



## President's Take: A Pivotal Moment for EU Foreign Policy

As the spring of 2024 draws to a close, the peace and security situation in and around Europe is as fraught as it has been in decades. Russia is pressing its advantage in Ukraine, moving into the Kharkiv region, which Kyiv liberated in 2022, and showing signs of increasing confidence. The western Balkans' fragile peace is under increasing strain: in Bosnia, the Serb-majority Republika Srpska is inching closer to secession and lingering disputes between Kosovo and Serbia are a continuing source of friction. Farther afield, Israel continues its harsh campaign in Gaza in response to Hamas's attacks of 7 October 2023 – a war that has killed upward of 35,000, pushed the strip to the brink of famine and created serious risks of escalation elsewhere in the Middle East. On 20 May, the International Criminal Court's prosecutor announced that he is seeking arrest warrants for leaders on both sides, citing evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Sudan's civil war – now more than a year old – is exacting an appalling human toll and threatening to splinter this large, strategically significant country for decades.

But much as these and other crises command the attention of the European Union and its member states, many European policymakers will be spending the coming weeks in election mode. With just two weeks until voters go to the polls, all eyes in Brussels are on the European Parliament elections, which will determine who represents the close to 450 million EU citizens. The results will shape both the forthcoming selection of the EU's top officials and the EU's overall political direction in the years ahead. The stakes in 2024 seem especially high – and not just because of the wars and crises in the bloc's eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Far-right parties are as strong as they have ever been in the EU's history. These parties are either in government or part of governing coalitions in five member states (Italy, Finland, Hungary, Sweden and the Netherlands), and highly visible far-right leaders in Italy (Giorgia Meloni), Hungary (Victor Orbán) and France (Marine Le Pen) are actively seeking to make Europe more inward-looking and EU member states' politics, economies and security less integrated.

### Stepping Up and Facing Challenges

That vision stands in stark contrast to the direction that the current EU leadership has tried to set for the bloc. Over the past five years, the EU has at least in some respects become a

more active geopolitical player than it was when Ursula Von der Leyen first became president of the European Commission in 2019, vowing to enlarge the EU's role on the world stage.

Certainly, today's EU is increasingly committed to developing its own defence capabilities and vocal in asserting its interests vis-à-vis Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. These trends are most pronounced in the EU's reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Defying predictions that European unity would crumble, the bloc and its members rallied behind Ukraine in the face of Russia's all-out invasion in February 2022 – supplying billions of euros in military and non-military aid as well as training; working with the U.S. and other partners to apply sanctions far tougher than might have been expected; and weathering fuel shortages brought on by the severing of economic links with Moscow.

But the EU and its member states still face significant challenges as they seek to attain the higher geopolitical profile that Von der Leyen and other EU leaders have worked toward, as well as achieve the overlapping goal of strategic autonomy – the idea that Europe is better able to defend its own political, security and economic interests – that French President Emmanuel Macron originally championed and many other European leaders at least notionally now subscribe to in some form. The most basic problem is that of military power. With limited (although growing) arms production capacity, Europe still looks to the United States to supply the bulk of the materiel that Ukraine requires for its defence – a task that most European powers see as critical to deterring further Russian aggression, considering the existential threat they perceive it poses not only to Ukraine but also to Europe's peace and stability.

This level of reliance leaves the bloc ill prepared for what could be coming should the November U.S. presidential election return Donald Trump to power. Trump has strongly hinted that he would twist Kyiv's arm to reach a settlement, quite possibly on terms that it (and many of its European backers) would find unpalatable and dangerous. More broadly, Trump has made no secret of his views that Europe should pay more toward its own

defence, going so far as to say he would invite Russia to attack countries that did not meet NATO's financial bar. Reducing the trans-Atlantic alliance to crudely transactional terms will mean a rocky ride for a Europe that still depends heavily on the U.S. for its security.

Arriving at a more cohesive European approach to China will be another challenge. In recent years, the EU and member states began to see it as important to reduce their economic dependency on Beijing, and they have also been under pressure from Washington to do so. But despite concrete steps in this direction, recent meetings of leaders such as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, French President Macron and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán with Chinese President Xi Jinping suggest that fundamental policy gaps persist both among member states and between Europe and the U.S. Whereas Macron stressed trade tensions and urged Xi to offer "fair rules for all", Scholz emphasised tightening economic ties, signalling resistance to "de-risking", which has become jargon for reducing strategic dependencies. Orbán went even further in seeking a deeper relationship – which Xi characterised as an "all-weather" strategic partnership. As Crisis Group has argued before, Europe should not outsource its China policy to Washington, particularly given the latter's fraught relationship with Beijing. But if it wishes to stand up for its interests, it should do more to come up with a common vision of what these are.

Thirdly, and consequentially for Europe's geopolitical ambitions, relations with the so-called Global South have become strained. One source of frustration is resentment of colonial-era powers that have worn out their welcome, as with France in West Africa. Another is a sense that European and other Western partners too often fail to account for the implications of their policies outside Europe, as with Ukraine-related sanctions that have had damaging ripple effects on fragile economies. A third is the perception that on fronts from managing the COVID-19 pandemic to combating climate

change, Europe (and the West at large) have failed to provide the resources required to help poorer countries respond effectively – even, as in the case of climate change, where they are disproportionately responsible for creating the challenge in the first place. The sense

of Western double standards on matters of ostensible principle – browbeating others to join the West in condemning Russia’s aggression and atrocities in Ukraine while tolerating (or in some cases actively supporting) Israel’s devastating offensive in Gaza – hardly helps.

## A Spanner in the Works

Making progress on these new and old challenges would be difficult under any circumstances – but the results of the forthcoming parliamentary elections could add a whole new level of complexity. Amid a rapidly changing political landscape, polling suggests that the two right-wing and Eurosceptic political groups, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy Group (ID), could gain a larger share of seats than they now hold – perhaps as much as 25 per cent, up from about 18 per cent – thus increasing their influence. One of them could become the third largest group in the assembly, displacing the liberal Renew Europe group and shifting the centre of gravity of European Parliament policymaking to the centre-right.

These two far-right groups traditionally do not have clearly defined positions when it comes to EU foreign and security policy, with the radical right ID group particularly divided over issues such as relations with Russia and China, and the more moderate ECR still broadly following the political mainstream. But most ID and some ECR politicians have begun to converge on certain positions that, if they got their way, would have major implications for Europe’s ability to engage on global issues including international peace and security. These include resistance to EU enlargement, development assistance (unless used as leverage to reduce migration), climate diplomacy and even maintaining a strong European diplomatic service.

Although there is no likely scenario in which the ECR and ID could form a majority, a stronger and more assertive far-right minority

bloc within the European Parliament would still be able to affect the EU’s geopolitical aspirations. That is especially true if it could command enough votes to influence the choice and mandate of top EU officials like the Commission president, the high representative and powerful commissioners who deal, for example, with the EU’s neighbourhood, international partnerships and humanitarian engagement (and possibly defence). Even Von der Leyen, who is reasonably popular among voters, may not be a shoo-in, though her role in brokering deals with Mauritania, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon to stem migration, as well as in scaling back green policy ambitions, may help protect her political right flank.

These groups’ growing bargaining power may also complicate negotiations on trade, association agreements and EU enlargement, as well as the EU budget’s allocation of funds, including those designated for external action and foreign policy initiatives – areas where the European Parliament holds direct competencies (unlike many other EU foreign policy files). In 2025, negotiations will start about the new seven-year EU budget, which means that much is at stake. Beyond these direct areas of influence, the potential to shape foreign policies indirectly, by shifting the discourse, pressuring mainstream parties or blocking consensus-building, is arguably even greater.

A surge in far-right representation in the European Parliament would not happen in isolation. It would be part of a wider trend in Europe, whereby far-right parties are participating in a growing number of national governments, with the Netherlands the latest country

to join the ranks. These national governments wield an even bigger influence over EU foreign and security policy than the parliament, not least because of their de facto veto power at the European Council – where decisions on EU

foreign policy have to be taken unanimously. The potential these trends have to disrupt, fragment and polarise EU foreign policy discussions, including about key issues such as support for Ukraine, is significant.

## Pushing Back

Moving in this direction would be to Europe's detriment and the wider world's as well. At a time when instability and violent conflict directly threaten Europe's own security, and global threats such as the climate crisis are on the rise, the bloc can ill afford to turn inward. It has to invest more in hard power to meet the challenge of an aggressive Russia and a potentially unreliable U.S., but that is not the extent of it. Building a safer Europe and a more peaceful and stable world also requires continued investment in the tools that keep war and humanitarian catastrophe at bay both on Europe's borders and farther afield.

It will be important to resist the impulse to concentrate energy on the EU's immediate neighbourhood and on winning over powerful or wealthy states such as Brazil, India and the Gulf monarchies. The EU and member states should also work to mitigate the pressures such as debt, climate change, demographic forces and internal violence that threaten more vulnerable low and middle-income states on an individuated basis. Such efforts, particularly if

they come with tangible financial, technical and diplomatic support, would help the EU both expand its geopolitical reach and cultivate a more peaceful and prosperous world in which to advance its own interests.

In this spirit, this Watch List Update offers suggestions for how the EU can engage with a range of external actors in the service of crisis management and conflict prevention – in Bosnia, Haiti, Israel and Lebanon, the South China Sea and Sudan. As always, the list is far from comprehensive. But in offering this snapshot Crisis Group is pointing to conflict situations where the stakes for Europe are particularly high and where the EU and its members states are well placed to make a substantial contribution. ■

