

The role of the European Parliament in the Common Foreign and Security Policy

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We live in challenging times. Our world is in flux with growing complexity and interdependence. Individuals, countries, and international organisations are facing the need to provide adequate and rapid responses to increasing risks to security. They are exposed to traditional forms of threats as well as new global security challenges. Terrorism and extremism, financial turmoil, and natural and man-made disasters hit the headlines and make citizens feel vulnerable, insecure, even lost. At the same time, peoples around the world call for a greater say in determining their future. They want democracy, they want more and better rights, they want prosperity and peace, and they look to establishing closer and more stable relations with our countries.

Promoting peace and prosperity

Our European foreign and security policy is rooted in the very nature of the European Union, in particular promoting prosperity and peace amongst people and thus enhancing security, which has a direct effect on citizens' lives. And doing so is about defending specific values, enshrined in our Treaty. Foreign and security policy, however, is often viewed as a prerogative of the executive branch, a domain requiring a considerable degree of flexibility and secrecy, which allows only limited parliamentary involvement and democratic participation in scrutiny.

The European Parliament has its role to play

I personally cannot endorse this view. Decisions affecting our citizens' lives, such as sending military or civilian personnel to dangerous countries, have to be understood and supported by the public. This involves decision-making procedures, which are sufficiently public and transparent, and where both value and policy choices are considered one against the other. This is why national parliaments hold debates on issues such as their countries' participation in international peacekeeping operations.

When such decisions are taken collectively, at the EU level, which institution but the European Parliament would be able and willing to control the concerted EU actions having an effect on the well-being and security of EU citizens? The EP is legally entitled to be consulted and informed on foreign and security policy. According to the Treaty, the Council must consult Parliament on the main aspects and basic choices of the CFSP. This is why every year we adopt a resolution on the



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annual Council report on Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). However, so far the Council has failed to engage in a real dialogue with us. We want a more forward-looking report, and encourage the Council to develop, with our support, a more strategic approach to CFSP, with clearer references to the budgetary needs and the financial impact of external actions.

The EP as the main arena for democratic control

The flow of information and inter-institutional contacts have been increasing over the years. An ever-growing number of Council and Commission representatives appear before my committee in order to keep Members informed and hear their views on specific issues.

Representatives of the Presidency, the Council and the Commission, as well as the High Representative and EU Special Representatives have been holding regular exchanges of views with the Committee on Foreign Affairs. These public discussions usually cover the full range of current foreign policy activities, offer Members the possibility to express their positions and to question the policy and value choices of EU decision-makers. By doing so, they serve as the main arena for democratic control. In the context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the European Parliament also draws up reports and formulates recommendations to other EU Institutions and third countries stating its priorities on geographical areas and thematic issues.

The EP's tools of influence

The inter-institutional arrangements currently in place can only partially meet the information needs of Members.

Lisbon provides the opportunity for a consistent information flow

Under a 2002 inter-institutional agreement concerning access to sensitive information, Parliament has access to confidential documents and briefings. However the scope and quality of the requested information remains unsatisfactory and the procedures are cumbersome and unwieldy.

Therefore, seizing the opportunity offered by the new Treaty of Lisbon, my committee is calling for a review and extension of these arrangements.

The EP's role of budget control on CSDP expenditure

Another tool at our disposal to influence the shaping of EU foreign policy is the budget. Parliament has the final say on CFSP-related expenditure. This is why the 2006 inter-institutional agreement on budgetary discipline and sound financial management provides that the members of the bureaux of the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Budgets can - in regular Joint Consultation Meetings with the Presidency of the Council - query and assess the financial implications of decisions and actions adopted by the Council in the framework of the CFSP. Naturally, our two committees are using these opportunities to address broader strategic issues with relevance to ongoing ESDP missions. These regular meetings are important for obtaining first-hand information on financial planning and spending in the area of CFSP - this, indeed, strengthens the foundation of the EP's budgetary powers.

Parliamentary Diplomacy for promoting EU priorities

Inter-institutional consultations are useful means to enhance parliamentary accountability of CFSP actions and to influence policy-making in this domain. But Parliament is also a vehicle for consultation and negotiation with third countries. Parliamentary diplomacy is a sometimes underestimated tool for promoting EU priorities and, by doing so, shaping the Union's foreign affairs. In the sixth parliamentary term, the Committee on Foreign Affairs was addressed close to 400 times by visiting speakers from both outside and within the EU, including prime ministers, leading government officials, as well as prominent representatives of international organisations and non-governmental bodies.

The large number of visiting speakers from third countries attests to the high level of interest for exchanges with the Committee on Foreign Affairs; this of course is a reflection of the fact that over the years the European Parliament has become a respected and influential partner for debating geographical and thematic issues of common concern. In this regard, parliamentary diplomacy, including the activities of inter-parliamentary delegations and the numerous visits and meetings by the President, individual Members and political groups,

constitutes an important tool for better understanding and shaping the world around us.

Lisbon enhances the influence of the EP

We expect the new Treaty of Lisbon to further enhance the transparency and parliamentary scrutiny of the EU's external actions. Although the new provisions offer only limited substantial changes, they form a good basis to extend parliamentary legitimacy and oversight in the further development of the CFSP. Its innovations should be exploited to their full extent.

Endorsement of the High Representative/ Vice President of the Commission

The main one consists in the double-hatting of the High Representative as Vice President of the Commission in charge of external relations. The European Parliament plays a formal role in endorsing the nomination of the Vice-President/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR), since this person is subject to a collective vote of consent by the EP.

Because of the double legitimacy (appointment by the Heads of State and Government and subject to a collective vote of confidence by the Parliament) the VP/HR will maintain much closer relations with Parliament and consequently be more cooperative and responsive to our needs. The VP/HR will be obliged under the new Treaty to regularly consult the European Parliament - at least twice a year - on CFSP/CSDP issues and to ensure that Parliament's views are duly taken into account.

The EP and the European External Action Service (EEAS)

In my opinion, this should lead to a substantive dialogue with Parliament with the aim of developing a more strategic approach to the CFSP, including the definition of the new structures and tools at the disposal of this policy. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is a case in point. In this context, we expect the Vice-President/High Representative to commit to consulting Parliament about appointments to senior posts in the EEAS and to agreeing to parliamentary hearings with selected candidates so as to ensure that appointments are based on merit and conducted with the required transparency.

The EP ready to enhance its influence

The implications of the new treaty certainly go beyond our immediate expectations. There is still a long way to go in improving parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of foreign and security policy at the EU level. I am convinced, however, that this is the way we should go - the increasing complexity and interdependence of our globalized world calls on the EU to play an enhanced role. This only can happen with the full support of our citizens. It is up to us, parliamentarians, with our words and deeds, to ensure that the choices we make are sound and can be understood and supported by our people.