

EU Core Groups Specialisation and Division of Labour in EU Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Close foreign policy cooperation among a limited number of EU member states is generally looked upon with suspicion as it is associated with '*directoires*' of large member states. The central argument of this paper is that, under certain conditions, the specialisation and division of labour among the member states can strengthen both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the foreign policy of the EU. This paper proposes the establishment of a system of small, specialised *EU core groups* that focus on particular foreign policy issues. An EU core group consists of (representatives of) the high representative, the Commission and the presidency and of a limited number of EU member states that are both willing and able to devote extra efforts and resources to a specific foreign policy matter. A system of EU core groups can help to alleviate some major problems of EU foreign policy: the cleavage between large and middle-sized or small member states, the predominance of uncommon interests, a lack of cooperation and vertical consistency, and the growing irrelevance of the Council in an EU with 25 or more member states.

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EU CORE GROUPS

SPECIALISATION AND DIVISION OF LABOUR IN EU FOREIGN POLICY

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1. Introduction

An analysis of the foreign policy of the European Union (EU) points to the rising importance of small groups of member states that take the lead in the operationalisation of EU foreign policy or in tackling the most delicate aspects of foreign policy matters. The best-known examples are the ‘*directoire*/directorate’-type activities of France, the UK and Germany in the context of the EU-3 negotiations with Iran (together with the high representative for the common foreign and security policy) and of the Contact Group for the Balkans (together with Italy, the US and Russia).¹ In addition, there are other, less visible informal groups that include smaller member states along with representatives of EU institutions. Examples are the informal Contact Groups on Afghanistan and on the Democratic Republic (DR) of Congo, and the EU Core Group on Somalia.² The latter was to some extent legitimatised by the Council, which in March 2006 it “welcomed the establishment of an EU contact group on Somalia in Nairobi to engage on behalf of the EU and in consultation with EU Heads of Mission in direct dialogue with the Transitional Federal Government”.³

The activities of these kinds of informal groups are often seen as undermining the common foreign policy of the EU. This paper claims, however, that under certain conditions, the creation and functioning of small groups of countries and representatives of the EU institutions can be turned into an asset for the foreign policy of the EU. The central argument of this paper is that the introduction of specialisation and division of labour among the EU member states can strengthen both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the EU’s foreign policy.

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¹ In both cases, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Mr Javier Solana, or one of his representatives is also involved in the deliberations. For an analysis of the arguments pro and contra directorates, see Keukeleire (2001). For the Contact Group on the Balkans, see Schwegmann (2000), Keukeleire (2001) and Gégout (2002). For the EU-3 on Iran, see Delpech (2004 and 2005), Borda (2005) and Posch (2006).

² The informal Contact Group on Afghanistan includes the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, the Council Secretariat and the Commission – with the first three being its key members. The informal Contact Group on the DR Congo has France, the UK, Belgium and the Council’s Secretariat General as its key members. The EU Core Group on Somalia, which was created early 2004, now consists primarily of the UK, Italy, Sweden and the European Commission.

³ See the Press Release from the 2718th meeting of the Council of the European Union (General Affairs and External Relations), “Somalia – Council conclusions”, 7033/06 (Presse 68), Brussels, 20 March 2006, pp. 7-9.

The specialisation and division of labour can be considered as necessary for two sets of reasons. First, these modalities are necessary to allow for a more operational and dynamic foreign policy in an EU with 25 or more member states. They are indispensable to cope with the major differences in the member states' foreign policy capabilities and interests, the widening cleavage between larger and smaller countries, and the growing tension between the objective of a 'common' foreign policy and the needs of an operational foreign policy. This approach is even more important in view of the non-ratification of the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe and the doubts about an EU minister for foreign affairs and a European External Action Service (EEAS) – leading to the need for other devices to strengthen EU foreign policy. Second, the specialisation and division of labour are necessary to tackle some fundamental problems of EU foreign policy that are often disregarded and were not or not sufficiently tackled by the Constitutional Treaty: the predominance of 'uncommon' interests, the member states' lack of interest in each other's foreign policy priorities, the problem of vertical consistency (between EU and national foreign policies), and the problems of legitimacy, credibility and visibility.

This paper proposes a method to organise the specialisation and division of labour through a flexible system of small, specialised *EU core groups* (or *EU liaising groups*⁴) that focus on particular foreign policy matters. An EU core group consists of (representatives of) the high representative, the Commission and the presidency (or of the EU minister for foreign affairs if the post is created) and of a limited number of EU member states that are both willing and able to devote extra efforts and national resources to a specific foreign policy matter (i.e. a country, region, conflict or thematic issue). This composition implies that different EU core groups will include different sets of member states. The main function of EU core groups is to take special responsibility in developing a more dynamic, coherent and (pro)active policy towards a specific policy matter: first through the support for the preparation, elaboration, implementation and follow-up of EU policy, and second through the intensification, pooling and stronger coordination of the national efforts and assets of the EU core group's member states.

The first and second sections of this paper focus on various underlying but often neglected political problems of EU foreign policy, in order to explain more clearly the need for and added value of specialised EU core groups. In the third section, the various dimensions of the proposal to establish a system of EU core groups are explored: their composition, conditions for creating an EU core group, their functions, their relationship with the EU's existing institutional framework and policies and differences in comparison with other flexibility mechanisms (such as enhanced cooperation). This discussion is followed by an overview in the fourth and fifth sections of the advantages of a system of EU core groups, as well as the limitations and potential risks.

The analysis leads to some – at first sight – paradoxical conclusions. It demonstrates that a mechanism of EU core groups could not only increase the role of member states but could also strengthen the relevance of the Community method and of the institutions and procedures of the EU's first pillar. It illuminates the point that bringing national diplomacies more to the centre of EU foreign policy can reverse a continuing trend of nationalisation (or renationalisation) of foreign policy. And it reveals that accepting diversity in member states' foreign policy interests and capabilities, together with introducing a division of labour and specialisation, can actually bring more unity and consistency to EU foreign policy.

⁴ The idea of 'EU Liaising Groups' was launched by the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel De Gucht (2005) in his 27 October speech in Helsinki on "Towards greater effect and appeal – Strengthening EU foreign policy". The label 'EU Liaison Group' has the advantage of avoiding the link with the concept of a 'core Europe' (which is often perceived as excluding member states). I opt for the label 'EU core groups' as it reflects more correctly the nature and role of EU core groups, which is broader than that of the 'EU Liaison Groups' proposed by Mr. De Gucht.

2. Disregarded underlying political problems of EU foreign policy

Before going into detail on the proposal to create a system of EU core groups, it is useful to explore some fundamental problems of EU foreign policy that in political debates and academic analysis receive less attention than they deserve.

Uncommon interests and mutual obstruction

A first set of problems is often lumped together under the headings ‘lack of common interest’ or ‘lack of political will’. Yet a closer look at these problems reveals that there is far more to it. Particularly the factor of lack of political will on the part of member states is too easily used to explain the constraints and failures of the EU, which hinders both an accurate diagnosis and the search for possible solutions.⁵

Diverging interests and sometimes outright disagreements among member states explain the lack of common policy towards some major foreign policy issues (such as the Iraq war in 2004) and the weakness of some of the existing policies (such as that towards Russia). In many cases, however, it is not the existence of *opposing interests* and substantial disagreements that impedes the development of a more dynamic foreign policy. Particularly in foreign policy matters that are situated slightly lower on the international agenda, the real reason is simply the *lack of interest* in a certain foreign policy issue. Historical, geographical, economic and other factors explain why most member states are only actively interested in a certain number of third countries and foreign policy issues, which are often of less interest for other member states. To give one example: developments in East Timor might attract much attention in Portugal and a couple of other member states, but politicians and public opinion in most other EU states do not really care about what happens in that country and may not even be able to situate East Timor on a world map.

This lack of interest in each other’s foreign policy priorities explains why member states that want a more dynamic EU policy towards certain issues often see their efforts blocked or slowed down by other member states that are not interested in the issue and have no interests to defend. As a result, EU foreign policy does not often surpass the level of declaratory diplomacy, ‘political dialogue’ and traditional contractual relations with a country or region. The development of new military and civilian crisis-management instruments and the growing role played by High Representative Javier Solana and his staff have allowed the EU to develop a policy towards issues that initially received only peripheral attention from a majority of member states (such as the DR Congo). Nevertheless, many foreign policy priorities of member states are left out. And even when an initial lack of interest can be overcome, member states discover that it remains difficult to find support from the other partners to further upgrade the EU policy and develop a more comprehensive and dynamic approach.

The mutual indifference of member states towards each other’s issues and the resulting obstruction of a more activist EU foreign policy have a major negative impact. First, it leads to disappointment and frustration for those member states demanding a dynamic EU policy towards a specific third country, region or issue. By not taking member states’ traditional,

⁵ For (ab)use of the arguments concerning lack of political will and lack of common interests as explanations for the problems of EU foreign policy, see Keukeleire (2002 and 2006).

national foreign-policy objectives⁶ with sufficient seriousness, the EU undermines the relevance, credibility and legitimacy of its foreign policy – and of the EU as such. After all, from a member state’s perspective, what is the point of having an EU foreign policy that does not contribute to tackling problems and crises in areas that it considers of crucial importance?

Second, disappointment and frustration about the limited added value of EU foreign policy for national foreign policy priorities partially explains member states’ restrained commitment towards EU foreign policy in general and the extent of their willingness to support initiatives proposed by other states. These factors often lead to mutual obstruction. To be concrete: Why should the Scandinavian countries support a more activist policy towards Mediterranean countries if these member states are reluctant to prioritise the Northern Dimension in EU foreign policy?

Third, this situation is one explanation for member states’ choice of unilateralism, initiatives with other countries, ad hoc formulas and contact groups outside the EU framework. These activities in turn further increase distrust and tension among member states and undermine the credibility and relevance of the EU as an international actor.

Fourth, there are also negative consequences in terms of the visibility of EU foreign policy. National press in general focuses on the major international conflicts and crises (where the EU is often absent) or on those countries, regions or issues that are a foreign policy priority of that member state (where the EU is generally inactive too). Together, this means that the public literally does not see (on television or in newspapers) that there is an EU foreign policy, which again undermines the credibility and legitimacy of the EU. This is problematic for the EU as public opinion polls demonstrate that, taken together, foreign and security policy is one of the domains where the European population wants an active EU.⁷ This situation is also one of the major problems for the EU’s quickly developing European security and defence policy. The EU is increasingly involved in crises-management operations in different parts of the world, but this is barely visible for the general public. For instance, how many EU citizens have seen television images of the EU’s Aceh Monitoring Mission in Indonesia or of the EU’s largest military operation, Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Considering these disadvantages, the EU might profit not only from focusing attention on the *common* interests of the EU, but also from devising methods to take important *uncommon* interests more seriously – interests that rank are highly for only some member states. The challenge is thus to find a method for turning the differences in member states’ foreign policy interests and capabilities from obstacles into assets for the foreign policy of the EU.

Increasing in this way the added value of EU foreign policy for the member states may also contribute to tackling their so-called ‘lack of political will’. Indeed, from the perspective of the preceding analysis, the question is not whether member states demonstrate sufficient political will to support EU foreign policy, but whether there are sufficient incentives for national politicians and diplomats to generate the necessary political will. Further refined, the question is how the EU’s foreign policy system can develop mechanisms to facilitate the generation of such political will and to increase the commitment of member states.

⁶ Specific examples include: the Northern Dimension for the Scandinavian and Baltic States; the Mediterranean area for the Southern member states; Africa for France, the UK, Portugal and Belgium; Latin America for Spain and Portugal; Asia for the UK, the Netherlands and Portugal; the former Soviet republics for the new member states; and specific international conferences for Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

⁷ See the EU’s bi-annual Eurobarometer survey (retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm).

Vertical inconsistency and a lack of coordination and cooperation

A second set of problems is related to the consistency and coherence of EU foreign policy. When this issue is discussed, most attention goes to institutional and horizontal consistency. This aspect concerns the consistency between the policies developed in the EU's first pillar and second pillar by different political and bureaucratic systems, and the consistency among the various policies of the EU: development policy, trade policy, common foreign and security policy (CFSP), etc. There is, however, much less focus on the problems of vertical consistency between EU and national foreign policies and of horizontal consistency among the different national foreign policies.⁸ Yet, these two dimensions of consistency are at least as important as the other dimensions, given that foreign policy is a shared competence of the EU and its member states,⁹ that the foreign policy capabilities are still limited and that in specific domains of international relations the member states' foreign policies remain essential.

For the effectiveness and credibility of EU foreign policy, vertical consistency between the policy agreed within the EU institutions and that of all 25 member states is needed. But for many foreign policy issues, what really counts is the consistency between the policies of the central EU actors (the high representative, Council Secretariat and European Commission) and the often small number of member states that are really interested in the issue and that can make a difference in that dossier – as a result of their economic leverage, their special relationship with a third country, etc. One of the weaknesses of the existing EU system is exactly that it does not contain sufficient mechanisms to guarantee and foster this vertical consistency between the policies of the central EU actors and the partial number (and varying set) of relevant member states.¹⁰

The same reasoning applies to **the horizontal consistency among national foreign policies** and the resulting need for close **cooperation and coordination among national foreign policies**. EU foreign policy not only relies on common action through common instruments and common actors, but also on “strengthening systematic cooperation between member states in the conduct of policy” (Art. 12, TEU). Again, not all member states are relevant for all foreign policy dossiers. To be effective it is imperative that particularly the relevant member states do cooperate systematically and do strengthen their cooperation and coordination. The existing EU system, however, does not provide mechanisms and structures to practically facilitate cooperation and coordination among groups of pertinent member states – a situation that is related to the constraints of the current set-up of the Council and its substructures.

The growing irrelevance of the Council and of national representatives

The third set of problems is connected with the policy-making in the Council and its substructures, which suffers from the fatal dual disease of too many ministers (and other national representatives) and too many items on the agenda.

It is clear that in a Council meeting with 25 ministers, real debates are nearly impossible and indeed are also becoming rare. The resulting implication is that the decision-making and problem-solving capabilities of the Council of Ministers are under strain. Because of the large number of participants, the possibility for national ministers to intervene in the Council debates

⁸ For an analysis of the various aspects of consistency, see Nuttall (2005).

⁹ For the tensions in EU external competences, see Gauttier (2004) and Duke (2006).

¹⁰ An exception is the informal (but not very transparent) mechanisms achieved through (former) national diplomats who are members of the Council Secretariat General and the private staff and Planning Unit of the High Representative.

and to express and defend national interests and positions is more restricted than before. These circumstances not only cause ministers of foreign affairs to feel increasingly irrelevant in the Council meetings, they also make the Council meetings and their participation in it increasingly irrelevant for member states. This growing feeling of irrelevance in an expanding EU is not only true for meetings of the Council of Ministers, but also for the meetings of the various substructures of the Council: the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper), the Political and Security Committee and the many working groups. The psychological effect on the national ministers of foreign affairs is much more significant, however, and potentially harming for the EU, as these ministers are not really used to feeling irrelevant. In short, in addition to the diminished *output legitimacy* (because of its constrained problem-solving capacity), the Council structures are thus also faced with a diminished *input legitimacy*, which threatens to undermine the overall legitimacy and acceptability of the Council's decisions and of the EU as a foreign policy forum as such. Obviously, this also induces member states to use other fora to promote national foreign policy goals, such as other international organisations and ad hoc groups with a limited number of states.

The 'too many participants' problem is further exacerbated by the 'too many issues' obstacle. As a result of the expansion of the foreign policy instruments and activities of the EU, the ministers of foreign affairs as well as the various substructures of the Council are confronted with an increasingly overloaded and impossible agenda.¹¹ The example of the agenda of a recent meeting of the Africa Working Group (of 13 September 2006) illustrates the problem. During this meeting, the Working Group had to discuss: Sudan, DR Congo, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Somalia, Malawi, Madagascar, Togo, the progress report on the joint EU–Africa strategy, the EU's concept for strengthening African capabilities for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts, the Commission Communication on Governance (as part of the EU Strategy for Africa), and the EU Electoral Observation programme for 2006 and 2007. Member states that have a strong interest in a particular African country or issue thus see their foreign policy priority drown in the large number of agenda points. It is evident that it is impossible for the Working Group to grasp the details of all these issues and to discuss all of them in a serious way. A setting with more than 25 participants is not at all appropriate to develop an operational policy towards such a large number of complex issues that goes beyond generalities (such as the wish to promote peace, stability and democracy). It is also clear that the Council presidency cannot be expected to take the lead in all these foreign policy dossiers, except if the presidency is held by London or Paris with their extensive central services and diplomatic networks in Africa. Moreover, the mere bi-monthly meetings of the Africa Working Group are not sufficient if developments in a specific country or EU involvement in intensive mediation efforts require the EU to react swiftly and in a flexible way. In this context, it is not surprising that member states will see these meetings as insufficient and will turn to other fora and informal groupings to tackle their foreign policy priority in a more serious way – inside or outside the EU foreign policy setting.

3. Creating a system of EU core groups

Summing up the previous analysis, EU foreign policy is challenged to devise methods to focus more on uncommon interests, to increase its added value and relevance for the member states, to facilitate the generation of political will, to increase vertical consistency and cooperation among national foreign policies and to adapt the Council structures. The argument developed in this paper is that the introduction of specialisation and division of labour through the creation of a

¹¹ See also the analysis in Gomez & Peterson (2001).

system of EU core groups can contribute to meeting this challenge. This section spells out in detail the various dimensions of the establishment and functioning of EU core groups.

Composition

An EU core group consists of (representatives of) the high representative for the EU's CFSP, the Commission and the presidency of the Council, as well as a number of member states that accept the commitment to intensify the foreign policy efforts towards a certain foreign policy matter (a country, region, crisis or thematic issue). These member states have to be willing and capable over a longer period of time to: i) devote extra energy, time, money and other national resources in support of the EU's policy towards a specific foreign policy matter (a country, region or issue); and ii) step up, coordinate and pool their national foreign policy efforts towards that foreign policy matter – beyond those already undertaken by the member states and the EU as a whole. The European Commission can be excluded from an EU core group if the main focus of the core group is military crisis-management or if it is concerned with strategic military matters. Membership in EU core groups can change over time, in accordance with the evolving requirements of the subject area and the evolving attention of the EU core group.

To alleviate member states' concerns that EU core groups would become restricted playgrounds for former colonial powers or for EU countries that border the third country or region that is the subject of the EU core group, it can be decided that an EU core group should also include at least one EU member state with no historical links or direct borders with the third country or region concerned – i.e. a country with a more neutral status. This strategy may also be useful as an additional guarantee that the activities of an EU core group do not conflict with the general foreign policy of the EU. The involvement of countries with no direct historical or geographical ties to the subjects of an EU core group requires, however, that these countries commit themselves to the issue or area and have the capacity to dedicate special efforts in its regard. The northern member states of the EU (Sweden, Finland and Denmark) prove that this is not impossible by their very active foreign policy towards several non-European countries with which they have no particular historical links and no specific economic or other interests at stake (e.g. Indonesia, Somalia and the Great Lakes region in Africa).

At the highest political level, an EU core group consists of the high representative, the commissioner for external relations (and/or the commissioner for development), the minister of the country that assumes the presidency of the Council and the ministers of foreign affairs or other relevant ministers of the member states that take part in the EU core group. In the core group, the role of the high representative can be filled by an EU special representative who works under his authority. In the case of ratification of the Constitutional Treaty – or the creation of an EU minister for foreign affairs or a comparable function outside the Constitutional Treaty's framework – the EU minister would take the place of the high representative, the responsible commissioner and the presidency. If the Constitutional Treaty is not ratified, the Council can decide that the presidency of the Council will not take part in the EU core group's activities and that the high representative (or the EU special representative who works under his authority) will be the Council's main representative in the EU core group.

At lower diplomatic and administrative levels, an EU core group consists of specialised diplomats or civil servants from the participating member states, the high representative's Policy Unit or personal secretariat, the Council Secretariat and the administration of the Commission. If the EEAS is created, then some of these diplomats or civil servants should be replaced by diplomats or civil servants from the EEAS (depending on the form the EEAS assumes). The Council can also decide to involve representatives of the various military structures or other bodies of the EU in the activities of the EU core group.

Diplomats from the participating countries and institutions may not only meet in Brussels; they may also meet and act in other relevant places, such as in the third country or region that is the subject of the EU core group, or in New York to coordinate with and within the UN bodies and other international organisations.

The members of an EU core group agree among themselves on the management of their group and activities. Within the core group, there can be further specialisation and division of labour among the participant countries and institutions, with different (sets of) actors focusing on different dimensions of the policy towards the area or issue, depending on their competences and expertise. This specialisation and division of labour is particularly useful when an EU core group focuses on various dimensions of the external action *vis-à-vis* an area or issue. Depending on the need and circumstances, these dimensions can be related to mediation or reconciliation efforts, civilian and military crisis-management, post-war reconstruction, institution-building, development cooperation, technical cooperation, environmental protection initiatives, etc. Contingent upon the dimensions tackled by an EU core group, different specialised actors (ministers, diplomats, civil servants, agencies and experts) from the participating member states and EU institutions can be involved.

Criteria or conditions for creating EU core groups

An EU core group can be created when the following conditions are met:

- when a number of member states (for instance, from three member states upwards), the high representative and the responsible commissioner judge that a specific geographical area or foreign policy issue requires a more active EU policy and more extensive pooling and coordination of their efforts and resources; *or*
- when the Council asks a number of member states, the high representative and the Commissioner to intensify the policy of the EU towards a specific area or issue or to take the lead in developing a more active policy towards this area or issue (or both);
- *and* when these member states i) accept the commitment to devote in a concerted way and over a longer period of time additional efforts and national resources to this priority area and ii) also have the capabilities to do so in terms of personnel, financial means and other national assets (e.g. diplomatic or military leverage, close formal and informal political contacts with the elites in a third country, economic support or leverage, technical expertise, credibility to act as a mediator in a region, observers or peacekeeping forces and development cooperation).

EU core groups can concentrate on specific geographical areas, on thematic foreign policy issues or on a combination of both. Geographically organised EU core groups can focus their efforts on a specific country, group of countries or a region within a country or set of countries (for instance, a conflict area overlapping the borders of countries). Examples of thematic foreign policy issues that may be the subject of an EU core group are the spread of light weapons, security-sector reform efforts, child soldiers in conflict areas, institution-building and the link between conflicts and the production of narcotics. The focus of an EU core group can be rather broad and comprehensive or somewhat restricted in scope.

EU core groups cannot be established for all foreign policy areas, as this approach will not always be possible, desirable or useful. The creation of a particular EU core group may be excluded in the case of fundamental differences in interests and approaches among EU member states with regard to that foreign policy issue. When could this formula of division of labour and functional specialisation then be used? A mechanism of specialised EU core groups can be particularly useful for the many foreign policy domains that are situated slightly lower on the

international agenda and that are considered of major importance by only a limited number of member states. An EU core group can even be useful for well-established EU foreign policy areas (such as the Balkans or the Middle East), when it is seen as beneficial or necessary to intensify efforts in a specific sub-dimension to achieve the EU's foreign policy goals for that area. The creation of an EU core group may also be considered for policy issues that are already the subject of informal 'contact groups' or 'friends of' groups (e.g. in the context of the UN), created by a number of EU and non-EU countries.¹² In such cases closer interaction among the various EU actors involved and a closer link with the broader EU policy can be useful too.

EU core groups can be created in several ways. One possibility – and probably the most logical and natural – is that an EU core group is established incrementally and organically from below, based on practical experience and concrete needs and opportunities. Through this process an EU core group on a specific foreign policy issue gradually crystallises on the basis of closer interaction and cooperation between diplomats and civil servants from some member states and the EU institutions. Another possibility is that political leaders decide to create an EU core group when at a certain moment the need is felt by some member states or the Council to intensify policy towards a specific foreign policy issue. In order to guarantee the required flexibility and avoid protracted and difficult formal negotiations, the EU core group has to be created by a political agreement rather than through a formal legal agreement or detailed mandate by the Council.

Functions of EU core groups

The function of an EU core group is to take special responsibility for developing a more dynamic, coherent and (pro)active policy towards a specific area or issue – through its support for the preparation, elaboration, implementation and follow-up of EU policy, and through the intensification and pooling of the efforts and assets of the EU core group's members. An EU core group can fulfil this function in different ways, depending on the specific needs of the area or policy issue. What follows is a non-exhaustive list of possible tasks for an EU core group:

- support the Council, the Council's substructures, the high representative (or EU special representative) and/or the Commission in preparing new EU initiatives and decisions, or in concretising, implementing and assuring the follow-up of the decisions of the EU *vis-à-vis* this area or issue;
- examine, propose and apply measures to strengthen the various dimensions of horizontal and vertical consistency – with a special emphasis on the consistency of the national policies of the member states in the EU core group;
- pool more intensively the policy measures and efforts of the members of the EU core group or adopt new measures to further the objectives of the EU towards this area or issue,

¹² Examples of such groups are the Friends of the Secretary General on Georgia/Abkhazia (which includes, in addition to non-EU countries, France, Germany and the UK), the Group of Friends of Darfur (which includes France, the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, the EU Council presidency and the European Commission), the International Contact Group on Liberia (which includes France, the UK, the EU Council presidency and the Commission), the Grupo de Amigos on Venezuela (which includes Spain and Portugal), the Core Group on Northern Uganda (which includes the Netherlands and the UK), the Core Group on Lebanon (which includes France, the UK, Italy, the EU Council presidency and the Commission), and the 'Friends of the Nairobi Declaration' on the fight against the traffic of small arms (which includes seven EU countries and the Commission).

particularly through measures by member states in policy domains where the EU as such has little or no competences or capabilities, but where some coordination with EU policies is useful or essential;

- broaden and deepen the political dialogue with third countries or regions, allowing less formal and more frequent, flexible and purposive interaction, in addition to the political dialogue conducted by the Council (or presidency or troika) or Commission as is formally foreseen in the agreements with these partners;
- mediate or negotiate more closely with third parties to promote, elaborate or propose concrete solutions for specific problems;
- strengthen in a systematic way the coordination with other external actors that are active with regard to the area or issue at stake (such as other third countries, other regional organisations, UN agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and non-governmental organisations);
- intensify the dialogue among the EU core group's member states to increase the convergence of views about the area or issue, to diminish differences in approach and narrow divergences in interests and, in this way, to increase the possibility of a more coherent and active common EU policy; and
- implement any other tasks that the Council may assign to an EU core group.

Relationship with the legal and institutional framework of the EU and the general policies adopted within the EU

In order to ensure that an EU core group does strengthen and not undermine EU foreign policy and to dispel distrust of a division of labour and specialisation within the EU, it is of great importance to clearly define the position of an EU core group within the broader institutional, legal and policy framework of the EU and to define the perimeters of an EU core group.

First, an EU core group shall respect the principles of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community,¹³ the legislation and other decisions adopted in the context of these treaties, as well as the competences, rights, obligations and interests of those member states that do not participate in it. An EU core group does not affect the formal competences of the Council, European Parliament or European Commission. It cannot replace the Council, European Parliament or Commission in adopting binding decisions for the EU as a whole, nor can it adopt political, financial or other commitments for the EU as a whole or for other member states that are not part of the EU core group.

Second, through the Council, all member states remain involved in the policy-making process towards the geographical area or policy issue that is subject of the EU core group. The formal decisions and commitments adopted in the framework of the European Community (EC) and EU Treaties are basic components of the activities of the EU core group. Although an EU core group can contribute to looking for and suggesting new courses of action to tackle a specific foreign policy issue, when actions fall under the formal competences of the EC or EU, the formal decision-making procedures must be followed. It is equally important that all EU member states remain responsible for implementing and complying with the formal EU and EC decisions with regard to these areas and issues. In other words, the creation of an EU core group

¹³ This stance would also apply to the framework of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, should this Treaty be ratified and come into force.

for a specific issue does not diminish or remove the obligations and responsibilities of all EU member states to respect and implement commitments adopted within the EU and to support the Union's policy towards that issue.

Third, within the framework of the Council's activities, the high representative, presidency and/or the Commission shall ensure that all member states are regularly informed about the EU core group's activities and that the functioning of the EU core group does not run counter to the above-mentioned principles and restrictions. Like any EU member state, they can submit an initiative of an EU core group for discussion in the Council framework if it is thought to go against these principles and restrictions.

Fourth, the high representative, presidency and/or the Commission shall ensure that the competent parliamentary committees of the European Parliament and the interparliamentary delegations are regularly informed about the activities of the EU core group and that the core group takes into consideration the resolutions, reports and other findings of the European Parliament. When the EU core group focuses on a specific third country or region, it can ensure the close involvement of and coordination with the relevant interparliamentary delegation for that third country or region, as this can contribute to the successful functioning of the core group. The EU core group can thus provide a flexible setting that facilitates interplay with the parliamentary actors and allows the relevant interparliamentary delegation to be more closely involved in EU foreign policy.

Finally, it is clear that the member states' representatives in the EU core group are responsible for the relationship with, *input of* and feedback for their own domestic political institutions, non-governmental organisations and particularly their national parliaments. The latter is crucial for several reasons. Intensive interaction with the parliaments of the EU core group's member states can increase the legitimacy of the actions of the core group and of EU foreign policy in general. It will assure the national members of parliaments that their country plays a major role in the shaping of EU foreign policy and that the foreign policy priorities and interests of their country are taken seriously in the EU context. Moreover, close interaction with the relevant national parliaments can also contribute to and even be necessary for these governments to step up their own efforts.

Differences in comparison with enhanced cooperation and other flexibility clauses

A further point that needs clarification is the distinction between EU core groups and the flexibility clauses that are foreseen in the existing treaties and particularly with the formula of *enhanced cooperation*.¹⁴ The enhanced cooperation clause sought to facilitate foreign policy-making in cases where not all member states wanted to proceed. But it did not provide the flexibility several member states had hoped for, because of its narrow scope and the heavy procedures and strict requirements for establishing it.¹⁵ These factors also explain why the clause has not been used in practice.

¹⁴ For the relevant treaty articles on enhanced cooperation, see Arts. 27a-e, 40, 40a-b and 43-45, TEU and Arts. 11 and 11a, TEC. The other flexibility clause, the formula of *constructive abstention* (Art. 23, TEU), is more restricted in scope. For CFSP issues (except for decisions having military or defence implications) it allows for the possibility – under specific and limited conditions – that a country abstains from voting and is subsequently not obliged to apply the decision adopted in the Council.

¹⁵ For an analysis of the enhanced cooperation clause in the Nice Treaty and an account of the underlying motivations, see Stubb (2002) and Jaeger (2002).

A system of specialised EU core groups has several advantages compared with the system of enhanced cooperation. EU core groups can be created in a more flexible and informal way, without the heavy procedures and without the minimum of eight member states required for enhanced cooperation. In contrast to enhanced cooperation, an EU core group makes it possible for the countries participating in the core group to act beyond the limits of the powers of the EU, as they can agree together about initiatives or measures that only commit themselves (if they at least respect the decisions and policies agreed in common in the EU). The scope of enhanced cooperation is restricted to the implementation of joint actions and common positions, excluding matters with military implications – restrictions that do not apply to EU core groups. Also in contrast to enhanced cooperation, the system of EU core groups is not necessarily a last resort mechanism: even policy fields that are already the subject of a dynamic EU policy can profit from the specialisation and division of labour of an EU core group. Finally, although in EU core groups decisions are to be adopted by consensus (whereas under the enhanced cooperation formula qualified majority voting is formally allowed), the smaller number of actors involved in an EU core group should facilitate decision-making.

It is interesting in this regard to look at the provisions on flexibility that were included in the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe. The amendments to the provisions on enhanced cooperation did not substantially increase the prospect of a greater usefulness of this formula.¹⁶ In its section on the common security and defence policy, however, the Treaty did include a major innovation that goes to some extent in the direction of the flexibility proposed in the EU core-group system. After enumerating in Art. III-309 the tasks in the course of which the Union may use civilian and military means, Art. III-310 reads as follows:

Within the framework of the European decision adopted in accordance with Article III-309, the Council may entrust the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task. Those Member States, in association with the Union Minister for Foreign Affairs, shall agree among themselves on the management of the task.¹⁷

This provision could be a major step in the direction of increased flexibility. Yet it is not as far-reaching as the system of specialised EU core groups presented here. A system of specialised EU core groups has two major advantages. First, it allows for the support of the EU's general policy towards a specific geographical area or policy issue over a longer period of time (and is thus not restricted to the implementation of a specific European decision as in the case of Art. III-310). Second, a system of core groups allows for a comprehensive and integrated approach that includes the various policy domains (and is thereby not restricted to the common security and defence policy). But as the chances of a ratification of the Constitutional Treaty are rather slim, this comparison becomes somewhat irrelevant – with the EU losing even this limited but nevertheless useful flexibility clause.

¹⁶ See Arts. I-44, III-416-424 of the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe; see also Törö (2005).

¹⁷ The second paragraph of this article continues as follows: “Member States participating in the task shall keep the Council regularly informed of its progress on their own initiative or at the request of another Member State. Those States shall inform the Council immediately should the completion of the task entail major consequences or require amendment of the objective, scope and conditions determined for the task in the European decisions referred to in paragraph I. In such cases, the Council shall adopt the necessary European decisions.”

4. Advantages of the EU core groups

After elaborating the various features of a mechanism of specialised EU core groups, it is necessary to give more in-depth consideration to the potential advantages of such a mechanism as well as its possible limitations, drawbacks and risks.

Increasing the relevance of EU foreign policy

A system of EU core groups provides the EU with a device to overcome the obstacles analysed in the first section of this paper: the predominance of uncommon interests, the member states' lack of interest in each other's foreign policy objectives, the resulting obstructionism in EU foreign policy-making and the impression of member states that the EU is not promoting their foreign policy priorities. EU core groups make it possible to develop a more dynamic foreign policy in dossiers considered important by a certain number of member states, which in turn increases the relevance of EU foreign policy for them. While remaining committed to and involved in the foreign policy of the EU as a whole, member states can, within the EU foreign policy framework, focus their efforts more intensively on areas that are important to them.

Vice versa, a system of EU core groups also enhances the relevance of national foreign policy actors within the EU as it gives a more prominent role to individual member states within EU foreign policy. A system of EU core groups can strengthen the feeling of national diplomats and ministers of foreign affairs that, in an EU with 25 or more member states, they can make a difference. In view of the smaller number of participants in an EU core group and of the valuable assets participating countries can offer, membership in an EU core group increases the chances that their perspectives, proposals and initiatives are taken seriously. Important from the viewpoint of national politicians is also that membership in a dynamic EU core group will make it easier for them to make it clear to the general public, the media, their colleagues and other politicians that they play a significant role within the EU's foreign policy system. As EU core groups align themselves with foreign policy issues traditionally covered by the national media, the EU's foreign policy visibility will also grow, which can further increase its legitimacy.

Increasing the member states' sense of ownership

A major advantage of EU core groups is that it can increase the member states' sense of ownership and stimulate the national diplomacies to take greater responsibility in one or more specific dossiers of EU foreign policy. As manifest stakeholders, participating countries will commit more time and resources to make their EU core group a success. They will also take more responsibility for ensuring vertical and horizontal consistency along with cooperation among national diplomacies, as these factors will be important for achieving results. When member states are persuaded that EU foreign policy also furthers their traditional foreign policy priorities, they may increase their commitment towards and investment in EU foreign policy in general. Member states may also be more willing to accept a rise in the EU budget for foreign policy when they are convinced that it provides real added value for their foreign policy concerns.

Increasing the effectiveness and external credibility of EU foreign policy

A system of EU core groups, while not being a guarantee of success, nonetheless raises the potential effectiveness of the EU as a foreign policy actor. First, it provides the EU with a mechanism to bring together all its relevant actors – EU institutions as well as individual member states – whose influence, expertise and other assets are essential to tackling specific foreign policy issues. It is useful to remember that third parties in a conflict often take the EU

seriously only if the most relevant member states are closely involved in its foreign policy actions. Second, the system of EU core groups provides a small, informal and flexible framework, which is often crucial for conducting foreign policy. The limitation on the number of actors makes it easier to share sensitive information, to act swiftly to external changes and to conduct complex negotiations. Moreover, this small setting is not only useful in the contacts with other actors, but also facilitates the internal cohesion of the EU core group and helps to overcome differences in view – which as such can contribute to the effectiveness of the EU core groups. Third, the effectiveness of the EU's foreign policy can be enhanced as a result of the greater continuity and availability of the relevant EU actors in that specific policy area. Fourth, as mentioned earlier, the effectiveness of EU foreign policy actions can also improve as a result of the strengthened vertical and horizontal consistency and as a result of the larger commitment of the member states *vis-à-vis* EU foreign policy.¹⁸

Alleviating the institutional constraints of the Council structures

The system of EU core groups provides at least a partial solution to several problems of the current institutional framework – problems that would not completely disappear if the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe were to ever enter into force.¹⁹ In general, a system of EU core groups can contribute to overcoming the current lack of institutional flexibility, which makes it difficult to bring together a small group of relevant member states and to react quickly to changes in a specific policy area. More specifically, it helps to tackle some limitations of the main institutional actors.

An EU core-group system can help to reduce several of the constraints of the high representative for the CFSP (or of the EU minister for foreign affairs) and of the presidency. Despite his status and growing influence, High Representative Solana is restricted by his resources, the inability to ensure permanent personal involvement and leadership in all areas of EU foreign policy, and his varying authority and expertise. This authority and expertise is very pronounced in some cases – such as in the Balkans – but less so with regard to many other regions. The same is true concerning the much more striking limitations of the presidency. In this regard, a system of EU core groups can help to alleviate the lack of continuity and consistency, the often constrained resources, expertise, experience and availability, the frequently limited internal and external credibility and legitimacy, as well as the lack of interest and commitment in some cases.

Finally, a system of EU core groups can to some extent provide an answer to the dual disease of too many participants and too many items on the agenda, which undermines the Council of Ministers and the Council's various substructures. As a device for a sensible division of labour and specialisation, a system of EU core groups can provide significant relief to the overburdened and overcrowded Council structures. At the same time, it can strengthen the operational capacities of the Council by enhancing the quality of the policy preparation and follow-up. As previously mentioned, a system of EU core groups also assures national ministers of foreign affairs and diplomats that in an EU with 25 member states they are still relevant and can make a difference.

¹⁸ The account of David Owen (1995, pp. 179-83 and 296-99) on the Contact Group on Bosnia clearly demonstrates these various advantages of a restricted and informal group – as well as its limitations. See also Keukeleire (2001).

¹⁹ On the provisions on foreign policy in the Constitutional Treaty and the remaining constraints, see Forsberg (2004), Duke (2004), Crowe (2005) and de Ruyt (2005).

Strengthening the impact of Commission initiatives

A system of EU core groups can also alleviate the constraints of the Commission to some extent, which does not always possess the legal competence or political weight to use its instruments as leverage in EU foreign policy. Although some might worry that EU core groups could undermine the EU's Community method and the position of the various Community actors and the European Commission in particular, the contrary may be true for several reasons. First, the European Commission systematically takes measures and initiatives with regard to specific third countries, regions, crises or other foreign policy dossiers. Yet these actions often have rather limited impact, either because they are not sufficiently embedded in a broader policy supported by the other EU institutions and the member states, or because they lack the political backing and support of the Council and member states. The Commission also frequently proposes very relevant foreign policy measures and initiatives, which sometimes receive little to no attention in the Council. A system of EU core groups may contribute to reducing these problems. It provides a pertinent sounding board for the Commission's ideas and it brings the Commission together with other interested stakeholders from member states that may help to generate support in the Council for the initiatives and proposals of the Commission. Second, it is often the case that member states that are reluctant in the general foreign policy debate to use the Community method and involve the Commission (and the first pillar in general) are in practice much more pragmatic if it serves their interests in concrete foreign policy dossiers. In concrete dossiers where civil servants and diplomats from the Commission and member states work closely together to tackle specific foreign policy problems, the national actors tend to consider the Commission's expertise, budgetary instruments and external network as quite useful and are willing to bring into play EC policies and instruments if that facilitates their foreign policy objectives.²⁰ Third, a system of EU core groups at least guarantees the participation of the Commission, which is not the case with various existing contact groups and other informal fora.

Reducing the cleavage between large and small member states

Among the major tensions in EU foreign policy is the tension between large and small member states. A system of EU core groups can ameliorate these tensions to some extent because it takes into consideration the qualitative difference between the largest EU countries and the other countries in the EU, without marginalising or excluding the middle-sized and smaller EU countries. Smaller member states will probably be members of only one or two EU core groups, while middle-sized countries will participate in more groups and the larger member states will take part in many more, reflective of their extensive capabilities, interests and ambitions. The requirement to devote extra effort and national resources as a member of an EU core group will prevent the largest member states from joining all EU core groups, as London, Paris and Berlin also have their budgetary and other constraints and have to set priorities.²¹

The major advantage here is that a system with various EU core groups does not exclude any member state from participating in an EU core group that it considers as crucial and to which it

²⁰ The case of the existing EU Core Group for Somalia is quite illustrative in this respect, as it reveals how countries that are renowned for their clear preference for an intergovernmental approach and for their scepticism towards the European Commission (the UK, Sweden and Italy under Premier Silvio Berlusconi) in practice worked closely together with the Commission. Nevertheless, there are other examples in which member states maintained their principled position against Commission involvement.

²¹ The EU Core Group for Somalia was again interesting in this sense. Initially, France and Germany were also members of this group, but refrained from further participation when a larger diplomatic and financial commitment was expected.

commits itself for additional efforts. The question is not whether a country is small or large, but whether a country is relevant for a specific foreign policy matter and can provide added value to EU foreign policy. This way, a smaller country may not only be a relevant member but may also take the lead in an area of national importance. Equally important is that this system combines the use of smaller informal frameworks with the assured involvement of the EU institutions, allowing for flexibility without relying upon ad hoc formulas.

5. Limitations and risks

This paper argues that a system of EU core groups can lead to a more dynamic EU foreign policy and can contribute to tackling some of the problems and obstacles of EU foreign policy. It is clear, however, that this system will not solve every problem of EU foreign policy and that it is not without risks.

A system of EU core groups will not help when member states defend incompatible interests in a dossier or when they have major disagreements about the course to be followed. In such cases, the use of a system of EU core groups should indeed be completely excluded as it could reinforce cleavages in the EU. The same is true regarding major disagreements and diverging interests between the Council and the Commission. That being said, minor disagreements among the participating countries and institutions should not be significant obstacles: an EU core group can provide the necessary small setting to help them to overcome differences in view and to gradually strengthen mutual understanding.

Tensions between EC/EU policies and EU core-group approaches

What are the risks of a system of EU core groups? A first risk is that an EU core group gradually adopts an approach that runs counter to the common policy developed by the EU as a whole. This situation could arise if one member state gradually starts to dominate the activities of the EU core group and imposes its own perspective without sufficiently accounting for the policies and approaches of the other group members or of the EU as a whole. A diverging approach could also result from the typical dilemma in foreign policy-making in conflict areas: close involvement in mediation efforts in a conflict can force an EU core group to adopt a much more pragmatic attitude than the EU's official policy line dictates. For instance, peace negotiations or peace-building efforts may be possible only if negotiations are started with influential leaders of armed groups or extremist groups – even if they have violated human rights or have been involved in atrocities or terrorist activities. Yet this may be irreconcilable with the formal position of the EU (i.e. when these leaders are put on the EU's list of terrorists or when the respect for human rights is seen as the major goal). It may also be unacceptable for those EU member states that are not involved in the EU core group's activities and do not accept that the basic values and principles of EU foreign policy are renounced.

A second problem could arise when the actions of an EU core group – particularly when they are successful – increase the pressure on the EU as a whole to adapt its policy or to enter into new engagements. It may also result in new expectations on the part of third countries or international organisations towards the EU as a whole (i.e. with regard to additional financial support from the EU, the intensification of diplomatic relations or the use of crisis-management instruments). The dynamic of international relations may make it very difficult to avert these pressures or expectations. The problem becomes particularly pointed when the EU core group explicitly or implicitly enters into commitments in policy domains that fall under the competences of the EC or the EU as a whole. In a more subtle way, in its negotiations with

other actors an EU core group can refer to certain EC or EU assets as leverage (as carrots or sticks). Even if the EU core group does not engage in new commitments, it can raise expectations on the part of other actors.²²

Another problem may arise when the Commission decides to spend financial resources in support of the objectives and activities of the EU core group. In principle, this is not a problem if the Commission has the authority to decide on the implementation of the EU budget. Nor is it a problem if there is no shortage of financial means. It may lead to discussions, though, if the budget for that area or type of policy initiative is limited and if such a decision can impact the financial means available for other policy initiatives that are considered to be more important by other member states.²³

What can be done to counter these potential risks? As has been pointed out before, a system of EU core groups includes some checks and balances as well as guarantees for non-members (if only through the presence of representatives of the Commission, presidency and high representative). One of the main guarantees is that any member state as well as the Commission, Council presidency and high representative can refer such problems to the Council of Ministers, to obtain assurance from the EU core group that it is following the agreed policy line, is not committing the EU as a whole or that it will submit sensitive policy matters to all EU member states. The Council can also force the high representative and the presidency (or their representatives) to stop participating in the activities of the group, which would put an end to the functioning of the EU core group. Moreover, a member state, the Council or the Commission can bring an action to the Court of Justice on grounds of lack of competence, infringement of an essential procedural requirement, misuse of powers, or infringement of the EC Treaty or of any rule of law relating to its application (Art. 230, EC). Nevertheless, it is clear that this will not solve problems that stem from, for instance, expectations or pressures generated by the EU core group's activities about the policy of the EU as a whole. Nor will these checks and balances solve other problems, such as the fact that the failure or mistakes of an EU core group may bring EU foreign policy as a whole into discredit.

A renationalisation of foreign policy?

Two other fundamental objections can be formulated against a system of EU core groups: first is the objection that it may undermine the common policy of the EU; second is the concern that it could lead to a renationalisation of foreign policy. These concerns are raised regularly in debates on the role of small groups of states. Yet they do not really hold weight, as they are based on minimalist interpretations of 'policy' as well as exaggerated assumptions about the current 'common' level of foreign policy integration.

With regard to the first concern, on many concrete foreign policy issues an EU core group cannot undermine the EU's common policy, for the simple reason that there is no common policy of the EU – if by 'policy' we refer to something beyond contractual relations with third

²² The negotiations of the EU-3 with Iran in 2004-05 demonstrated the problems that this can generate. The main focus and reason for the EU-3's establishment was the nuclear build-up of Iran, where the status of the UK and France explained why these countries took the lead. In the negotiations with Teheran, however, the EU-3 also touched upon policy domains that fell under the competence of the EC or EU, such as the possibility of a trade and cooperation agreement and political dialogue on human rights.

²³ An example of this occurred in 2005 when, as a result of the positive effects of the EU core group on Somalia, the Commission decided to commit financial resources from the African Peace Facility to Somalia. This action led to critical remarks among other member states that it diminished the money available for other policy actions in Africa (such as in Sudan or the Great Lakes Region).

partners (e.g. Cooperation or Association Agreements with third countries) and beyond rather general ‘declaratory’ policy (the promotion of democracy and human rights, declaratory support for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, etc.). With regard to the second concern, many foreign policy issues cannot be ‘renationalised’ because, in fact, these issues are still primarily addressed through the national foreign policies of some individual member states. These states – and not the EU as a whole – do have an active, operational and problem-solving oriented foreign policy. A nationalisation of foreign policy issues will not result from a system of EU core groups (since a link with the general EU policy and EU institutions is guaranteed), but will rather follow from the inclination of member states to shape their foreign policy outside the EU framework if the EU setting is considered as unhelpful.

In other words, a system of EU core groups can precisely help efforts to both ‘Europeanise’ the operational policy towards foreign policy issues and add a common operational dimension to the existing common declaratory and contractual relations-based policy – even if such Europeanisation and common policies are the outcomes of a certain degree of division of labour and specialisation in the foreign policy of the EU.

6. Conclusion

This paper claims that, for reasons of legitimacy, visibility and effectiveness, the EU could benefit significantly from a mechanism allowing closer cooperation on specific foreign policy issues among a limited number of member states and between these states and the various Brussels-based EU foreign policy actors. A joining of forces of a limited number of EU member states is generally looked upon with suspicion and even hostility as it is associated with *directoires* or contact groups or seen as counter to the idea of a common foreign policy. This paper asserts that – under certain conditions – the specialisation and division of labour within the EU’s foreign policy is not only reconcilable with the EU’s ‘common’ foreign policy, but can also strengthen the EU as a foreign policy actor and may even be essential as the EU grows. Paradoxically, although a system of EU core groups grants a more prominent role to the member states within the foreign policy of the EU, it can make EU foreign policy more effective and EU institutions and policies more relevant. Equally paradoxically, although a system of EU core groups explicitly recognises the existence of uncommon interests and introduces some division of labour for member states, this system can actually bring more unity and consistency to EU foreign policy and increase the EU’s credibility. This system, moreover, accounts for the realities of both world politics and EU foreign policy.

A system of EU core groups may become even more necessary now that the prospect of a ratification of the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe seems dim. As the appointment of an EU minister for foreign affairs and the creation of a European External Action Service are less likely, the expected improvements in terms of effectiveness, dynamism and consistency also seem far off. A system of EU core groups may therefore be useful or even crucial in order to alleviate some major constraints and obstacles of a foreign policy in an expanding EU.

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