The EU's Political and Security Committee: Still in the shadows but no longer governing?

The Lisbon Treaty introduced the most far-reaching reforms to EU foreign and security policy cooperation since the 1990s. In the years since, much attention has been focused on the role of the High Representative/Vice President and the European External Action Service. Yet as **Heidi Maurer** *and* **Nicholas Wright** *explain, there has been little attention paid to the impact the Lisbon Treaty had on the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC), which brings together Ambassadors from the EU's member states to help manage foreign policy cooperation. Drawing on a new study, they reveal how the PSC, which once sat at the centre of EU foreign policy-making, is now battling to maintain its influence in a much-changed institutional landscape.*

The EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) was established in 2001 as a permanent, Brussels-based forum through which the member states could manage the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). An ambassadorial-level body, the PSC sits just below Coreper I and II in the Council's diplomatic hierarchy. It has been central to the institutionalisation of EU foreign and security policy cooperation and plays a leading role in EU crisis management through its day-to-day management of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It quickly emerged as the 'linchpin' of the CFSP, becoming the crucial interface between capitals, the High Representative and supranational institutions. Indeed, previous studies have concluded that it was so influential that it was effectively 'governing in the shadows'.

The Lisbon Treaty radically reformed the EU's foreign policy landscape, however. The most eye-catching innovation was a beefed-up role for the High Representative who also became a Commission Vice-President (HRVP) and therefore better able to corral the institutions and resources available for EU foreign policy; the establishment of a new European External Action Service (EEAS) as a proto-EU foreign ministry and diplomatic service to support the HRVP; and the replacement of the six-month rotating presidency in foreign policy with a 'permanent presidency' exercised by the HRVP and EEAS officials. In the years since, analysis has focused primarily on the HRVP and EEAS in seeking to understand how – and how far – these changes have influenced EU foreign policy-making and its capacity for international actorness. Very little attention, though, has been paid to the PSC. Our research seeks to address this gap.

As the focal point of member states' day-to-day engagement with the CFSP, the PSC provides an excellent starting point to explore to what extent (if at all) the nature of interactions and the power balance between national and supranational levels have changed since Lisbon. In a series of interviews with PSC Ambassadors, diplomats involved in the CFSP, and officials from the EEAS, Commission and European Council, we sought to understand how it navigates a dramatically changed institutional context, asking whether it is still able to fulfil the strategic role for which it was intended. Three major themes emerge from our research.

The impact of the 'permanent presidency'

First, the 'permanent presidency' in foreign affairs has significantly altered the rhythms and balance of policy-making in the CFSP, affecting not just the PSC but the working groups operating below it and the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) whose agenda it prepares. The ambition of a permanent presidency was clear: greater coherence, coordination and long-term strategic thinking in EU foreign policy. To a considerable extent it has achieved this, particularly under Federica Mogherini who chaired the Foreign Affairs Council as HRVP from 2014-2019. She is regarded as having used the agenda-setting power of her position to good effect, being 'very activist' and wanting 'to be involved in all the major policy decisions'.

Political and Security Committee informal meeting with the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Palestinian National Authority in 2018, Credit: European Council

For the PSC, the impact of the permanent presidency is felt primarily through their engagement with the EEAS. The EEAS is 'the institution we cooperate with on an almost hourly basis', according to one PSC Ambassador. The EEAS chair has certainly brought continuity and a longer-term perspective to decision-making. Institutionally, meanwhile, the EEAS also enjoys significant advantages over most member states, particularly in terms of its informational resources and control of the EU's diplomatic network. It has been able to translate these into significant agenda-setting capacity and influence. This has enabled the EEAS chair to become the 'driving force' of PSC meetings. Indeed, one Ambassador described them as being 'like a twenty-ninth member state'.

This has caused tensions, though, between the role of the chair as facilitator of consensus among the member states and his/her broader institutional loyalty to the HRVP's priorities. While PSC Ambassadors strive to maintain and exert their own influence as the embodiment of their states' preferences, one felt that the EEAS now 'puts quite a lot of effort into keeping decisions away from the PSC', only seeking PSC approval when necessary. Another was blunter, suggesting that at times 'the [EEAS] chair can be a bloody nuisance', for example in efforts to expand EEAS influence over CSDP missions. On occasion, Mogherini even sought to circumvent PSC Ambassadors by speaking directly to capitals if they were felt to be blocking particular decisions.

The European Council as the new centre of gravity in foreign policy

Second, the PSC has also faced pressure from above. Since Lisbon, the European Council has become the EU's most important centre of strategic foreign policy decision-making. In part, this is a function of the issues on its agenda during this period. The crisis between Ukraine and Russia, the Iranian nuclear negotiations, and Syria are all *Chefsache* – issues of such significance that they demand decisions from the very top. The consequence, though, has been the gradual eclipsing of the Foreign Affairs Council. Foreign ministers no longer attend European Council meetings and the Foreign Affairs Council is left to deal with implementation and detail. This has contributed to a broader loss of interest in the Foreign Affairs Council among foreign ministers and has reduced the PSC's capacity to feed into decision-making processes.

While the PSC prepares Foreign Affairs Council meetings, European Council summits are prepared by each state's Permanent Representative through Coreper II. The PSC is not automatically involved in drafting foreign policy elements of European Council conclusions (a process the European Council permanent presidency jealously guards) and the balance between Coreper II and the PSC has therefore shifted. The previous modus operandi, whereby Coreper II would generally leave PSC Ambassadors to deal with foreign and security questions unless a serious issue arose, can no longer be taken for granted.

The PSC is increasingly seen as unable to take the broader, cross-cutting policy views necessary for decision-making at this level. This change has not been lost on PSC Ambassadors: one suggested that they had 'become a little impoverished in our engagement with European Council conclusions' and reliant on a good working relationship with their respective Permanent Representatives to ensure effective communication and coordination. A European Council official was less charitable, describing Coreper II as 'much more efficient' while the PSC 'adds no value to our summit preparations'.

Internal tensions in the PSC

Both these themes contribute to a third: a growth in tensions within the PSC and a reduction in its capacity to fulfil its role as effectively as it used to. In part, this is a consequence of size. Enlargement has seen the number of PSC Ambassadors almost double since it was originally established. At the same time, only a minority of states have the capacity or interest to deal with the wide range of issues dealt with through the CFSP, which explains the willingness of some to allow the EEAS and HRVP to take the lead.

The loss of the rotating presidency has also been a significant factor. Having the prestige and spotlight for six months is important both for individual states and their officials. It also emphasises that policymaking is a shared enterprise – a reminder that they all have 'skin in the game'. For all its advantages, the permanent presidency has thus weakened this key means of balance and socialisation among member states. This, and the sense that real decision-making power has shifted to other parts of the Council, has diminished the PSC's perceived significance.

Alongside this has been the intrusion of wider politics into the PSC's functioning, particularly through the increase in populist, sovereigntist governments around the EU. This has seen the consensus norm challenged and even break down in some cases. Isolation is no longer the taboo it once was. Some PSC Ambassadors are even instructed by their capitals to pursue a deliberate strategy of obduracy. This has played out in splits over Israel, attitudes to the Trump Administration and Russia. This growth in contestation poses perhaps the greatest challenge to the ongoing relevance of the PSC over the longer term: like all parts of the system, if it cannot function effectively, its value will be quickly lost.

The picture that emerges of the PSC since Lisbon is of a body increasingly squeezed between 'bigger institutional beasts'. Continuing instability in both the EU's neighbourhood and globally means the demand for a greater focus on foreign, security and defence policy by member states is unlikely to diminish. However, the role of the PSC as a strategic decision-maker in this context is less certain. More likely is a growing responsibility for oversight over the HRVP and EEAS, although it remains to be seen whether all member states will be happy with this. The PSC will continue to operate in the shadows, but it seems its days of governing may be over.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying (open access) paper in the Journal of Common Market Studies

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