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EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE



**Report of the High Representative of the Union  
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**

**of 16/06/2021**

**CFSP Report – Our Priorities in 2021**

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**Report of the High Representative of the Union  
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**

**"CFSP Report - Our priorities in 2021"**

This report covers events up to 31 May 2021.

The EU Common Foreign and Security Policy had to adapt to a wide array of challenges over the last year, starting with the geopolitical impact of the COVID-19 crisis and further including the intensification of geopolitical competition at the expense of the rules-based multilateral order, the existential threat of climate change, the persistence of violent conflicts, and global political instability. A fierce technological competition, renewed protectionism and increased fragility of supply chains coupled with growing socio-economic inequalities and the “weaponisation” of economic assets, trade, sanctions and even of vaccines is adding to an intensifying battle of narratives challenging democracy, fundamental values, and the very stability of the international system. The world has become more fragmented, contested and transactional, and the environment in which the EU nowadays operates is more complex and uncertain.

In the face of such challenges, the EU needs to stay united and resilient as no single EU member state can confront them alone. Our values and interests will only persevere if we continue articulating and implementing a common strategic response. Working even closer with our partners, becoming even more actively engaged and invested in our neighbourhood and beyond will be of crucial importance if we want to strengthen EU’s relevance and influence at the global stage.

**(1) GEOGRAPHIC PRIORITIES**

**Europe**

As likeminded partners, the **non-EU Western European countries** generally support EU foreign policy, including in multilateral fora. Cooperation is close on global issues, in particular COVID-19, climate change, migration, and security, on strengthening multilateralism. The EU further conducts with some of the countries regular informal dialogues on CSFP/CSDP, sanctions and human rights.

With regard to the **Western Balkans**, the EU reaffirmed its unequivocal support for the region’s European perspective at the Zagreb Summit in May 2020 and mobilized unprecedented support to fight COVID-19 (EUR 3.3 billion) and through the Economic and Investment Plan (EUR 9 billion) for socio-economic recovery. With a view to reinvigorating the accession process, the enhanced enlargement methodology is also applied to **Montenegro** and **Serbia**. The EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue resumed high-level meetings, with three held so far. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and in **Kosovo** the EU operation EUFOR Althea and the EU Mission EULEX remained operational

throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The EEAS Stratcom Western Balkans Task Force provided strategic communication support to the EU's efforts in building resilience to information manipulation. The intense cooperation on security continued through capacity-building measures, including on hybrid threats (e.g. through surveys scoping concrete needs), counter-terrorism, preventing radicalisation and violent extremism (with work under the regional Action Plan overseen by the EEAS counterterrorism/security expert based in Sarajevo), fighting organised crime, border security and others. The EU, through the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, EUROPOL and the European Asylum Support Office, continued to coordinate and cooperate closely on illegal migration.

The political context of EU-**Turkey** relations has progressively deteriorated over the past years. This has been mostly due to Turkish actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, directly challenging the rights of the Republic of Cyprus in its maritime zones, and a sharp increase of Turkey's provocative actions against Greece; the lack of advancement in the Cyprus settlement process, coupled with Turkey's related threatening actions and rhetoric; the further deteriorating domestic situation in Turkey, notably in the area of fundamental rights and economic governance; the increasingly assertive Turkish interventions in most of the surrounding regional conflicts, which often were at odds with international law and broader EU interests and priorities under CFSP. Turkey's alignment with EU Statements recorded the lowest rate of around 11% in 2020.

Since December 2020, Turkey has shown a more constructive attitude on various issues, including in its bilateral relations with several EU Member States. In addition, Turkey undertook efforts to improve relations with other regional actors. Building on this momentum, the European Council expressed readiness to engage in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner to enhance cooperation in a number of areas of common interest. It also reaffirmed the EU's determination to use the instruments and options at its disposal to defend its interests and those of its Member States, should Turkey return to renewed unilateral actions or provocations in breach of international law.

The year 2020 was marked by the departure of the **United Kingdom** from the EU and the negotiations of a new basis for EU-UK cooperation in the form of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), signed by the two sides on 30 December 2020. The TCA entered into force on 1 May 2021.

During the transition period provided for by the Withdrawal agreement in 2020, EU law, including in the field of CFSP, continued to apply to and within the UK. Hence, the UK continued to be bound to CFSP policies developed by the 27 Member States of the EU and contributed to the CFSP budget. As of 1 January 2021 the UK has become a third country to all effects. An EU Delegation to the United Kingdom was established in London on 1 February 2020. It has contributed from the beginning, to many EU-UK policy areas, for instance the protection of the rights of EU citizens in the UK, in line with the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement.

For the time being, there is no structured EU-UK cooperation in the area of foreign, security and defence policy. However, the TCA contains a number of related provisions, including on

cooperation on global issues in multilateral fora, the promotion of democracy, rule of law and human rights, climate change, non-proliferation and disarmament, fight against terrorism, cybersecurity and others. In its meeting of 24-25 May 2021, the European Council noted that the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the Withdrawal Agreement should be fully and effectively implemented and their governance structures made operational. The European Council also stressed that the EU will continue to be united in its engagement with the UK.

### **Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia**

The EU continued the preparation of the future **Eastern Partnership (EaP)** agenda with a Joint Communication outlining economy, rule of law, green transition, digital agenda and civil society as key priorities, the identification of concrete targets beyond 2020 and the preparation of the December 2021 Summit.

As regards other regional cooperation fora, the EU continued its engagement and sectoral cooperation in the Black Sea area as well as in the Northern Dimension. The EU started work on a Joint Communication to update its Arctic policy with a view to reflecting new challenges and opportunity in the Arctic region, and enhancing EU's engagement.

The EU enhanced political cooperation with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), through the High Level Dialogue at Secretary Generals level which in 2020 focused on promotion of multilateralism, the climate-security nexus and protracted conflicts. The EU also supported OSCE activities concerning conflict resolution in the region, in particular in Ukraine (Trilateral Contact Group and OSCE Special Monitoring Mission), Moldova (5+2 format) and Nagorno-Karabakh (Minsk group), as well as OSCE mediation offers in Belarus.

Regarding **bilateral relations with partner countries**, the Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia remained the main bilateral frameworks for pursuing our relations. The negotiations on the new agreement with Azerbaijan continued.

The EU supported reforms in **Ukraine**. It closely monitored developments in the rule of law and anticorruption areas. The EU Advisory Mission enhanced its activities in the Southeast of the country, and opened a field office in Mariupol. The EU reaffirmed its resolute support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, within its internationally recognised borders.

In the **Republic of Moldova**, the election of pro-reform oriented President Sandu in November 2020 gave the opportunity for enhanced relations focusing on leveraging structural reforms on the rule of law, justice and anti-corruption, while maintaining strict conditionality.

In **Georgia**, the autumn 2020 Parliamentary elections were followed by a month-long political crisis. Intensive EU engagement and ultimately direct mediation by President of the European Council Michel culminated in a political agreement between Georgia's political leaders in April.

The EU remained firm in its support for Georgia's territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.

In **Belarus**, the EU strongly reacted to the August 2020 fraudulent elections and to the subsequent brutal repression by i) reviewing its relations with Belarus scaling down bilateral cooperation with central authorities while increasing EU's support to the Belarusian people and civil society; ii) imposing sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for repression and misconduct of the electoral process; iii) supporting civil society organisations, independent media, and the victims of repression; iv) supporting relevant mediation initiatives and raising the human rights situation in international fora. The EU reacted with an emergency package of over EUR 2.7 million, to assist the victims of repression and state violence covering legal assistance. In addition funds were directed to medical support and other emergency assistance to those most in need, as well as EUR 1 million of support, to independent media and digital outlets forced to either leave state media channels for political reasons or leave Belarus.

A significant additional package of assistance, which steps up engagement with the people on the ground was adopted in December 2020 and is currently being implemented. This package includes support to civil society, independent media (EUR 8 million); youth (EUR 8 million) with a dedicated scholarship scheme, SMEs (EUR 10 million) with business advisory and access to finance assistance; health resilience (EUR 4 million) - delivery of equipment for health centres and laboratories technical assistance and sub-grants to civil society organisations help contain the spread of COVID-19. In addition, European Council had asked the Commission to come up with a Comprehensive plan of economic support to a democratic Belarus; the plan of EUR 3 billion was announced in May 2021 and will be made available once Belarus embarks on a democratic path. In the case of such a democratic transition, the EU will ensure as a priority to offer immediate and longer-term support to Belarus to help it stabilise its economy, reform its institutions to make them more democratic and able to contribute to delivering benefits for citizens and society as a whole. The EU also strongly condemned the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk on 23 May 2021 endangering aviation safety, and the detention by Belarusian authorities of journalist Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega.

In response, on 24 May the European Council decided to adopt additional listings of persons and entities as soon as possible. It called on the Council to adopt further targeted economic sanctions and to adopt the necessary measures to ban overflight of EU airspace by Belarusian airlines. Finally, it called on all EU-based carriers to avoid overflight of Belarus.

During and after the 44-day **Nagorno Karabakh** conflict, the EU has been actively engaged, calling the sides to cease hostilities and return to the negotiations table. Following the conflict, the EU mobilised EUR 17 million for humanitarian aid for all affected populations and for post-conflict recovery to enable restoring people's lives and strengthening their resilience. The EU is ready to contribute to shaping a durable and comprehensive settlement of the conflict.

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The EU worked on strengthening bilateral relations with **Armenia** while supporting its democratic path through the implementation of the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that entered into force on 1 March 2021.

The EU continued cooperation with **Azerbaijan** with a view to help to diversify its economy. At the same time, the EU underscored the key place of the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in our relationship. Azerbaijan remained a strategic energy partner.

Managing the relationship with the **Russian Federation** remained a strategic challenge considering the increasingly confrontational stance by Russia. The EU's policy towards Russia continues to be guided by the five principles, unanimously reaffirmed by the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council.

There was no tangible progress in the implementation of the Minsk agreements, a key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance. Russia continued claiming that it is not a party to the conflict, portraying itself as a mediator instead.

All three EU restrictive regimes (travel ban/asset freeze on individuals and entities; measures related to the annexation of the Crimean peninsula; and economic measures) were regularly reviewed. For the first time, the Council imposed restrictive measures under the cyber and the EU Global Human Rights sanctions regime. It also imposed restrictive measures under the chemical weapons regime in response to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny.

The HR/VP's visit to Moscow in February 2021 aimed to test whether the Russian government was interested in reversing the negative trend in EU-Russia relations. The reaction the EU received pointed in a different direction.

The period that followed was marked by the expulsions of Russian diplomats by several Member States in response to criminal and espionage activities on their territory and by Russian counter-expulsions. Russia imposed an entry ban on eight EU nationals (including the President of the European Parliament Sassoli and Vice President of the Commission Jourova). Moreover, under the Executive order of 23 April 2021 in "Response to Unfriendly Actions by Foreign Nations", measures were imposed against a Member State.

The EU followed with concern Russian troop movements in spring 2021 along Ukraine's eastern borders and in the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula, the closure of parts of the Black Sea for Russian military manoeuvres, as well as other destabilising activities, such as a surge in disinformation campaigns from Russian state-controlled media and cyber-attacks. The special European Council of 24-25 May 2021 condemned the illegal, provocative and disruptive Russian malign activities against the EU and its Member States, its partners and beyond. It reaffirmed its unity under the five guiding principles governing the EU's relations with Russia and underlined that the EU will continue coordination with like-minded partners. In view of its meeting in June 2021,

the European Council invited the High Representative and the Commission to present a report with policy options on EU-Russia relations, in line with these five guiding principles.

The EU intensified high-level contacts with Central Asian states, which have been hit particularly hard by the Covid19 pandemic and its socio-economic repercussions. The 16<sup>th</sup> EU-Central Asia Ministerial of 17 November 2020 provided an opportunity to convey a strong message of solidarity to the region through a “Team Europe” package of EUR 134 Million. The Ministerial also allowed advancing region-to-region cooperation on the promotion of sustainable connectivity and fostering a common understanding towards supporting the peace process in Afghanistan. The EU achieved significant progress in the negotiation of an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with Uzbekistan, which will provide a key vehicle to underpin the country’s reform agenda while advancing EU norms and standards. The HR/VP expressed public concern about the political trouble that followed the October 2020 elections in Kyrgyzstan and the EU has been monitoring political developments in the country closely since then. The EU has called for a peaceful settlement of border disputes and offered to support this process through its regional cooperation programmes following the escalation of tensions at the border between the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan in April 2021.

### **Middle East and North Africa**

In 2020, the EU conducted a joint reflection with its Southern Neighbourhood partners on how to renew the partnership in the context of COVID-19 and the digital and green transitions. A Joint Communication proposing an ambitious “**New Agenda for the Mediterranean**” was issued in February 2021, following several Foreign Affairs Council discussions, a joint ministerial meeting in Barcelona in November 2020 and European Council Conclusions of December 2020. Council Conclusions call, inter alia, for renewed efforts by the EU, its Member States and partners in preventing and solving conflicts and for strengthening the political dialogue across the Mediterranean.

The EU supports the UN-led efforts to achieving a lasting solution to the **Syrian** conflict. In June 2020 and March 2021, the HR/VP co-chaired with the UN the fourth and fifth Brussels conference for the future of Syria and the region, where a total amount of respectively EUR 6.9 billion and EUR 5.3 billion pledges was raised. The EU continues to impose sanctions on leading members and entities of the Syrian regime in response to the violent repression of the Syrian people.

EU support remains crucial in addressing the socio-economic consequences of the Syrian crisis and COVID-19 in **Jordan** and **Lebanon**. The HR/VP visited Amman in February 2020 and His Majesty King Abdullah II visited Brussels in January 2020 and May 2021. The EU reacted quickly to the explosion in Beirut port in August 2020. It has been urging the Lebanese political forces to form a government and implement key reforms to address the political and socioeconomic crises. The Council Conclusions of 7 December 2020 reiterated the EU’s commitment to support the country’s recovery, while making full assistance conditional on the implementation of reforms.



**Egypt** remains an important partner at bilateral and regional level. The HR/VP visited Egypt in September 2020. Human rights developments are regularly raised bilaterally and in the UN Human Rights Council. In June 2020, the EU joined as an observer in the AU-led negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the use of the Nile Waters.

With regard to the **Middle East Peace Process**, the EU remains committed to a just and comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the two-state solution, respecting all relevant UN resolutions, and internationally agreed parameters. The EU has firmly condemned all acts of violence and incitement on all sides, which are incompatible with advancing a peaceful two-state solution. It has consistently reiterated its strong opposition to Israel's settlement policy and all actions taken in this context, and the need for Israeli authorities to meet fully their obligations under International Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. It continued to call on all parties to take swift steps to change the political, security and economic situation in the Gaza Strip in particular in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. On 20 May 2021, after 11 days of fighting, a ceasefire came into effect between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The EU was actively engaged in efforts at calming the situation, including through a series of public statements and private diplomacy. On 18 May, the HR/VP convened an extraordinary informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers with MS in broad agreement on the need to end the hostilities. The EUSR MEPP was asked to travel to the region. These events showed, once again, Gaza needs sustainable solutions and tackling the conditions that produce repeated violence.

Following the regional escalation in early 2020, the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council of 10 January 2020 reaffirmed the EU's robust support to the stabilization of **Iraq**, including via the EU contribution to the Global Coalition against Da'esh. The EU managed to step up engagement across a wide range of policy areas, including through its comprehensive development cooperation portfolio and to re-launch the institutional engagement under the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. This notably included the holding of a Political Dialogue, thematic Sub-Committees on Human Rights and Trade and an informal migration dialogue.

In **Yemen**, the EU supported the efforts of the UN Special Envoy to achieve a sustainable and inclusive political solution to the conflict. This included financial support to the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism and to the UN Peace Support Facility. The EU remains a main humanitarian donor in response to the massive humanitarian needs caused by the conflict.

Despite the challenges to the **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)**, the EU remained strongly committed and worked hard to preserve it. The High Representative, as coordinator of the JCPOA Joint Commission, maintained the political unity of the participants and steered the diplomatic efforts to bring the agreement back on track. This is particularly relevant in the context of two Dispute Resolution Mechanism notifications, of the unilateral US attempts to re-instate sanctions lifted by UNSC 2231 and of Iran's worrying reduction of its nuclear commitments. Building upon the JCPOA joint ministerial statement of December 21, 2020 and on the US readiness to reengage in meaningful diplomacy, the High Representative took forward the

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diplomatic efforts to facilitate the return of the US to the JCPOA and the return of Iran to full implementation.

In 2020 the EU also held the 5<sup>th</sup> regular EU-Iran High Level Dialogue and advanced bilateral work on key issues such as climate change and migration. In the civil nuclear field, EU–Iran cooperation under JCPOA Annex III continued in the area of nuclear safety. The promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Iran remained one of the top priorities with focus on respect of a fair trial, safe and humane detention conditions, and release of EU-Iranian dual nationals and human rights defenders who were arbitrarily detained.

As regional tensions were on the rise in January 2020, the HR/VP called upon all relevant actors to refrain from actions that could lead to military escalation. The ensuing bilateral visit to Tehran in February 2020 allowed the HR/VP to reinforce this key message.

The EU has shown clear determination to further develop the various dimensions of its strategic partnership with **Morocco**. Several promising files, such as green transition or digitalisation, have been identified for reinforced cooperation. The EU has reiterated its support for the UN to find a mutually acceptable political solution to the Western Sahara conflict.

At the Association Council of December 2020, the EU and **Algeria** underlined their willingness to deepen their dialogue and cooperation in areas such as regional stability, fundamental rights, climate change, energy or migration.

The EU continued its support to **Tunisia** in its democratic transition and reforms. High level visits of President Michel in April 2021 and EU Commissioners Varhelyi and Johansson in August 2020 will be followed by the visit of President Kais Saïed to Brussels in June 2021. The EU maintains restrictive measures against persons responsible for misappropriation of State funds until 2022.

One year after the Berlin Conference on **Libya**, the formation of the Interim Government of National Unity in March 2021 was a significant breakthrough that creates appropriate conditions for reunifying the institutions and steering the country out of the crisis. In line with UN Security Council Resolutions, the EU has reiterated repeatedly the importance of effective implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement, compliance with the UN arms embargo, as well as the swift withdrawal of all foreign fighters and mercenaries. Operation IRINI was launched in March 2020 to implement the UN arms embargo on Libya.

### **Africa**

In Africa, the EU continued to develop the continent-to-continent partnership, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the much expected AU-EU Summit and preceding Ministerial meeting. The year 2020 witnessed several high-level visits. The 10th EU-African Union (AU) Commission-to-Commission meeting was held in February 2020 and separate political dialogues on human rights and peace and security took place with the AU and with Regional

economic communities. The March release of the Joint Communication “Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa”, the June Council Conclusions and the October European Council Conclusions further consolidated the EU’s new strategic approach to Africa. The EU also stepped up its support to Africa for both COVID-19 response and longer term socio-economic recovery. All over the continent, political dialogues under the article 8 of the Cotonou agreement have been successfully organised.

The year 2020 has also seen the end of the **Post-Cotonou negotiations**. The political deal achieved between the EU and the 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific states substantially upgrades and modernises our relations with the ACP countries. It is based on mutual respect and dialogue, and provides us with the main priorities on which to focus our cooperation at all levels, namely human rights, democracy and good governance, peace and security, inclusive and sustainable development, human development, environmental sustainability and climate change, and migration and mobility.

In **West Africa**, the EU took the lead in supporting a new momentum for stabilisation in the **Sahel**, by participating in the creation of the “**Coalition for the Sahel**”. The EU has been entrusted with the co-lead in the areas of strengthening the capabilities of defence and security forces and in supporting the provision of basic services to the population by the state. In order to fulfil this demanding task, the secretariat of the “**Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel - P3S**” was established within the EEAS and the mandate of EUTM Mali was extended. After the Pau Summit in January 2020 had called for a “military surge”, the Sahel Coalition Summit in February 2021 called for a “civilian and political surge”, which translated into the adoption of a renewed EU Sahel Strategy in April 2021. In Mali, the EU has strongly condemned the demise of the President and the Prime Minister of the Transition in May, and expressed its support to the work and position of the ECOWAS on this issue. Beyond Sahel, high attention has been devoted to political trends in the region and important partnerships have been strengthened. In November 2020, the 7<sup>th</sup> EU-Nigeria Ministerial Dialogue was organised for the first time in 4 years, reigniting a common interest towards a more strategic partnership that will benefit the whole region.

In the **Horn of Africa**, optimism has faded, notably with the outbreak of the conflict in **Ethiopia** in November. Council Conclusions adopted in March 2021 stressed the strategic importance of Ethiopia but also EU’s deep concern about the situation in Tigray. EU’s unwavering messages, passed at the highest level, have contributed to improving humanitarian access and respect for human rights, even though the road remains long. Tensions between **Sudan** and Ethiopia have also re-emerged, made more volatile by the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Support to the continuation of Sudan’s transition has been imperative in the EU’s action. Council conclusions on **South Sudan** adopted in April 2020 supported the peace process. In **Somalia**, where the electoral process stalled, the EU has actively participated in facilitation between the parties, which might put the process back on track. Concerns about the inclusiveness of the electoral processes in **Tanzania** and **Uganda** were raised publically through statements of the HR/VP. A new Strategy for the Horn of Africa was adopted in May 2021 by the Council of the EU. This strategy aims at strengthening the EU’s partnership with the countries of the region and improving the EU’s effectiveness and visibility in an increasingly competitive environment.

In the **Central African Republic (CAR)**, the disruption of presidential and legislative elections by armed groups triggered a major crisis, which the EU has been addressing, including through its CSDP mission. CAR was also a test case for EU strategic communication, fight against disinformation and manipulation of information. In **Cameroon**, the EU continues to encourage mediations between the authorities and separatists in finding a political solution to the worsening crisis. In **Chad**, after the unexpected death of President Déby, the EU firmly called for power to be transferred to civilians and for respect of human rights. It has also continued to encourage Chad's stabilisation efforts in the region. In **Burundi**, the election of President Ndayishimiye opened a more positive dynamic for increased regional cooperation and for normalizing the EU-Burundi relations. Outreach to **DRC** as current chair of the AU has been successful in mobilising its active participation to peace and security issues and to relaunch preparations for EU-AU high-level events.

In the **Southern Africa and Indian Ocean region**, the key developments beyond COVID-19 were the intensifying crisis in **Mozambique's** Cabo Delgado Province, the formation of a new government in **Lesotho** and the re-run presidential election in **Malawi**. Council Conclusions were adopted in February 2020 on **Zimbabwe** and in April 2020 on Mozambique, followed by a Political framework for crisis action (PFCA) on **Cabo Delgado**, presented in March 2021. The ministerial dialogue with **South Africa**, in July 2020, addressed opportunities for complementarity through preventive diplomacy, mediation and conflict resolution, followed by open and constructive South Africa - EU Political and Security Dialogue, in December. At the **Angola** ministerial political dialogue, held in September, the two sides had a first discussion on a possible EU-Angola structured cooperation in the field of security and defence.

### **Asia-Pacific**

Asia – and in particular the Indo-Pacific – continue to be a centre of gravity with global economic and political shifts. Issues like effective multilateralism, defending the rules-based international order, tackling climate change, addressing security challenges, and promoting connectivity became even more acute in 2020 as **COVID-19** hit the world. The EU had to refocus its attention to jointly fight the pandemic, provide consular assistance to more than 200,000 EU citizens stranded in Asia, frontload programmed funds and mobilise new financial support to countries whose economies had been severely hit, while developing vaccines and sharing them with countries in need through the COVAX facility.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, **China** became even more assertive and self-confident in advancing its political and economic model and goals. The human rights situation continued to deteriorate, notably in Xinjiang and Tibet. In Hong Kong, China cracked down on pluralism and democracy following the adoption of a new National Security Law, undermining the high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms that it had pledged to protect until at least 2047. The pandemic also confirmed the high levels of economic interdependence and that no solution to global and many regional challenges is possible without China. Thus, the EU-China relationship has become one of the most strategically important and challenging. In October 2020, the European

Council reaffirmed the EU's multi-faceted approach, as set out in the 2019 Joint Communication "EU-China: Strategic Outlook", which presents China as a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, an economic competitor or a systemic rival, depending on the policy area.

An EU-China Summit was held in June, followed by two China-EU leaders' meetings in September and December. These high-level interactions served to seek engagement on global challenges such as climate change, pursue the EU's interests vis-à-vis China and raise non-consensual issues including Hong Kong and human rights directly with the Chinese leadership. In December 2020, the negotiations of an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) were finalised. Following the adoption of the new listings under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (EUGHRSR) on 22 March – which included four Chinese individuals and one entity responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang - China announced retaliatory measures against Members of the European Parliament, Member of national Parliaments, researchers, as well as the entire DROI Committee of the European Parliament, the Political and Security Committee and two European think tanks. The Chinese retaliatory measures are unacceptable as they target those who have expressed their opinion on China or advocated for human rights, including elected Members of Parliaments, as well as those who have participated in EU decision-making processes related to China.

With **India**, the EU's relationship developed in a positive direction in 2020. In January, the HR/VP attended the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, and in July, the EU-India Summit was held, which deepened and widened the Strategic Partnership. The Summit endorsed an EU-India-Roadmap 2025, which will guide EU-India cooperation and enhance cooperation notably on environment, climate change and maritime security.

Also with **Japan** and the **Republic of Korea** – two further strategic partners of the EU in the region, Summits were held in 2020. With Japan, the EU concluded the first Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure in 2020. An important result of the May 2021 EU-Japan Summit was the establishment of the first Green Alliance between the EU and Japan, for accelerated and ambitious action on climate change, energy transition and environment.

In December 2020, the EU launched a new strategic partnership with **ASEAN**, and the same month the High Representative for the first time participated as a Guest of the Chair at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, invited by Vietnam.

Following the agreement signed between the US and the Afghan Taliban in February 2020, the EU adopted a firm stance to maintain **Afghanistan's** democratic and self-reliant trajectory in view of the evolving political and security situation. In May, the Foreign Affairs Council reaffirmed the EU's principled position on the need for an immediate ceasefire and a political settlement to the conflict. The EU facilitated access by civil society organisations to the peace negotiations, while the EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan met with representatives of women's groups, minorities, and victims of war, as well as with Afghan, regional and international partners to promote a broad-based consensus for peace. The EU set out its principled positions on protecting and promoting

fundamental freedoms and on helping to advance financial governance and anti-corruption efforts in a document ‘Key Elements for Sustained International Support to Peace and Development in Afghanistan’. It gained the full backing of other major development partners and was prominently reflected in the outcome documents of the November 2020 Afghanistan Conference in Geneva.

With the **Pacific**, in December, negotiators reached political agreement on a successor to the Cotonou Partnership Agreement with the African-Caribbean-Pacific countries, including the EU-Pacific Protocol, which will strengthen the political partnership and allow the EU and Pacific countries to step up cooperation on peace and security and address regional challenges.

Steps were taken towards developing an EU approach to the **Indo-Pacific** region, which led to the adoption of Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on 18 April 2021 on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Americas**

Following meetings between President von der Leyen with President Trump in January 2020 in Davos and the visit of HR/VP Borrell to the U.S. in January 2020, a “mini trade deal” was reached. Faced with the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak, the EU and the U.S. joined forces to better respond to the pandemic. The HR/VP maintained regular contact with Secretary Pompeo, who attended FAC on 15 June 2020. After the elections of November 2020, the EU published “A New EU-U.S. Agenda for Global Change” on 2 December 2020, setting out proposals for the revitalised transatlantic partnership. Council Conclusions, adopted on 7 December 2020, underlined the need to maintain and further enhance EU-U.S. engagement across the board.

The EU and Canada see eye to eye on most foreign policy issues. At their leaders’ meeting in October 2020, President Michel, President von der Leyen and Prime Minister Trudeau looked forward to holding the next EU-Canada Leaders’ Summit (to be held on 15 June) to further advance cooperation between the EU and Canada on foreign and security policy. The partnership was further bolstered through ministerial videoconferences (in September and October) and several calls to deepen cooperation and dialogue on key regional issues including climate change, human rights, democracy, effective multilateralism, hybrid threats, the Women Peace and Security Agenda, digital innovation and artificial intelligence. Deployment of the first ever military advisor to Washington DC, with accreditation for Canada (January 2020) helped to promote EU security and defence policy.

EU relations with **Latin America and the Caribbean** were revitalised in 2020, as the EEAS contributed to the organisation of two ministerial videoconferences (hosted from Paris in July and Berlin in December), devoted to stepping up regional cooperation on green and digital agendas, as well as responses to the pandemic. The EEAS also developed relations with regional organisations, including the Pacific Alliance. The FAC discussed the whole region twice, in July and October 2020. These were all crucial occasions for the EU to express its enduring solidarity with a region that was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic out of all proportion with its population. Under

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Team Europe, the EU and its Member States mobilised more than EUR 2.4 billion to contribute to responses across Latin America and the Caribbean.

After 20 years of negotiations, a historic agreement was reached in June 2020 on the political and cooperation pillar of the EU-**Mercosur** Association Agreement (the trade pillar was already concluded in 2019). The EEAS and Commission continue work on an additional instrument to address environmental and sustainability concerns.

Meetings with **Central America** took place in June under the Costa Rican Presidency of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana. An EU Electoral Expert Mission was deployed for the legislative and municipal elections in **El Salvador** in February. A mechanism for bilateral consultations with **Panama** was established by HR/VP Borrell and Foreign Minister Mouynes. In the run-up to the elections in November in **Nicaragua**, the EU renewed its targeted sanctions framework whilst engaging with all stakeholders, with a view to promoting a peaceful and democratic way out of the crisis.

Intense political dialogue with **Mexico** continued throughout 2021, in the framework of the Strategic Partnership, with frequent contacts at all levels.

In 2020, the EU intensified its political and diplomatic efforts to promote the holding of transparent and credible elections in **Venezuela**, including through the International Contact Group and the Special Adviser on Venezuela. Following discredited legislative elections in December 2020, the EU adopted restrictive measures against another 19 Venezuelan officials for undermining democracy and the rule of law, as well as human rights violations (bringing the total to 55). Throughout 2020 and 2021, the EU pursued emergency assistance to the Venezuelan population, supporting genuine efforts towards peaceful, negotiated, inclusive and democratic solutions to the crisis.

The EU remained strongly engaged in support to the implementation of the peace agreement in **Colombia**. The EEAS negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding, with a view to reinforcing the existing EU-Colombia partnership, further enhancing existing political and sectoral dialogue and cooperation in areas such as environment and climate change, digital agenda, inclusive growth, migration and multilateral cooperation.”

The EU’s relationship with **Brazil** continued to be driven by enhancing the Strategic Partnership, seeking joint responses to global challenges, with dialogue and cooperation in areas of mutual interest including the digital and green agendas. A reinforcement of the bilateral agenda on sustainable development, environment and climate change matters was initiated.

In **Chile**, the EU engaged in supporting constitutional reform. Good progress was made on negotiations to conclude a modernised Association Agreement.

The EU supported electoral processes in **Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru**, including through the deployment of electoral expert missions (EEM) in spite of the difficult COVID-19 situation. In Bolivia, the EEAS has actively supported, together with the UN and the Church, efforts that led to peaceful and credible general elections in October 2020.

In **the Caribbean**, negotiations for the Caribbean Protocol to the ‘Post Cotonou’ EU-ACP agreement were completed. This ambitious new deal aims at strengthening political dialogue and the promotion of common interests such as climate change, human rights, respect for democratic principles, and the rule of law, as well as opening new areas for cooperation based on equal partnership including advancing economic transformation and diversification, increasing investment in human and social development. With **Cuba**, the ministerial Joint Council in January 2021 concluded a second cycle of talks under the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement. Political dialogue continued with countries in the region, including **the Dominican Republic, Bahamas and Jamaica**. The EU coordinated preparations for the particular impact of Brexit in the Caribbean. In **Haiti**, senior EU officials conveyed EU positions on the ongoing crisis, reflecting the updated “Money for reform” approach. The EU is providing humanitarian assistance (EUR 740 000) to **St. Vincent & the Grenadines** following eruption of La Soufrière volcano.

### (2) GLOBAL ISSUES

During the year, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a reminder of the importance of multilateral cooperation to prevent, address and overcome global challenges. The Commission and the HR/VP presented specific proposals in February 2021 to strengthen the EU’s contribution to rules-based **multilateralism**, supporting the UNSG call to ‘recover better’ and reinforcing cooperation with the UN and other multilateral and regional organisations.

The EU determination to address exacerbating human rights violations and abuses worldwide was underscored by the adoption of the **EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime**, the result of the HR/VP personal engagement throughout 2020. The EU has adopted sanctions against four Russian individuals responsible for arrests and repression in the context of the case of Alexei Navalny, as well as persons and entities responsible for serious human rights violations and abuses from six countries: China, DPRK, Libya, South Sudan, Eritrea and Russia. The new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024) set out priority areas for human rights action, including in the digital area. The EU engaged in over 30 human rights dialogues with partner countries, while leading or co-leading resolutions at the **Human Rights Council (HRC)** notably on Freedom of Religion or Belief. In continuous efforts to promote **democracy** and in spite of complications linked to the COVID-19 outbreak, the EU continued to deploy **election observation missions** and to develop methodologies for observing on-line campaigning in cooperation with the international election observation community.

Throughout 2020, the HR/VP engaged in comprehensive **green diplomacy action** in support of the EU internal goal of climate neutrality, coupled with the high level of climate ambition of the Green



Deal. The EU's approach was reconfirmed in January 2021 Council Conclusions on **Climate and Energy Diplomacy**, setting out the EU key priorities in the run-up to the Glasgow Climate Conference, linked notably to energy transition and sustainable finance.

Throughout 2021, the EU provided top financial support to international solidarity in particular to Covax, and promoted a cooperative and multilateral approach to **global vaccine action** with key partners around the world and in main fora, such as the G20 Global Health Summit, the World Health Assembly and the G7. In addition, the EU set up a **vaccine sharing mechanism**, whereby MS can also donate vaccines to third countries either directly or through Covax.

The 2020 development agenda has been framed around the global response to **COVID-19** challenges. The EU and its Member States together with the EIB and EBRD through a **Team Europe** approach mobilised over EUR 40 billion to support partner countries' immediate needs. Particular attention has been given to strengthening the partnership with Africa, especially in the context of COVID-19 recovery and post-Cotonou framework. Key topics such as gender, debt relief and sustainable financing have also been at the core of development ministers discussions. The EU has been a strong promoter of multilateral initiatives on **debt relief** such as the Debt Service Suspension Initiative, in the framework of the G20 and a top contributor to the IMF's Catastrophe and Containment Relief Trust. The **programming of NDICI-Global Europe** for the next 7 years will aim at supporting partner countries recovering, promoting the EU's vision for a sustainable, just and inclusive global recovery.

Throughout the year, the EU identified **connectivity** priority actions in the digital, transport, energy and people-to-people areas. The EU further engaged in Africa, the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia while exploring connectivity cooperation with the US, Japan, Australia under the Blue Dot Network. In December 2020, the HR/VP, EU27 and ASEAN 10 Foreign Ministers concluded a Ministerial Statement on connectivity, building on the strong engagement with ASEAN and mobilising investments to improve regional integration, particularly on connectivity.

In 2020, the HR/VP contributed to the elaboration of the external dimension of the **New Pact on Migration and Asylum** and its operationalisation through strengthened migration partnerships with third countries. This comprehensive approach was also translated into broader strategic cooperation frameworks, such as the new Africa Strategy and the New Agenda for the Mediterranean and was reconfirmed by the HR/VP and Ministers of Foreign and Home Affairs in March 2021. The HR/VP also contributed to the elaboration of the international dimension of the **EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings**, stepping up cooperation with non-EU countries of origin and transit of victims.

### **Gender**

With the adoption by the College on 25 November 2020 of the Joint Communication on "An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action (GAP III)

(2021-2025)[1] the EU put forward ambitious plans to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through all external action of the EU. GAP III aims to make the promotion of gender equality a priority of all external policies and actions; offers a roadmap for working together with stakeholders at national, regional and multilateral levels; steps up action in strategic thematic areas, calls for the institutions to lead by example, and ensures the transparency of the results.

One novel and fundamental facet of the GAP III is the inclusion of the EU Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Action Plan. The driving force behind this complementary idea of synergy are the members state themselves. Moreover, the inclusion of the EU WPS Action Plan into the GAP III represents a tangible example that the EU is taking concrete steps towards the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 on the ground.

The adoption of GAPIII has been complemented, on 16 December 2020, by the Presidency conclusions [2]. 24 EU Member States supported the text in its entirety. The Presidency conclusions underline the need for full coherence between external and internal action for increasing EU credibility and for contributing to better results and impact, in line with the principle of policy coherence for security and sustainable peace development. Moreover, in line with GAP III requirements, we are establishing a gender-responsive leadership as the new norm for all EU leaders and managers. On 16 April, the HR/VP appointed Stella Ronner-Grubacic as Adviser to the Secretary-General for Gender and Diversity.

Throughout the year, the EU showed commitment to integrating gender perspective and ensuring women's participation and leadership in all peace and security-related contexts, such as in peace processes, in mediation, but also in protection, state building and reconstruction. Promotion of dialogue and calls to involve women and youth were consistent part of EU engagement. For example, in March 2021, HR/VP exchanged views with Directors of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office member organisations. These independent peacebuilding civil society organisations shared their experience from many conflict countries and made a series of recommendations to the EU, ranging from the importance of paying attention to root causes of conflict to better inclusion of conflict-affected populations in the different peace processes. The EU worked closely with civil society organisations and continued supporting partner governments in providing security and basic services for their people.

### **Strategic Communications**

The pandemic continued to have a significant impact on almost all strategic communication activities throughout the year. The need to join forces in response to COVID-19 also markedly increased cooperation with other European institutions under the umbrella of "Team Europe". This joined approach did much to strengthen the common EU brand in our partner countries and has become the established framework for communication towards our external audiences.

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[1] [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_2184](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2184)

[2] <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13947-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

The successful campaigns on repatriation “We Bring You Home”, solidarity among EU citizens “United In Distance” and EU support “We Fight Coronavirus” provided facts, but also used creative storytelling and added an emotional appeal. The aim has been to emphasise the pivotal role the EU is playing in supporting our partners during the pandemic.

Apart from COVID-19 related communication, the in-house “Beach Clean-Up” campaign helped promote environmental and climate change actions and was supported by over 80 EU Delegations across the world. Another major initiative was the “We need to talk about Yemen” campaign, which had the goal of drawing attention to the world’s worst humanitarian and development crisis. A “Europeans Making Difference” campaign targeted citizen in the Western Balkans and EU, while the campaign dedicated to the Syria Conference highlighted the EU’s response to the Syria crisis. Each of the campaigns reached 14 million citizens on social media, accompanied by briefings to multipliers, journalists and influencers. The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN was celebrated in a number of events that highlighted our cooperation with UN agencies under the hashtag #UN75. Finally, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EEAS offered an additional opportunity to promote our foreign policy efforts through our #EEAS10 campaign.

Cooperation with Delegations has been further professionalised by strengthened internal communication and by issuing the “EEAS Communications Principles and Priorities 2020-2021” – a practical toolbox designed to support EEAS staff in headquarters and Delegations in their day-to-day communication activities. This for instance includes a “think communication first” approach, better addressing key audiences and measuring impact by using performance indicators.

Stratcom continues to explore new trends and avenues in communication, in particular with regard to reaching new audiences: the increasing involvement of third country influencers through social media being just one of them.

Addressing the challenge of foreign **disinformation**, information manipulation and interference remains high on the EU’s political agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the real-world impact that foreign information manipulation and interference can have on the EU’s ability to effectively implement its policies domestically and abroad. Globally, attempts at information manipulation around elections show worrying potential for elections inside the EU and the crackdown on independent and critical voices by authoritarian regimes negatively affects the pluralistic information space that is a core element of free and open societies. In response, the EEAS has significantly invested in its analytical and strategic communications capabilities and developed new approaches to protect and strengthen societal resilience in line with the Action Plan against Disinformation (Dec 2018) and the Joint Communication on COVID-19 related disinformation (June 2020).

The EEAS continued to play a leading role in assessing the threat landscape and strengthening partnerships inside and outside the EU to tackle information manipulation and interference, including with partners from civil society and private industry. The EEAS continued to strengthen cooperation between EU Institutions and Member States’ experts via the Rapid Alert System on

Disinformation (RAS) and built international partnerships with like-minded partners such as the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) and NATO as well as other fora and initiatives dedicated to tackle this challenge.

Pro-Kremlin disinformation activities have been addressed using a mix of proactive communication in the Eastern Partnership region, supporting independent media and exposing disinformation activities by pro-Kremlin media. The EUvsDisinfo awareness campaign in particular proved an important instrument to expose and counter pro-Kremlin disinformation. In addition to the ongoing work of the three Stratcom Task Forces and acknowledging the rapidly evolving threat landscape, the EEAS also devoted additional resources to strengthen its work on emerging threats and actors, i.a. by recruiting additional data scientists and China experts.

Exposing disinformation and raising awareness is not enough to stop perpetrators. In line with the December 2020 European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), the EEAS is working on strengthening the EU's toolbox that will allow for an imposition of costs on malign activities. In this work, the EEAS closely involves EU institutions, Member States, private industry and civil society.

An expanded scope of activities to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference will safeguard the EU's ability to conduct and implement European Common Foreign and Security Policy in the neighbourhood and beyond, including protecting the EU's civilian and military missions. The strengthening of the Delegations (27 new Stratcom officers recruited in the Neighbourhoods and Western Balkans in 2020-21) and missions to respond to foreign information manipulation and interference will remain a top priority.

### (3) COMMON SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY AND CRISIS RESPONSE

Work continued towards strengthening the EU's capacity to respond to security challenges and be better equipped to consolidate its role of a global player and a security provider.

The EEAS advanced work on security and defence, including by leading the process of developing a **Strategic Compass** by 2022, as tasked by the Council in June 2020. The Strategic Compass will define policy orientations and specific goals and objectives in four clusters: (1) crisis management, (2) resilience, (3) capability development, and (4) partnerships. It will build on the first ever EU-level threat analysis provided by EU intelligence community in November 2020. The Strategic Compass will contribute to further developing the common European security and defence culture.

2020 was a particularly important year for the **Permanent Structured Cooperation** (PESCO), launched in 2017. The Council reached an agreement on the participation of third countries in the collaborative PESCO projects. This will help consolidate PESCO and develop more advanced capabilities and interoperable forces in order to contribute to international peace and security together with partners. The Council also endorsed the PESCO Strategic Review, one of the main

outcomes being the agreement by Member States that 26 projects (out of the ongoing 46 PESCO projects) will be operational by 2025.

With a ceiling of EUR 5 billion over the next 7 years, the **European Peace Facility (EPF)** will make the EU's common policy more effective and better equipped to respond to the needs of its partners.

The EU **17 CSDP missions and operations** (6 military and 11 civilian) continued to be an emblematic, high visibility EU foreign policy tool to address crises around the world. They provide improved situational awareness in regions of interest to the security of the Union. They delivered on their mandates in 2020 in spite of the unprecedented situation created by the pandemic. Operation IRINI was launched in March 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, to implement the UN arms embargo on Libya.

The EEAS launched the **Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP)** concept, with the establishment of a Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell for the Gulf of Guinea as a pilot project. The CMP concept is a new and flexible tool aimed at enhancing the EU's role in maritime areas of interest agreed by Member States. It seeks to make the best use of Member States' naval capabilities to enhance the EU's security and common awareness, and to promote international cooperation at sea.

The **Climate Change and Defence** Roadmap was presented in November 2020, putting forward an ambitious set of actions to address the linkages between defence and climate change.

Regarding **civilian capabilities and civilian CSDP**, the EU continues to focus on results. The EUAM RCA, first CSDP mission under the Civilian CSDP Compact was launched in December 2019. The EEAS continued work to strengthen links between CSDP and Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) actors. The Civilian CSDP Compact led, through national implementation plans, to an increased contribution of EU Member States to civilian CSDP.

The **cyber** threat landscape has evolved in 2020 due to growing international rivalries, and the increasing reliance on Information and Communication Technologies. In response, the EEAS, together with the European Commission, worked on updating the EU's policy through a new Joint Cybersecurity Strategy to increase its resilience and show leadership in cyberspace; build capacities to prevent, deter and respond to cyber-attacks; and strengthen its partnerships in favour of a global and open cyberspace. The EU has adopted its first ever sanctions against cyber-attacks. The EEAS contributed to the development of the Security Union Strategy, adopted in July 2020. The Strategy contains a number of **hybrid-related initiatives** with the objective to make the EU detect, prevent and respond better to hybrid threats.

The EU continued to engage with numerous **partners** worldwide on a wide range of security and defence issues. Cooperation was further consolidated with the UN and NATO, African Union, ASEAN, Canada, Norway as well as with other partners in the European neighbourhood, Asia, Africa and Latin America. The EEAS also coordinated work aimed at launching a dedicated EU-US dialogue on security and defence. The EEAS continued to engage with third states regarding

participation in CSDP missions and operations and enhanced modalities for third state participation in CSDP missions and operations were approved.

The EU has been working closely with third countries and international organisations on **countering terrorism and preventing/countering violent extremism**, including through dedicated Counter Terrorism Dialogues. In 2020 the Council Conclusions on Counter Terrorism, as well as the new EU Counter Terrorism Agenda were adopted. The EEAS has continued to further strengthen and expand the Network of CT/Security Experts, currently active in 18 EU Delegations.

Despite the challenge of COVID-19, the EEAS continued activities in the area of **Non-Proliferation, Disarmament and Arms Export Control**. Seven new CFSP Council Decisions were adopted, with a total budget of EUR 27 million. Due to the standstill of outreach activities amid the global lockdown, the implementation period for another 13 CFSP Council Decisions worth another EUR 41 million was extended. Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Dialogues were held virtually with China, Cuba, India, and the United States, while Political Dialogues on arms export control issues were virtually held with the United States and Norway.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Council tasked the HR/VP and the Commission to support the **repatriation of stranded EU citizens**. The EU-coordinated repatriation effort has reached more than 625.000 European nationals between January and May 2020. This massive operation mobilised around 2,600 commercial flights and 343 special flights funded by the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism, which brought back home around 76,000 EU citizens.

#### (4) PRIORITIES FOR 2021

The EU's priorities for 2021 and beyond build on the analysis of the dynamics that define our increasingly multipolar world. The EU is learning to better use the language of power and to work in a more assertive way. We have considerable assets and means at our disposal that we should harness together to address the challenges we face. For this, we need to build a common strategic culture based on strengthened solidarity. We also need to improve the speed and the way we take decisions in order to be able to respond to a fast-changing global environment, and we need to pull together our resources in order to increase our global influence, from the effectiveness of sanctions to norms and standards setting.

A comprehensive strategic response to the wider geopolitical trends and challenges should follow two tracks: **(1) promoting multilateralism and (2) strengthening strategic autonomy**. They both aim at making the EU more assertive and resilient in pursuing its interests and values, when confronted with crises, facing strategic rivals or policies that go against the EU's interests. Promoting rules-based multilateralism and strengthening strategic autonomy are two sides of the same coin.

**Openness and cooperation** remain at the core of the EU's international action. The EU will continue to invest in mutually beneficial partnerships and spearhead the shaping of international rules and standards. We will continue upholding and promoting a rule-based multilateral order that delivers global solutions to global problems, from preserving free trade to fighting climate change, promoting sustainable development, and preserving international peace and security.

However, we must not be naïve in a world where countries increasingly instrumentalise their assets, economic or other, to pursue their own interests. We need to decrease our vulnerabilities, increase our resilience, and to strengthen our capacity to act autonomously, when needed, from security and defence, to diversifying supply chains, strengthening our technological and financial sovereignty or protecting our critical infrastructure. We should seek to act multilaterally whenever we can, and be prepared to act autonomously if we must. This should be our guiding principle when engaging with the world.

Building deeper and strategic partnerships around the world are essential building blocks for a more effective and geopolitical EU role in the world and in helping to address global challenges.

The new **US** administration is a real opportunity to work together to advance the transatlantic partnership and pursue common objectives more effectively. The EU-US Summit in June 2021 will be an important occasion to reinvigorate the strategic partnership and to frame our future agenda. This will demonstrate the strength of the EU-US partnership as a leading force for democracy and human rights, fighting climate change, reforming and strengthening multilateral structures, and setting standards for emerging technologies.

**China** is simultaneously a cooperation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival in different policy areas. We have to navigate skilfully this complex relationship. While we are not equidistant in the US-China rivalry, finding a European approach that protects and promotes European interests and values will be a major challenge ahead.

Our priorities start with our neighbourhood. First, in consolidating the European perspective and reform process of the **Western Balkans**, including opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia as soon as possible, support for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia through the EU-facilitated Dialogue, helping Bosnia and Hercegovina advance political reforms and functionality and further developing cooperation on CFSP/CSDP issues with the countries of the region. On **Turkey**, we will continue working along the four strands identified in the Joint Communication on EU-Turkey relations (Eastern Mediterranean; the Cyprus problem; regional conflicts, notably in Libya and Syria; deterioration of democratic standards in Turkey), on the basis of the approach defined by the European Council.

We also see opportunities to strengthen the cooperation with the **non-EU Western European countries** on issues of mutual interest, including on EU defence initiatives and CSDP missions and operations. The EU will strive to continue to cooperate with the UK as its “new” neighbour, building on the common values, and history that characterise our common vision for a global order.

**Russia** will remain a strategic challenge at our borders. We will continue implementing the five guiding principles in a balanced and comprehensive way. Within this framework, efforts will focus on pushing back when Russia infringes international law and human rights; constraining when it seeks to increase pressure on the EU, including through disinformation and cyberattacks; and engaging on issues of interest to the EU. The EU will also focus on enhancing its resilience, stepping up its support to Russian civil society and human rights defenders, as well as enhancing people-to-people contacts.

Our **Eastern and Southern neighbourhood** will remain a major focus of our work. We will follow up on the upcoming EaP Foreign Affairs Ministerial meeting and the Summit in 2021. Focus will be on building resilience as a dominant feature of our cooperation through supporting partner countries in the socio-economic post-COVID-19 recovery, including vaccine sharing, and in their reform efforts. We also have to look more closely on how we can help our partners to strengthen their own security and to better address the persisting conflicts that plague the region.

The recent surge of violence in the **Middle East** has again demonstrated the fragility of the situation in the region and the prevalence of political, socio-economic and security challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have a clear interest in mobilizing all our instruments and resources to support our Southern neighbours and the international community's efforts to address ongoing crisis and conflicts, contribute to stabilisation and democratisation processes and use the opportunities of the twin green and digital transitions. We shall also invest more actively in strengthening the regional approach, including by enhancing dialogue and cooperation with regional, sub-regional and inter-regional fora and structures.

The **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran** will remain at the top of our agenda, to support non-proliferation of nuclear arms and international peace and security while supporting multilateral solutions to international problems and contributing to regional cooperation in the **Gulf**.

Our neighbour continent **Africa** holds some of the keys to the EU's future in many regards: green transition, access to resources, economic growth, pandemic management, peace and security, movements of people. Efforts will continue to keep up the momentum in the run-up to the next EU-AU Summit that should agree on the priorities the EU and Africa want to pursue together. In support to stabilisation, the strategic regions of Sahel and the Horn of Africa as well as deteriorating situations including in Mozambique and Central Africa Republic will be major priorities.

**Asia** is full of opportunities and challenges. A major new priority will be our Indo-Pacific strategy, which will be developed through tangible initiatives, including on security and defence cooperation, and through a Joint Communication with the Commission. In parallel, we will continue building on positive developments with strategic partners such as India and Japan, following the recent productive leaders' meetings. We will also maintain our principled stance in standing up for democracy and human rights, whether in Xinjiang, Hong Kong or Myanmar. We will engage with



regional and other key partners to explore opportunities for joint approaches to support Afghanistan as it adapts to a new situation with the withdrawal of US and NATO troops.

The Berlin meeting with Foreign Ministers from **Latin America and the Caribbean**, in December 2020 affirmed our common intention to step up high-level bi-regional political dialogue and to work towards a Summit to be held in 2021, while at the same time we continue to engage through bilateral dialogues. We also remain fully committed and actively support the implementation of the peace process in Colombia, the constitutional process in Chile, as well as efforts to bring a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis in Venezuela, while addressing the humanitarian fall-out and the migration crisis.

A key global challenge ahead will be to shape the post-COVID world ensuring a robust global economic recovery that also protects the rights and freedoms of people with high-level ambitions on gender equality. The new Global Human Rights sanctions regime will remain front and centre of the EU human rights foreign policy with important geopolitical implications. Renewed dynamics at the Human Rights Council, the new EU- UNHCR strategic dialogue, and engagement with the US on democracy and rules-based multilateralism will lift up human rights and multilateral cooperation. Counteracting the global backsliding of democracy will also be an important priority for the EU together with our partners. Cooperation among democratic governments and pro-democratic civil society organisations is needed both to tackle the challenges in the areas of rule of law and accountability, malign authoritarian influence, and the erosion of human rights and fundamental freedoms online and offline, and to strengthen the pillars of democratic governance, including parliaments, democratic political parties and independent media. It will be essential for the EU institutions, including the European Parliament, to work together in this area, including through election observation and its follow-up.

As part of the EU's efforts to strengthen its voice in the **multilateral arena**, we will continue to steward a global recovery that is green, digital, inclusive, just, and sustainable. EU diplomacy has a central role to play here, including the EU Delegations, in line with European Council decisions and in support of efforts by the European Commission. The 2021 World Health Assembly, the UN Conferences of the Parties on Biodiversity (COP15) and on Climate Change (COP26), the UN Food Systems Summit will be key moments in this respect and opportunities to strengthen cooperation with the UN, the US and other like-minded partners. Climate diplomacy will be central feature of EU foreign policy and a standing item on the agenda of all this year's major summits. The EU will continue its close engagement and cooperation with the Council of Europe to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

We will also continue enhancing our **connectivity** initiatives, notably our partnerships with Japan and India, while engaging with Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific regions, as well as with G7 partners. We continue developing comprehensive **migration** partnerships embedded into the EU's overall relations with third countries, tapping into the potential of the EU tools to advance migration objectives, including with CSDP missions and operations.

**Emerging technologies**, e.g. advances in the digital world and genetic engineering, are increasingly shaping the global landscape both as enablers of finding solutions to systemic challenges from global warming to pandemics and as drivers of geopolitical competition. Digital and tech in particular have become geopolitical issues. We need to direct more political attention to how technology affects Europe's role in the world and how it should inform adjustments to foreign and security policy, including through increasing interaction between science and diplomacy.

The EU will not be able to become a full-fledged geopolitical actor unless we strengthen our capacity to respond to security challenges and be better equipped to consolidate our role of a global player and a security provider. We will therefore intensify our efforts ahead to advance work on **security and defence**, including by leading the process of developing a Strategic Compass by 2022 and working to further consolidate the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and develop more advanced capabilities and interoperable forces in order to contribute to international peace and security together with partners. Our 17 CSDP missions and operations (6 military and 11 civilian) continue to be an emblematic, high visibility EU foreign policy tool to address crises around the world.

We will continue to implement a stronger and more gender-transformative foreign and security policy – committed to advancing gender equality and women and girls' empowerment around the world. This will be done through the systematic integration of a gender perspective, based on gender analysis, into all EU external action related to CFSP. We will ensure the advancement of **Gender Equality, Diversity and the WPS agenda in EEAS HQ/EU Delegations and in CSDP missions/operations**, also aiming to increase the number of women in leadership, managerial/operational positions. We will engage with all partners to implement the EU Policy framework on Women, Peace and Security.

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