

Can Europe Become a Global Player?

As the nominee to serve as the EU's next High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell will have an opportunity to update Europe's approach to foreign policy. Chief among the challenges facing the bloc is to reassert its own sovereignty in an age of great-power politics, **writes Mark Leonard**



Josep Borrell

A chance to relaunch Europe's foreign policy

The last five years have not been kind to the European Union's foreign-policy prospects. A new great-power competition is shunting aside the international rules-based order, and aspects of globalization – from trade to the Internet – are being used to divide rather than unite countries. Meanwhile, the EU's geostrategic neighborhood has become a ring of fire.

These challenges mainly reflect a shift in the global balance of power, which has fundamentally changed the United States' foreign-policy outlook. As the European Council on Foreign Relations explains in a [new report](#), global developments have left EU countries increasingly vulnerable to external pressures preventing them from exercising sovereignty. Such exposure threatens the EU's security, economic, and diplomatic interests, by allowing other powers to impose their preferences on it. Making matters worse, the EU's governing institutions have done little to overcome the

divisions among member states, and they have not played a relevant role in responding to crises such as those in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.

With the nomination of Josep Borrell to serve as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU has an opportunity to relaunch its foreign policy. Currently the foreign minister of Spain – itself one of the EU's new power centers – Borrell's task will be to unite EU institutions and national foreign ministries behind a common EU-level foreign policy.

Three major challenges ahead

Beyond that, Borrell will face three challenges. The first is to secure Europe's strategic sovereignty. From day one, Borrell will need to start developing strategies for managing the bloc's most vexing diplomatic and security issues, from the threats posed by Russia and China to the potential powder kegs in Syria, Africa, and the Balkans. Borrell must chart a new course forward, neither ignoring dissenting views from member states nor settling for the lowest common denominator of what all members say they can accept.

The EU has an opportunity to relaunch its foreign policy

To that end, Borrell should consider offering a package deal, similar to the one agreed by the European Council in nominating a new EU leadership team. Any such compromise should balance a tough stance on Russia with creative engagement on the EU's southern flank. The EU doesn't necessarily need new foreign policies, but it does need new mechanisms for implementing its agenda, as well as competent leadership that can inspire confidence within all the member states. In reasserting the EU's sovereignty, the new high representative will have to deal with everything from US secondary sanctions and the weaponization of the dollar to growing cyber- and hybrid-warfare threats from around the world.

Borrell's second main challenge will be to re-operationalize European defense. While the EU has made progress in launching defense-related industrial projects, its operational capacity has shrunk. To reassure its Russia-facing flank, all member states will need to increase their forward presence there; simply establishing a small "Camp Charlemagne" in Poland would serve as a powerful symbolic gesture. Europeans could also take over certain military operations from the US, not least the mission in Kosovo, where Europeans already provide most of the troops. Moreover, with the US vetoing United Nations support for the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) and potentially planning a troop drawdown in some of those countries, the EU may need to increase its presence in Africa.

Confronting the challenges as a united bloc

In fact, this may be a good time for the EU's high representative to take up the idea of a "European security council," which was originally floated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron last fall. Such a body could offer a forum for honest strategic discussions among the member states, while also leading the diplomatic engagement with the United Kingdom after Brexit.

Borrell's third challenge will be to restore trust between member-state foreign ministries and the

European External Action Service. He cannot possibly tackle all of the EU's foreign-policy issues on his own; he will need a strong team and broad-based support within the EU. In appointing his deputies, he should choose members of the Commission who already have a mandate covering the key regional issues of the Sahel, the Balkans, and the Eastern Partnership.

Borrell can help the EU confront the challenges of the coming years as a united bloc

Better yet, Borrell should assign specific policy issues to individual foreign ministers, who would then have to report back to the member states and the EU Political and Security Committee. There are some precedents for this, such as when former High Representative Catherine Ashton assigned the Georgia brief to Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and then the Moldova brief to Sikorski and Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt.

Finally, Borrell should consider appointing core groups of member states to convene workshops on divisive issues, with the goal of identifying common positions and raising the lowest common denominator. At a minimum, this could give each member state some "skin in the game," possibly discouraging them from abusing EU processes or pursuing unilateral action.

By adopting the broad agenda outlined above, Borrell can help the EU confront the challenges of the coming years as a united bloc. His top goal should be to secure Europe's strategic sovereignty. The EU is still the world's largest market, comprises some of the largest national aid budgets, accounts for the second-highest level of defense spending, and can deploy the largest diplomatic corps. If it can put these assets in the service of a larger strategic agenda, it can become a player in the twenty-first century, rather than the plaything of other great powers.

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Author

Alissa Lefebvre

Economist

alissa.lefebvre@ing.com

Deepali Bhargava

Regional Head of Research, Asia-Pacific

Deepali.Bhargava@ing.com

Ruben Dewitte

Economist

+32495364780

ruben.dewitte@ing.com

Kinga Havasi

Economic research trainee

kinga.havasi@ing.com

Marten van Garderen

Consumer Economist, Netherlands

marten.van.garderen@ing.com

David Havrlant

Chief Economist, Czech Republic

420 770 321 486

david.havrlant@ing.com

Sander Burgers

Senior Economist, Dutch Housing

sander.burgers@ing.com

Lynn Song

Chief Economist, Greater China

lynn.song@asia.ing.com

Michiel Tukker

Senior European Rates Strategist

michiel.tukker@ing.com

Michal Rubaszek

Senior Economist, Poland

michal.rubaszek@ing.pl

This is a test author

Stefan Posea

Economist, Romania

tiberiu-stefan.posea@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Jesse Norcross

Senior Sector Strategist, Real Estate

jesse.norcross@ing.com

Teise Stellema

Research Assistant, Energy Transition

teise.stellema@ing.com

Diederik Stadig

Sector Economist, TMT & Healthcare

diederik.stadig@ing.com

Diogo Gouveia

Sector Economist

diogo.duarte.vieira.de.gouveia@ing.com

Marine Leleux

Sector Strategist, Financials

marine.leleux2@ing.com

Ewa Manthey

Commodities Strategist

ewa.manthey@ing.com

ING Analysts

James Wilson

EM Sovereign Strategist

James.wilson@ing.com

Sophie Smith

Digital Editor

sophie.smith@ing.com

Frantisek Taborsky

EMEA FX & FI Strategist

frantisek.taborsky@ing.com

Adam Antoniak

Senior Economist, Poland

adam.antoniak@ing.pl

Min Joo Kang

Senior Economist, South Korea and Japan

min.joo.kang@asia.ing.com

Coco Zhang

ESG Research

coco.zhang@ing.com

Jan Frederik Slijkerman

Senior Sector Strategist, TMT

jan.frederik.slijkerman@ing.com

Katinka Jongkind

Senior Economist, Services and Leisure
Katinka.Jongkind@ing.com

Marina Le Blanc
Sector Strategist, Financials
Marina.Le.Blanc@ing.com

Samuel Abettan
Junior Economist
samuel.abettan@ing.com

Franziska Biehl
Senior Economist, Germany
Franziska.Marie.Biehl@ing.de

Rebecca Byrne
Senior Editor and Supervisory Analyst
rebecca.byrne@ing.com

Mirjam Bani
Sector Economist, Commercial Real Estate & Public Sector (Netherlands)
mirjam.bani@ing.com

Timothy Rahill
Credit Strategist
timothy.rahill@ing.com

Leszek Kasek
Senior Economist, Poland
leszek.kasek@ing.pl

Oleksiy Soroka, CFA
Senior High Yield Credit Strategist
oleksiy.soroka@ing.com

Antoine Bouvet
Head of European Rates Strategy
antoine.bouvet@ing.com

Jeroen van den Broek
Global Head of Sector Research
jeroen.van.den.broek@ing.com

Edse Dantuma
Senior Sector Economist, Industry and Healthcare
edse.dantuma@ing.com

Francesco Pesole

FX Strategist

francesco.pesole@ing.com

Rico Luman

Senior Sector Economist, Transport and Logistics

Rico.Luman@ing.com

Jurjen Witteveen

Sector Economist

jurjen.witteveen@ing.com

Dmitry Dolgin

Chief Economist, CIS

dmitry.dolgin@ing.de

Nicholas Mapa

Senior Economist, Philippines

nicholas.antonio.mapa@asia.ing.com

Egor Fedorov

Senior Credit Analyst

egor.fedorov@ing.com

Sebastian Franke

Consumer Economist

sebastian.franke@ing.de

Gerben Hieminga

Senior Sector Economist, Energy

gerben.hieminga@ing.com

Nadège Tillier

Head of Corporates Sector Strategy

nadege.tillier@ing.com

Charlotte de Montpellier

Senior Economist, France and Switzerland

charlotte.de.montpellier@ing.com

Laura Straeter

Behavioural Scientist

+31(0)611172684

laura.Straeter@ing.com

Valentin Tataru

Chief Economist, Romania

valentin.tataru@ing.com

James Smith

Developed Markets Economist, UK

james.smith@ing.com

Suvi Platerink Kosonen

Senior Sector Strategist, Financials

suvi.platerink-kosonen@ing.com

Thijs Geijer

Senior Sector Economist, Food & Agri

thijs.geijer@ing.com

Maurice van Sante

Senior Economist Construction & Team Lead Sectors

maurice.van.sante@ing.com

Marcel Klok

Senior Economist, Netherlands

marcel.klok@ing.com

Piotr Poplawski

Senior Economist, Poland

piotr.poplawski@ing.pl

Paolo Pizzoli

Senior Economist, Italy, Greece

paolo.pizzoli@ing.com

Marieke Blom

Chief Economist and Global Head of Research

marieke.blom@ing.com

Raoul Leering

Senior Macro Economist

raoul.leering@ing.com

Maarten Leen

Head of Global IFRS9 ME Scenarios

maarten.leen@ing.com

Maureen Schuller

Head of Financials Sector Strategy

Maureen.Schuller@ing.com

Warren Patterson

Head of Commodities Strategy

Warren.Patterson@asia.ing.com

Rafal Benecki

Chief Economist, Poland

rafal.benecki@ing.pl

Philippe Ledent

Senior Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg

philippe.ledent@ing.com

Peter Virovacz

Senior Economist, Hungary

peter.virovacz@ing.com

Inga Fechner

Senior Economist, Germany, Global Trade

inga.fechner@ing.de

Dimitry Fleming

Senior Data Analyst, Netherlands

Dimitry.Fleming@ing.com

Ciprian Dascalu

Chief Economist, Romania

+40 31 406 8990

ciprian.dascalu@ing.com

Muhammet Mercan

Chief Economist, Turkey

muhammet.mercan@ingbank.com.tr

Iris Pang

Chief Economist, Greater China

iris.pang@asia.ing.com

Sophie Freeman

Writer, Group Research

+44 20 7767 6209

Sophie.Freeman@uk.ing.com

Padhraic Garvey, CFA

Regional Head of Research, Americas

padhraic.garvey@ing.com

James Knightley

Chief International Economist, US

james.knightley@ing.com

Tim Condon

Asia Chief Economist

+65 6232-6020

Martin van Vliet

Senior Interest Rate Strategist

+31 20 563 8801

martin.van.vliet@ing.com

Karol Pogorzelski

Senior Economist, Poland

Karol.Pogorzelski@ing.pl

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

Viraj Patel

Foreign Exchange Strategist

+44 20 7767 6405

viraj.patel@ing.com

Owen Thomas

Global Head of Editorial Content

+44 (0) 207 767 5331

owen.thomas@ing.com

Bert Colijn

Chief Economist, Netherlands

bert.colijn@ing.com

Peter Vanden Houte

Chief Economist, Belgium, Luxembourg, Eurozone

peter.vandenhoute@ing.com

Benjamin Schroeder

Senior Rates Strategist

benjamin.schroeder@ing.com

Chris Turner

Global Head of Markets and Regional Head of Research for UK & CEE

chris.turner@ing.com

Gustavo Rangel

Chief Economist, LATAM

+1 646 424 6464

gustavo.rangel@ing.com

Carlo Cocuzzo

Economist, Digital Finance

+44 20 7767 5306

carlo.cocuzzo@ing.com