EU foreign policy formation.[4] National identities may be the most fundamental and stubborn level of division: they change slowly, if at all. A pan-European communitarian narrative – 'the European Way of Life' – may come to transcend national differences in generations to come,[5] but the short- to medium-term political challenge is to move forward taking European differences as a starting point.

A second level of diversity is that of capability. Starkly put, there are member states that can and those that cannot pursue geopolitical strategies independent of the EU – France and Germany chief among the first grouping. France is still the only EU member state with significant military capabilities. However, as the relative weight of non-European countries in the global balance of power is growing, even for the bigger EU member states the comparative advantage of geopolitical strategies

2 Fraser Cameron, "Give Lisbon a chance: How to improve EU foreign policy", *European Policy Centre*, 8 January 2021: 2; Lehne, "Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?": 12-13.

3 Cameron, "Give Lisbon a chance: How to improve EU foreign policy": 1.

4 Ties Dams, "Forging European Unity on China. The Case of Hungarian Dissent", *Clingendael*, April 2022.

5 Ties Dams and Monika Sie Dhian Ho, "Will the European hero please stand up? An essay on European global narrative strategy", *Clingendael*, 24 March 2021.

pursued independently of EU consensus is diminishing. France and Germany do indeed at moments fill the gap in European leadership left by EU institutions, but they do so inconsistently – when it is in their national interest to do so and when the EU is the most suitable forum to pursue such interests.[6]

Interests are the most apparent and transient source of diversity. Even if member states share the same long-term strategic goal, tactical consensus may be hard to achieve due to diverging regional interests, political and economic gains, special relations with third countries or internal political constraints. Diversity in interests results in finding the lowest common denominator between member states or the blocking of foreign policy decisions all together.[7] Free riding is another limiting tendency that prevents the EU from forming and implementing effective foreign policy. It sometimes happens that member states refrain from taking a position and assuming responsibility because, they suppose, other states with stronger national interests will do so.[8]

Effectiveness

Effective geopolitical players act from integrated multidisciplinary strategies. This requires the EU to facilitate strategy formation across the institutional silos in which EU policies are made. As of present, there are some mechanisms in place to coordinate between different institutional spheres, but these mechanisms lack strategic capacity.

The HR/VP, currently Josep Borrell, is the face of the EU diplomacy responsible for ensuring effective policy implementation,[9] but without the support of the bigger member states his authority to act is limited.

The HR/VP chairs the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), but is a participant – not a member – of the European Council, where heads of state and governments meet. As chair of the FAC, the HR/VP has a platform to facilitate consensus at ministerial level. Dissensus by member states usually takes place in the Council preparatory bodies, chief among them for foreign policy the Political and Security Committee (PSC) which reports directly to the FAC. Dissensus at Council or European Council level happens only at the end of an escalation line, and when the stakes are high. If member states block something in the preparatory bodies it is less damaging to their credibility, compared to using the veto at Council or European Council level.

The current President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, initiated a specific group in charge of coordinating external affairs aspects of the Commission's work – the Group for External Coordination (EXCO)[10] – chaired by the diplomatic adviser of the president and the deputy head of Cabinet of the HR/VP. It is an information-sharing mechanism first and foremost, not yet a launching ground for common strategic narratives vis-à-vis third powers or multilateral forums. EXCO may grow into a forum for multidisciplinary integrated strategy formation, connecting internal and external policies, but it is yet to take that leap.

In the Council, the PSC ambassadors of EU member states are predominantly focused on coordinating crises in hand with several Council working groups covering regional or thematic aspects of EU foreign policy. PSC cooperates closely with EU Special Envoys and Representatives that are sourced by the EEAS and EU delegations abroad. The body where Permanent Representatives (PermReps) of EU member states meet, Coreper II, prepares European Council meetings on foreign policy, but is generally lacking the capacity for long-term integrated strategic discussions. When a proposal is

6 Lehne, "Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?": 13.
7 Jean Crombois, "Lilliput Effect Revisited: Small States and EU Foreign Policy", *European View* 19, no. 1 (2020): 80-87.
8 Lehne, "Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?": 11.
9 Wanda Troszczynska-Van Genderen, "The Lisbon Treaty's provisions on CFSP/CSDP State of implementation", *European Parliament*, October 2015: 5.
10 "The Working Methods of the von der Leyen Commission: Striving for more at home and in the world", European Commission, 4 December 2019.

dominantly framed within the arena of the competitiveness of the internal market, its preparation becomes the prerogative of Coreper I, where the deputy PermReps meet, even if its motivations or implications are significantly geopolitical. The European Chips Act is an example of this.

Acting in international crises occurs at the level at which the HR/VP is allowed to watch rather than lead the play. This makes swift EU responses to crises to some extent dependent on the planning of European meetings; for example, the sanctions package following the 2020 Belarusian election was so quickly agreed because a European Council meeting had conveniently already been scheduled for two days after the event. The HR/VP claims considerable legitimacy in territorial, as opposed to thematic, domains where EEAS expertise is outstanding. Of this, policy on China is a good example.

In short, the European Council (President) is often unable to take up the foreign policy strategizing role it is granted in the EU treaties. The HR/VP is burdened with an overextended coordinating responsibility – between European Council, FAC, Commission, member states and delegations abroad – disproportionate to the minimal ownership of strategic issues the position allows. At the same time, the Commission president at times claims geopolitical leadership, but without a clear division of roles. Within this fragmented space, member states are neither stimulated to take initiative nor to claim ownership.

Strategy: leveraging national strengths, strategic conversations, forging unity

Political debate and academic literature all too often point to the consensus rule in European Council decision making as the structural barrier to more effective EU foreign policy. Indeed, the consensus rule can trigger the vicious cycle of diversity, as it gives ample opportunities for tactics of free riding and hostage taking. Several EU member states, including the Netherlands, support the introduction of more frequent use Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Decisions within the CFSP are mostly taken by the Council rather than the European Council. The use of QMV instead of unanimity (e.g., on sanctions) requires a unanimous decision by the European Council for every individual Council decision. At present, we are faced with the reality that fundamental reform by way of Treaty change remains far-fetched.[11] How then to proceed?

A potential way forward is to leverage national strengths in foreign policy. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it ought not be. Differences can be made to work, if institutions adapt and coordinating roles are matched with strategic ownership. What follows are the contours of a tripartite proposal for improving EU foreign policy effectiveness, best summed up as a Leading Group strategy.

Leveraging national strengths

A 'division of labour', or **Leading Groups strategy**, can empower member states to take ownership of interdisciplinary strategic issues. In the development of strategic issues, the different interests of member states can become the motor rather than the break of European foreign policy. For member states, especially the smaller ones, it is impossible to be proactive on all foreign policy issues. A small group of member states can more often initiate Leading Groups on issues with which its political culture strongly identifies, in which it has outstanding capacity or expertise and in which it has 'skin in the game' – real interests which push it to pursue strategic, long-term innovation.

This is not new. Indeed, past experience shows that concrete policy milestones often result from a crucial vanguard of a number of member states carrying the issue over a longer period of time. The formation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) provides a precedent for successful member

11 Lehne, "Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy?": 3.

state-driven innovations in European military cooperation. A leading group *avant la lettre* of France, Italy, Spain and Germany pushed the issue. Right now, 25 of 27[12] member states pursue integration of their armed forces through PESCO.

Global Gateway, the Anti-Coercion Instrument and the European Chips Act are three very different recent examples of successes in EU adaptation to changing geopolitical challenges. The risk is that the very existence of such instruments kills the strategic conversation on the issues they react to, or that the conversation is held at the wrong level. To illustrate: the coordination of Global Gateway is as of now under COASI (the Asia-Oceania Working Party), not matching with the global scope envisioned in the Gateway. The geopolitics of connectivity, economic warfare and tech-sovereignty demand long-term persistent pursuit of strategic enhancement, reacting to changing circumstances, at various levels of leadership.

Leading Groups on these issues could be aided by the HR/VP, helping ensure the Leading Group would consist of an optimal grouping of member states, reflecting differences in identity, capabilities and interests, and could help ensure long-term continuity by formalising their status. Besides letting member states take the initiative, the HR/VP could also encourage the formation of Leading Groups covering the main strategic themes pointed out by the Strategic Compass (more on this later). The role of HR/VP in an EU Leading Group strategy for improving the effectiveness of EU foreign policy could eventually be formalised in different ways. To argue for one would be to jump ahead of the present state of debate. First, the possibility of a Leading Group strategy in and of itself should be put on the agenda and discussed on a more strategic level.

Ideally, chairs of Leading Groups would be either heads of state or ministers, depending on the topic, and could, in some instances, be mandated by HR/VP to represent the EU in diplomatic relations. This has a precedent: in April 2021, HR/VP Borrell mandated Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto to visit Ethiopia and its neighbouring regions as the EU representative. Previously the European Parliament has not looked favourably on deputising, as it can only hold the HR/VP to account in hearings, but the sheer number of foreign policy issues and the need to keep EU member states engaged arguably overrides such concerns. Moreover, national ministers are held accountable by national parliaments. Another concern is losing the commitment of member states not taking part while advancing too far along a certain line for others to still accept their vanguard role. This would certainly create problems with EU coherence.

The need for strategic conversations

Steps towards a more coherent European strategic culture can be and often are taken by member states. Take for instance the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: published in 2021, its formation was spurred on by French, German and Dutch strategies that put the issues on the agenda.[13] The Commission and the High Representative presented a Joint Communication on the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, adding to the coherence between EU and member state policies.

Yet, publishing strategies may not be enough to boost coherence in EU foreign policy and provide enough flexibility to operate. More is needed to facilitate **cross-disciplinary strategic conversations** on long-term geostrategic issues at the highest levels of leadership.

The success of debates leading up to the Strategic Compass could be built upon[14] and used as a starting point from which to

12 Denmark and Malta have opted out.

13 Premesha Saha, "What does an EU Indo-Pacific Strategy entail?", *Observer Research Foundation*, 17 September 2021.

14 "A Strategic Compass for the EU", European Union External Action Service, last accessed 22 February 2022.

engage more member states in strategic conversations at the highest level of leadership. EEAS is the most obvious actor to be in the lead here; it could elevate the strategic conversation at regular intervals.

The HR/VP could regularly organise a number of thematic **Strategic Conversations**, mirrored and prepared by meetings of FAC and PSC. In the first instance, membership should be restricted to member states, but third actors could be invited to take part when context demands it. A crossover with the Trade and Technology Council, where the US is an official participant, could make sense. Once or twice a year, the **president of the European Council** could convene member states at head-of-state level to participate in an overarching strategic debate on foreign policy.

Implementation is next in line. Flexibility to operate – without the need to wait for consensus – is key.[15]

The pandemic gave life to '**Team Europe**', an umbrella for initiatives built on exactly the principle that is being discussed here: leveraging differences. It already works, albeit on too limited a scale. According to the Commission, the 'Team Europe approach' is

> *… our answer to a changing geopolitical landscape that increasingly requires collective, swift and decisive action at multilateral and country level …*
> *The Team Europe approach enhances coordination …*
> *Team Europe is about branding EU interventions and creating more visibility*[16]

In other words, Team Europe is about making EU foreign policy more effective by enabling smaller consortia of member states to act on their own initiative under a joint banner, facilitated by the Commission and financed by European and national financial institutions.

The focus of Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) has been on the nexus between Covid responses and development, helping developing countries tackle the pandemic and its consequences with concrete projects.[17] France and Germany are the main actors setting the geographical and sectoral focus based on their own priorities, but the Netherlands, being involved in more than half of TEIs, is the next significant player.[18]

Team Europe's current focus on development hampers its relevance to geopolitics. However, its potential is undeniable. The Team Europe approach is a way to empower the EU to act globally by leveraging differences in the interests and capabilities of member states, empowering member states to take initiative and claim ownership. But can the Team Europe model be applied to geopolitical challenges?

A first step might be to demand of TEIs a clear strategy for improving EU visibility as a provider of security and support for economic growth. Although TEIs on, for instance, digitalisation make a significant impact across the globe, even within the EU these successes are hardly known about. Implementation of TEIs could be accompanied by a strategic communications plan that addresses a common narrative for all initiatives. TEIs, as well as Global Gateway projects, should be seen in a larger context of great power competition, and could serve as channels for European influence.

Forging unity

Europe cannot wait for unity: great power competition demands it pursues geopolitical power along the lines of difference. To this

15 Niels Keijzer, Aline Burni, Benedikt Erforth and Ina Friesen, "The Rise of the Team Europe Approach in EU Development Cooperation. Assessing a Moving Target", *Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik* Discussion paper 22 (2021).

16 Anna Kerekgyarto, "Infosheet on Team Europe Initiatives", European Union, 16 March 2021.

17 Samuel Pleeck and Mikaela Gavas, "Getting to the Bottom of the Team Europe Initiatives", *Center for Global Development*, 12 May 2021.

18 "Team Europe Initiatives: first insights and question to Member States' agencies", Concord, 16 November 2021; Pleeck and Gavas, "Getting to the Bottom of the Team Europe Initiatives".

end, three complementary strategies could be pursued in a cyclical manner: member states initiate Leading Groups, coordinated by HR/VP, based on their national interests and strengths; these Leading Groups can be coupled with Strategic Conversations at (European) Council level that facilitate regular conversations on long-term geostrategic issues, mirrored by European Council sessions once or twice a year, and led by the president of the European Council; the Leading Groups, moreover, can be encouraged to apply the framework of Team Europe Initiatives to implement projects that add to common visibility on the global stage.

Tactics: what the Netherlands could contribute to more effective EU foreign policy formation

The Netherlands has much to contribute to more effective EU foreign policy formation by pursuing a Leading Group strategy. In fact, the coalition agreement of the new cabinet stepped up this ambition.[19]

In pursuit of such a strategy, a more proactive role for the Netherlands is not a given. Interviewees from EU institutions and several member states unanimously acknowledge the Dutch potential for initiative and leadership, but some warn that its present image of naysayer in the financial domain may undermine its position (see also other research on this issue[20]).

As the EU matures in its role as a geopolitical actor, incremental steps towards more effective foreign policy coordination and greater visibility among key audiences are the way forward. There is no silver bullet.

In the pursuit of incremental change, the Netherlands could leverage its strengths to claim a leading role in specific areas by initiating a **Leading Group**. The **semiconductor industry** comes to mind first. The European Chips Act stimulates European tech sovereignty in this industrial sector. The semiconductor industry is likely to see more geopolitical pressure in the years to come. This requires not just a rethink of industrial policy, but an ongoing strategic conversation aimed at securing long-term security. A second area could be the **Indo-Pacific** – the Netherlands being one of the first countries to publish a strategy in this field. This is related to it being a maritime country and having strong capabilities in digital connectivity.

The Netherlands could also contribute to a Leading Group on Global Gateway, factoring the strong Dutch logistics sector into this framework. In general, a strategic platform for member states to steer the course of Global Gateway is missing. Crucially, all three areas demand a proactive investment in relations with France and Germany – partners without which said Leading Groups would have limited influence.

The Netherlands could promote a **forum for strategic conversation** on economic and geopolitical policy at the level of the Council of the EU, that could discuss multidisciplinary issues like economic security. The Dutch **inter-ministerial committee on economic security** is an example of best practice in the effective coordination of issues on the nexus of the internal market and geopolitical power play. It coordinates policy formation on economic security between the ministries of economic affairs, foreign affairs and security services. Although similar bodies exist in some member states, many other member states still struggle to strategically integrate dossiers along these lines.

The Dutch government could address the need for such coordination in its bilateral contacts with other member states. The ExCo committee performs a similar function,

19 The Dutch government, "Looking out for each other, looking ahead of the future. 2012-2025 Coalition agreement", 15 December 2021.

20 Directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie (IOB), "Tactisch en praktisch. Naar een toekomstbestendige coördinatie van het Nederlandse Europabeleid", Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 3 December 2021; Brigitte Dekker, Rem Korteweg, Adriaan Nunes, Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Wouter Zweers, "Perceptions of Dutch interest promotion inside the EU", *Clingendael*, 17 April 2019.

facilitating information sharing on the external aspects of Commission policy between EEAS and other Commission bodies. What is missing is a platform for information sharing between member states and EU institutions. The current case of Lithuania's escalating geo-economic conflict with China provides an example of a case where early coordination was lacking and could have made a big difference to the EU's ability to present a united front. ExCo and PSC could facilitate regular cross-meetings to serve as an early-stage information-sharing mechanism on economic security.

The new Dutch government writes in its coalition agreement that

> *We will make strategic use of the EU's economic power, for example by imposing sanctions that can be extraterritorial.*

Here, it seems to acknowledge the need for more offensive capabilities in the nexus of economics and geopolitics at European level. The use of sanctions with extraterritorial effects demands continued thorough strategic conversations at the highest level. The swift-decision making on sanctions against Russia beg the question how this improvised capacity to act can be channelled into more structural strategic capacity. Are institutional adaptions necessary, given the prospected prolonged nature of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and indeed the prospect of escalating economic and financial warfare between the U.S. and China? If the Dutch government wants to push the envelope here, it needs to initiate the strategic conversation on the topic of economic power at the level of the European Council, putting forward for discussion the option of formulating a **European Council Forum on Economic Security and Sanction policy**.

Moreover, as the Council has very recently formally approved the Strategic Compass, it is important to acknowledge that the process towards it was a great success, having empowered member states to think through the long-term implications of crucial security and defence policy themes in smaller groups. This should not end when the final product is delivered. Rather, the Strategic Compass could serve as a starting point for a continued process of strategic pathfinding, making use of member states' existing groupings, facilitated at different levels by EU bodies. EEAS could be in the lead here. The Netherlands could contribute to elevating this process of incrementally forging a more common strategic culture by proposing the organisation of strategic conversations more frequently.

As one of the main contributors to TEIs, the Dutch government could explore options of weighing geopolitical interests in the proposal of new **Team Europe** projects. What this means specifically would depend on the context of a specific project and would be best addressed in cooperation with other major contributing member states, such as France and Germany. As a general point, the Dutch government could help innovate ways for TEIs to contribute more to Europe's global image with key audiences. As Foreign Minister Hoekstra argues:

> *The EU is an economic power house second to none. But we need to do more to translate economic might into political soft power.*

To this end, the Netherlands could form a 1.5-track working group to explore the opportunities Team Europe Initiatives and Global Gateway offer for projecting a strong, positive and united image of Europe worldwide.

The Netherlands could likewise use its soft power to engage some of the most persistent impasses in European foreign policy that arise from stark differences in narratives of national identity. On key issues, the Netherlands could pursue a **biggest-difference public diplomacy strategy**, meaning, it would engage those governments (and their populations) with which it disagrees the most on the dossier in hand. A broad public diplomacy strategy – engaging such governments in 1.5 track dialogues, think tank collaborations or even public events – might serve as an early-warning system for potential clashes that would otherwise occur at Council level. An early-warning system could help to

engage said governments or crucial third parties early on, leaving more room for targeted diplomatic outreach.[21]

To sum up, we put forward five recommendations for the Netherlands to consider in its efforts to contribute to more effective EU foreign policy formation:

- Initiate Leading Groups on Chips, Indo-Pacific and Global Gateway, in cooperation with (at least) France and Germany.

- Initiate the strategic conversation on the topic of economic power at the level of the European Council, putting forward for discussion the option of formulating a European Council Forum on Economic Security and on Sanction policy.

- Propose regular Strategic Compass meetings at the level of the Council of the EU. Once or twice a year, the president of the European Council could convene member states at head-of-state level for a more strategic debate on EU foreign policy.

- Initiate a 1.5-track working group to explore the opportunities Team Europe Initiatives and Global Gateway offer for projecting a strong, positive and united image of Europe worldwide.

- Engage those governments (and their populations) with which the Netherlands disagrees the most on the dossier in hand through a biggest-difference public diplomacy strategy.

21 For an example of this, see the case brief on the role of Hungary in Sino-European relations: Ties Dams, "Forging European Unity on China. The Case of Hungarian Dissent", *Clingendael*, April 2022.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our greatest appreciation to our interviewees, who have provided us with invaluable insights into EU foreign policy dynamics. Among them, we would like to thank:

- Dr Christoph Heusgen, former diplomat and former foreign policy adviser to Angela Merkel
- Dr Christos Marazopoulos, Team Leader for Team Europe and Joint Programming at the European Commission
- Marianna Lovato, PhD candidate, Politics and International Relations at University College Dublin
- Pieter van den Berg, Senior Policy Officer at EU External Affairs Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
- Camille Merlen, Senior Policy Officer at EU External Affairs Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
- Willem Steketee, Senior Policy Officer at EU External Affairs Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
- Tony van der Togt, Associate Fellow at the Clingendael Institute and strategic policy adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
- Monika Sie Dhian Ho, General Director of the Clingendael Institute
- Dr Maaike Okano-Heijmans, Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute
- Dr Luuk Molthof, Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute
- Wouter Zweers, Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute

Myrthe Boon and Luc Köbben made valuable contributions to the project. The flaws in this paper are the authors' alone.

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This policy brief is part of a project that explores ways to improve the effectiveness of EU foreign policy. It builds on three case briefs that analyse defence specialisation, the role of the EU as a moderator in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and the role of Hungary in EU-China relations, respectively. What follows is the synthesis of the main insights gained from the case studies, but also the result of independent research into issues transcending policy domains related to the effectiveness of the EU as a geopolitical player.