



Should the EU make foreign policy decisions by majority voting?

by Leonard Schuette

15 May 2019

Lowering the threshold for making foreign policy decisions to a majority vote from unanimity would help the European Union become more assertive and effective in defending its interests on the world stage, but it would also bring fresh challenges. That's the key message in a new research paper by the Centre for European Reform, '[Should the EU make foreign policy decisions by majority voting?](#)' which examines the European Commission's proposal to extend Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) to three areas of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy: sanctions, human rights statements, and civilian missions.

Tensions with US President Donald Trump coupled with growing threats from China and Russia and instability in the Middle East have forced the EU to consider how to improve the way it promotes its interests and values in the world. But there's a problem: unlike many other areas of EU decision-making, EU foreign policy decisions require the unanimous backing of member-states. Consequently, EU action can be thwarted by just one country, be it because of different analyses of the issue, conflicting national interests, or acting at the behest or under pressure from an external power. The Commission has said the EU's foreign policy would benefit if decisions in these areas only required a qualified majority - the backing of at least 55 per cent of member-states, representing at least 65 per cent of the EU's population. Germany and France want to explore the idea but other countries have concerns.

Introducing QMV would free the EU's foreign policy from being held hostage by a single state or small group, and probably make it more vocal and forceful on the global stage. The need to find the necessary quorum for action would help encourage more ambitious compromises in EU foreign affairs. And QMV would also make it harder for external powers like Russia or China to influence EU foreign policy as they would need to sway more countries. However, smaller member-states fear they could be steam-rolled by larger nations. QMV may also result in winners and losers, and could increase friction and resentment, and even legitimacy concerns, if member-states are forced into action they do not support. Some states vehemently disagree with giving the EU more power over national sovereignty, while others that have courted Chinese or Russian investment want to preserve their ability to influence EU action. Critics also argue that foreign policy is more diverse and entrenched in member-states than other areas and so is not suitable for QMV. But most of these concerns can be allayed. On balance, the benefits from extending QMV outweigh the costs. The EU should, however, only extend QMV to sanctions and the implementation of common strategies.

"The EU's foreign policy decision-making process encourages member-states not to compromise – divisions over how to address the crises in Venezuela or Libya are only the latest cases in point. And Russia and China have become adroit in exploiting the need for unanimity to divide and rule the EU. The EU would benefit from extending majority voting to some foreign policies. But it must tread carefully to get member-states on board," said Leonard Schuette, the CER's 2018-19 Clara Marina O'Donnell fellow and author of the report.

Note for editors: For further information on the policy brief and to request an interview with Leonard Schuette, please contact Nick Winning in the CER press office on pressoffice@cer.eu or + 44 (0) 20 7233 1199. Follow us on [@CER_EU](#) and the author on [@LeoSchuette](#).