

The difficult process of learning to “speak the language of power”

di Josep Borrell

To take this look back, I have gone back to the programme I set out in 2019 before the Members of the European Parliament to compare it with what has actually been achieved. I was appointed HR/VP by the European Council on 2 July 2019 alongside Charles Michel, chosen as President of the Council of Heads of State and Government, and Ursula von der Leyen, appointed President of the Commission.

The dual role of the HR/VP

In its current form, the function of HR/VP is defined by the Lisbon Treaty dating 2007. The HR/VP is chosen before the other Commissioners by the European Council because he or she has two roles: High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Policy (HR) on one side and Vice President of the Commission (VP) on the other. The authority of the High Representative – the first part of the dual role – derives from the Council, since foreign affairs and defence policy remain exclusive competences of the EU Member States. Any decision in these areas still requires the unanimity of the Member States. I will come back to this later.

At the same time, the High Representative is also one of the Vice-Presidents of the Commission to facilitate the essential coordination with other common policies with a strong external dimension, such as trade, development aid, neighbourhood or migration. To underline the uniqueness of this position, the HR/VP heads an organisation, the European External Action Service (EEAS), which is separate from both the European Commission and the Council. It is this service that manages the 144 EU delegations around the world.

When I was proposed by the government of Pedro Sánchez to become both the Spanish European Commissioner and the HR/VP, I was well aware that this position would be

both a great honour and a heavy burden. It was the culmination of an already long career as a Spanish minister on several occasions, as a member of the European Convention between 2001 and 2003, as President of the European Parliament, and as President of the European University Institute in Florence. This varied experience did not prepare me too badly for this task. However, it was no less difficult to carry it out for five years in a very tense geopolitical context.

On 7 October 2019, I was invited to appear before the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Committees. The European Parliament had to give its assent to the various proposed appointments to the Commission. It was, of course, a very emotional moment to find myself once again for the first time before the Parliament that I had chaired fifteen years earlier.

One of the few advantages of the position of HR/VP is that you have a bit more time than the other Commissioners to prepare for your new job. So when I stood in front of the Members of the EU Parliament that day, I had formed some solid convictions about the priorities to be given to my mandate. Of course, I couldn't anticipate the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the massacre of 7 October 2023, or the war in Gaza. Nevertheless, when I re-read the speech I gave to the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), I think that I can safely say that the subsequent events have not proven me wrong on many of the issues I raised.

The world has changed for the worse, the much worse

My main message to the MEPs at the time was that we were living in a different era from the one that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. *'Since then, the world has changed dramatically, and for the worse, the much worse,' I said to the MEPs. 'We face trade wars, climate change, refugee crises, unstable neighbourhoods and hybrid threats. The rules-based international order is being challenged by a logic of power politics, which is far more unjust, unpredictable and prone to conflict.'*

The least we can say is that the following five years have - unfortunately - confirmed and amplified this diagnosis. The COVID-19 pandemic and its geo-economic consequences, the imperialist war of aggression launched by Vladimir Putin against Ukraine, trampling underfoot the United Nations Charter, the conflict in the Middle East and the difficulties in ensuring respect for international law and humanitarian law,

and the tensions in the South China Sea and the repeated violations of international law of the sea have fully illustrated these trends since 2019.

“This is not the world that the European Union wanted, I added then, but I am convinced that we have what it takes to face up to this difficult environment, because we have, and should be proud of, the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion in the world. We have the resources. We have the support of our people and solid institutions, and we must build on this foundation.”

This support from the European citizen was there in 2019 and remains today, but the results of the recent European elections also show that this consensus cannot be given for granted forever if we do not do what is necessary to provide our fellow citizens with the security and prosperity they expect.

Solid institutions, but not agile enough

On the other hand, while we undoubtedly have solid institutions, over the last five years I have measured the extent to which our institutions are not agile enough to react in a timely manner in a world that has become both more fluid and more dangerous. When it comes to foreign and defence policy, the unanimity rule has often cost us not just weeks but even precious months since 2019—whether when we had to react to massive electoral fraud in Belarus in 2020, to support Ukraine quickly and strongly enough, or to act for the respect of international law in the Middle East.

If there is one lesson I have learned from this mandate, it is the urgent need to change the rules of the game. I am fully aware of how special the area of foreign affairs and defence remains: it lies at the heart of the most fundamental prerogatives of nation states. For this reason, the politically acceptable solution will most probably not be to simply adopt the qualified majority voting which applies to other areas of European action. It will probably be necessary to introduce some sort of super-qualified majority or a rule of unanimity minus one or two States. But with the prospect of further enlargements, the unanimity rule will have to be replaced in any case.

How can Europe cope with this more hostile world?

“We should pool our national sovereignties to multiply the power of individual Member States, and I am convinced that if we do not act together, Europe will no

longer be relevant in the new world that is coming", I told MEPs in 2019. I was not completely naive, however, and I added that "pooling national sovereignties is a political decision, easier to proclaim than to achieve. My old friend Jacques Delors used to say: 'You have to reconcile Sunday's speeches with Monday's actions', but for that we need a truly integrated foreign policy that combines the power of the Member States, acting together within the Council, with all the policies managed by the Commission and the democratic legitimacy of this House". I have to admit that this goal has only been partially achieved over the past five years.

Reconciling Sunday rhetoric with Monday action

We have achieved this quite properly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic by effectively coordinating the repatriation of thousands of our fellow citizens stranded abroad in early 2020, by choosing to buy vaccines jointly, and by issuing €750 billion in joint debt to deal with the consequences of this pandemic while speeding up the energy and digital transitions. The external dimension of this European solidarity has, however, been less successful: we ended up being one of the international players that have contributed most to supporting vaccination in emerging and developing countries, but it often took us too long to do so. And this delay damaged our image in many countries.

We also more or less managed to match words and deeds in the face of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. We reacted together very quickly to the major energy crisis caused by the war. We also broke a taboo by providing massive military support to a country at war. However, on top of the already mentioned institutional obstacles, the belated realisation of the nature and real intentions of Vladimir Putin's regime, and the after-effects of thirty years of 'silent disarmament' following the fall of the Berlin Wall have often caused us to react too little too late, with serious consequences for the Ukrainians. We now need to amplify this effort, and to succeed we need in particular to relaunch our defence industries, but I'll come back to that later.

However, so far we have not managed to be consistent and effective in the Middle East. In 2019, I did not raise the issue before the European Parliament. At the time, everyone advised me not to touch it: the situation was frozen, there was no way of moving

towards a two-state solution. With the Abraham Accords, the Americans were building peace between the Arab countries and Israel, and the best thing for the EU was to stay out of it. The Palestinian question would eventually resolve itself. However, subsequent events have shown just how wrong this viewpoint was and how untenable this status quo was. For my part, well before 7 October 2023, I decided to re-invest the Union in the issue of peace in the Middle East. Following the explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020, we tried, without success, to help resolve the political and institutional crisis in Lebanon. The 11 days of fighting in Gaza in 2021, the steady deterioration of the situation due to illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the weakening of the Palestinian Authority had already shown that the situation was becoming explosive.

Reviving the two-state solution

In 2022, I reconvened the EU-Israel Association Council, which had not met for 11 years, to discuss these issues with the Israeli authorities. And in 2023, we launched a joint initiative with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Arab League, to relaunch the two-state solution. In September 2023, a few days before the October 7 massacre, we brought together representatives of more than 60 States to support this initiative on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. Despite the war that broke out on 7 October, we continued this effort by creating a Global Alliance for the two-state solution with the same partners in September 2024.

But after 7 October, beyond our unwavering condemnation of this horrific massacre, we were unable to speak with one voice or act effectively enough to help obtain a ceasefire, secure the release of the hostages, and ensure respect for international law and the decisions of the Security Council, the United Nations General Assembly, and the International Court of Justice in the region.

This was not out of lack of leverage. We are the leading supplier of aid to the Palestinian people via UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority. We are also Israel's leading partner in terms of trade, investment, and exchanges of people under an association agreement that is one of the most extensive we have in the world. Some of our Member States are also major suppliers of arms to Israel. It has been our deep

divisions on this issue that have largely prevented us from influencing the course of events, despite the growing number of civilian casualties.

Criticism of the ‘double standard’

This impotence and passivity, in contrast to the vigour of our commitment in support of Ukraine, have often been perceived outside the Union as the sign of a ‘double standard’: in the eyes of Europeans, the life of a Palestinian would not be worth as much as that of a Ukrainian. The vast majority of EU citizens certainly do not share this point of view, but that does not stop this idea from spreading widely in the countries of what is now known as the ‘Global South’. And not just in Muslim countries: I was struck by the extent to which this criticism was also regularly levelled at us throughout Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa.

This is a major geopolitical challenge for the Union. Vladimir Putin's imperialism represents an existential threat to us if he were to be victorious in Ukraine. If a significant number of countries in the “Global South” were to support his view on Ukraine rather than ours because of what is happening in the Middle East, our strategic position would be seriously weakened. With the massive deterioration in the situation in the Sahel, we have already seen the threat posed to the Union by Russia's growing influence in Africa. The BRICS meeting in Kazan, Russia, at the invitation of Vladimir Putin in October 2024 was another wake-up call. We imperatively must succeed in preventing the solidification of the ‘Rest against the West’ alliance, but I have to admit that at the end of my mandate, this is still a ‘work in progress’.

This is particularly true in our relations with Africa. *“We must not look at [Africa] solely from the angle of migration,”* I said in 2019, *“it is also an opportunity if we are able to put in place a global strategy that integrates trade, investment, security, education, especially education, the emancipation of women - there will be no solution without the emancipation of women in Africa - mobility, all together. We need to think big and be creative, developing a shared strategic vision.”*

One of the first actions taken by the new European Commission was to travel to Addis Ababa in early 2020 to meet our counterparts from the African Union and discuss ways of implementing this ambitious programme together. Unfortunately, a few days later,

the COVID-19 pandemic blocked any major initiative for almost two years. Subsequently, the negative developments in the Sahel, the increasingly deadly conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Central Africa, and the criminal game being played by Putin's Russia on the continent, made it very difficult for us to bridge the gap between Europe and Africa. This is so despite the fact that it is clear that an essential part of the future of Europe and the world will be played out in Africa over the coming decades. Finding ways of forging closer ties with Africa will be one of the main challenges facing the new European leadership.

Learning to speak the language of power

In 2019, I summed up the main mission of my mandate before the European Parliament in a phrase that has often been used since: *"The European Union must learn to speak the language of power". And I added that 'we have the instruments to implement a policy of power. Our challenge is to put them at the service of a strategy'.*

Confronted by the growing use by other players—China, but not only—of economic relations as weapons in the service of their own power policy, we have long been too naïve. *"We are a key standard-setting power in establishing global rules and norms. We have a powerful common trade policy. Powerful because it is common"*, I stressed at the time to the Members of Parliament.

This is one of the areas where things have moved the most during the term of office that is now drawing to a close. In the digital sphere, we have taken a number of strong measures to discipline the giants of the sector, in particular the major social networking platforms, and force them to respect our values and the rights and freedoms of Europeans. We have introduced stricter controls on foreign investment in Europe, as well as measures to combat dumping by foreign players benefiting from massive public subsidies. We have tightened controls on sensitive exports, particularly those likely to be used for military purposes. We have begun to accurately assess the risks associated with our excessive dependence on certain supplier countries in order to reduce them.

Nor have we hesitated to resort, if necessary, to large-scale economic sanctions. The double shock of the COVID-19 epidemic and the associated supply difficulties, and of the war of aggression against Ukraine and the energy crisis it provoked, helped a great

deal in pushing the EU Member States to take action in these areas, even if there are still significant differences within the Union on these issues.

A genuine 'foreign economic policy'

However, we still have to make up for the huge technological backlog accumulated over the last decades and highlighted by the Draghi report. In his report, Mario Draghi has stressed the need for the EU to develop a genuine 'foreign economic policy' and to better coordinate *"preferential trade agreements and direct investment with resource-rich countries, the building up of stocks in certain critical areas and the creation of industrial partnerships to secure the supply chain for key resources"*.

The silo functioning we have had until now, with the EU's trade policy on one side and its foreign and security policy on the other, is indeed totally unsuited to the geopolitical context in which we now find ourselves. The Lisbon Treaty sought to solve this problem. It distinguishes between international economic relations, such as trade and development aid, which fall within the remit of the Commission, and foreign and security policy, which is an intergovernmental matter. According to the Treaty, it is the HR/VP that should make it possible to integrate these two dimensions. In addition to chairing the Councils of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Development, he or she was also to chair the Council of Ministers for Foreign Trade. But for several years now, this provision has not been applied. To limit this harmful dichotomy, it would undoubtedly be useful to return to the spirit and letter of the Treaty in this area. The Draghi report also proposes going much further than we have done to date in terms of industrial policy. Admittedly, the measures already taken remain insufficient given the extent of our technological backlog and the increasingly aggressive practices of our competitors. However, we must take care to ensure that the measures we adopt do not have unintended effects.

The Union has gone too far in the past towards economic openness, but there is also a risk that the pendulum could now swing too far in the other direction. And that we are alienating partners with whom we should, on the contrary, be strengthening our ties, such as the countries around the Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South and South-East Asia.

Catch up technologically

To catch up technologically, Mario Draghi recommends investing an extra €800 billion in Europe each year, or 5% of European GDP. However, there is a risk that this major internal investment effort will be made at the expense of European investment outside the Union. This could ultimately undermine our geopolitical position, contrary to the objective of the Draghi report.

For example, the EU is now ready to do its part to limit climate change with the Green Deal, if it is effectively implemented in the coming years. This is one of the main achievements of the term of office that is coming to an end, thanks in particular to the work of my colleague and friend, Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans.

However, the key issue in limiting climate change is not Europe, but emerging and developing countries. These countries will only be able to make a full commitment to the green transition if the developed countries, which have a major historical responsibility for climate change, help them sufficiently. They tell us this at every COP. We are already the first supplier of green finance globally, but if we cannot increase Europe's contribution to the global financing of the fight against climate change in the future, we risk jeopardising the already fragile process of the Paris Agreement and alienating the countries most at risk. Yet, climate change is one of the main threats to our future in terms of instability at our borders.

Furthermore, China has greatly developed its geopolitical position, particularly in Africa and Latin America, by providing massive support for the construction of infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative, often referred to as ‘New Silk Road’. In 2021, we launched the Global Gateway initiative in response. But the additional funding that we can really mobilise remains too limited for the time being.

Finally, we need to reduce our excessive dependence on certain trading partners. But this should lead us to develop our economic links with other regions of the world, in particular to gain access to the critical raw materials needed for the energy and digital transitions. However, it is essential that we do not once again adopt an ‘extractivist’ approach: we must help our partners build genuine industrial sectors to add value to the raw materials they have.

In other words, despite our economic difficulties and our massive need for internal investment to catch up technologically, accelerate our energy and digital transitions and strengthen our defence, we must also invest more abroad if we do not want instability to spread to our borders, leaving the field open to China and Russia in the countries of the ‘Global South’.

In this respect, I hope that we will finally manage to conclude negotiations on our trade agreement with Mercosur, which has been under discussion for more than twenty years. The stakes go far beyond economy and trade: they are first and foremost geopolitical. I've worked hard on this for five years, but in the current context, it is crucial for the EU to strengthen the ‘other transatlantic relationship’ we have since a long time with Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the HR/VP mandate, security and defence is as important as foreign affairs

My call to ‘*learn to speak the language of power*’ of course also primarily concerned the Union's defence policy. The HR/VP not only has a dual role in the Council and the Commission, but also in foreign affairs and security policy. He or she chairs the Council of Defence Ministers and heads the European Defence Agency, which is responsible for coordinating innovation in defence within the EU and the procurement policies of European armed forces. The HR/VP is assisted by an EU Military Staff and initiates and coordinates European civilian and military missions deployed around the world. Nine such missions were launched during my term, including Operation Aspides in early 2024 to help preserve freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. The HR/VP also manages the European Peace Facility, an intergovernmental fund set up in 2021 to help our partners with defence equipment, a role that the EU budget cannot play. It has been central in particular to our military support for Ukraine. Finally, the HR/VP heads the European Satellite Centre, Europe's main tool for providing intelligence to Member States and European leaders.

In the new Commission, there will be a dedicated European Commissioner for defence. In practice, it will be rather a Commissioner in charge of the defence industry, which is in dire need of greater support, better coordination, and active boosting. For this effort to be effective, this Commissioner will have to work in close cooperation with

the HR/VP. It is indeed essential to coordinate precisely the action on the demand side of European armies, managed by the HR/VP via the European Defence Agency in particular, and the action on the supply side, organised by the Commission via its industrial policy specific to this sector.

From the outset, I considered that, in an increasingly tense geopolitical context, the defence aspect of my mandate as HR/VP was as important as the foreign affairs aspect. This is why I immediately launched the development of the Strategic Compass, a kind of European defence white paper designed to bring our Member States into agreement on the nature of the threats and to define together the priority actions to be implemented.

Prepared before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was adopted a few days after it began. It was within this framework in particular that we carried out the first European live military exercise in 2023 in Cádiz, Spain, and thanks to it, we will have by 2025 a force of 5,000 soldiers ready to be deployed outside the Union if needed for operations of the kind of the emergency evacuation of Europeans from Kabul or Sudan.

I also pointed out to MEPs in 2019 that our combined military spending was *"greater than that of China. Much more than Russia. We are second only to the United States. We spend 40% of what they spend, but our defence capability is much lower because of fragmentation and duplication. We need to spend better and the best way to spend better is to spend together."*

While there is no question of creating a genuine European army in the foreseeable future, it is imperative to coordinate national armies more closely. This applies in particular to their military equipment, in order to achieve full interoperability while filling gaps and avoiding unnecessary duplication.

Our defence budgets have increased significantly in recent years, particularly our equipment budgets, which have risen by 30% since 2022. Nevertheless, despite the urgency underlined by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, progress has been slow to date in coordinating military equipment purchases: only 18% of our purchases are currently made in a cooperative manner, whereas several years ago we had already set ourselves a target of 35% - twice as much. What's more, our defence industry is unable to keep pace with our rearmament effort, either quantitatively or qualitatively: since

2022, 45 % of additional military equipment purchases have been made outside the EU.

Consolidating and boosting our defence industries

If we want to be able to replenish the stocks of our armed forces, support Ukraine at the necessary level, reduce our excessive external dependence, and prepare for the future by developing the defence equipment of tomorrow, we urgently need to make a major effort to consolidate and boost our defence industries. Since 2022, we have already doubled our artillery ammunition production capacity, thanks in particular to the action of my colleague Commissioner Thierry Breton, but we still need to do more in this sector and duplicate this effort in the other ones.

That's why, in spring 2024, we prepared and presented the first European defence industry strategy. But we still need to find the means to implement it. The Draghi report puts the effort required at €500 billion over the next ten years. To mobilise these resources, we first need to remove the existing obstacles to private financing of defence industries and enable the European Investment Bank to provide greater support for projects in this area. But this will not be enough: significant amounts of European public money will also be needed.

The urgent need for financial support for our defence

Can we wait until 2028 and the next European multi-annual financial framework to start supporting our defence industry more substantially than we do today? I don't think so. As we decided in the face of the major emergency represented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the existential threat posed to Europe by the aggression of Putin's Russia would, in my view, justify issuing European common debt to deal with it, in particular to support our defence and our defence industry. I'm well aware of how politically sensitive the subject is, but at a time when the US commitment to European security is becoming more and more uncertain, I don't think there is an alternative that is equal to the needs.

In 2019, I dedicated a part of my hearing speech to NATO. *"It is and will remain the cornerstone of our collective defence", I said. "By developing European defence, we*

will strengthen the Atlantic Alliance, and by carrying more weight in NATO, we will contribute to a more balanced transatlantic relationship." At the time, there was still a significant tension within the European Union between those in favour of greater 'strategic autonomy' and those who feared that any specific European defence effort would weaken NATO and therefore European security.

One of the most positive achievements of the last five years has been the complete disappearance of what was in reality already largely a false debate at the time. After the result of the last American presidential election, everyone in Europe realised that the American commitment to European security has become more uncertain. And in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, everyone now agrees that we need to make both a major effort on defence and continue to strive to maintain and strengthen NATO by building a solid 'European pillar' within it. Even if it remains to be clarified how such a pillar should work in practice and how it should be linked to the Union's own security policy.

In conclusion, under the pressure of major crises, we have made significant progress since 2019 in learning to speak the language of power. However, given the rapid deterioration of our geopolitical environment, there is still much to be done to avert the risk that Europe could cease to be a relevant player on the global chessboard in the future. Regarding European foreign and security policy, we have still a lot of work to do to effectively combine the power of the Member States and the policies managed by the Commission and close the gap between '*Sunday's speeches and Monday's actions*'.