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Votes, Vetoes, Values: Foreign Interference, QMV and EU Foreign Policy in a Competitive Age

Daniel Fiott and Giulia Tercovich |
4 July 2023

Key Issues

- One of the hallmarks of a more competitive age between states is an increased prevalence of foreign interference. The European Union is particularly susceptible to foreign interference given the decentralised nature of its institutional make-up and governance.
- Foreign interference serves to undermine, halt or influence the external action of the European Union and its member states, which may necessitate a strategic reflection about the Union's decision-making processes for foreign and security policy.
- Although unanimity provides for a great deal of unity and solidarity, it only functions when there is consensus but this may prove more difficult to achieve due to foreign interference. Qualified Majority Voting could help dissuade and blunt foreign interference.

Many of the European Union's (EU) strategic competitors and rivals have provided added reason to review the decision-making processes of the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has seen the EU act in a unified, robust and speedy manner, but the sanctions on Moscow reveal tensions between member states. Some have sought opt-outs in industrial areas such as steel production and the diamond trade, whereas others have refused to join efforts on the military training of Ukraine's armed forces or to sign up to economic assistance for Kyiv. In recent times, member states such as Hungary have also blocked EU human rights statements on China's crackdown on democratic forces in Hong Kong. Whenever the threat or actual use of a veto is seen in some way as

being beneficial to the Union's strategic competitors, then suspicions are rightly raised about the motives for vetoes. Whenever a veto is used in such a context, it can be perceived as a victory for foreign interference – even if no evidence proving a direct link ever sees the light of day.

To be sure, the use – or threat – of vetoes in EU foreign and security policy do not always easily align with the interest of foreign powers. In many cases, EU member states may have justified domestic reasons for vetoing an EU foreign policy decision (e.g. sanctions may hurt specific economic sectors). In other cases, vetoes are used to draw attention to specific national concerns, even if there is some benefit to foreign powers. For example, when Cyprus stalled the decision to impose sanctions on the regime

in Belarus, it did so to receive an equal level of solidarity for sanctions for Turkey's illegal actions in the eastern Mediterranean. The decision was not taken to aid Lukashenko, even if it helped slow down EU sanctions on the regime. With foreign powers seeking to directly influence EU policy, however, we cannot easily overlook how foreign powers may try to instrumentalise or encourage national vetoes in certain cases. As "[Qatar Gate](#)" has shown, EU bodies can – and will – be the direct targets of foreign influence operations.

A central question facing the EU then, is how to ensure that decision-making processes in foreign and security policy are free from foreign interference/influence. Combined with the need to manage a Union of 27 members that may enlarge in the future, the calls for the use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in foreign and security policy are getting louder. In essence, QMV is seen as an alternative to unanimity because it overcomes the risk that any single member state can derail a decision. While QMV is used in other areas of EU policy, in foreign and security policy it is still seen as a taboo, especially for many smaller member states that fear having their sovereignty in national security undermined. Nevertheless, in May 2023 a group of nine member states formed a vanguard (or "[group of friends](#)") calling for the introduction of QMV in the area of CFSP, a point also echoed by several EU foreign ministers in a [commentary piece](#) calling for practical steps towards QMV.

Whenever politicians have called for the introduction of QMV in CFSP, however, they have done so on the understanding that a removal of the veto would speed up the EU's reaction to crises and help to uphold the universal value of EU principles, norms and values even when consensus at the level of 27 is difficult. Through such arguments, proponents of QMV accept that the unity and effectiveness of EU foreign and security policy may flounder. Although there is an established [body of research](#) into the merits and pitfalls of QMV, in this Policy Brief we seek to specifically weigh-up the costs and benefits of QMV through the prism of foreign interference and influence. In doing so, we want to understand whether QMV provides an effective enough shield against foreign interference/influence.

Foreign interference, influence and EU foreign policy

Since at least Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, the EU has increasingly become aware of the dangers of foreign "interference" and "influence". Cases of interference are easier to detect: for example, think of how [pro-Russian hackers](#) took down the website and computer system of the French Assemblée Nationale, how China threatened Lithuania with retaliation for allowing Taiwan to effectively open a [de-facto embassy](#) in its country, the [defamation suits](#) launched against European academics for commenting on Chinese telecom firms, the counter-sanctions imposed by China on European parliamentarians or even the reports that [Qatar](#) has attempted to directly influence EU legislation. Cases of influence are much harder to detect and usually take the form of disinformation or the propagation of narratives among willing (or unaware) audiences. As the French authorities [recently revealed](#), state-backed Russian actors – including embassies and cultural centres – launched a comprehensive disinformation campaign against France through fake social media accounts, web spoofing and digital identity theft.

For the EU, the question of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has become a central issue for [Europe's security](#). Indeed, in its first-ever report on [FIMI threats](#) the European External Action Service underlined that Russia and China use diplomatic channels to enable FIMI operations, but that the bulk of FIMI threats come from image and multilingual video based attempts to impersonate trusted organisations and individuals. The main aim of FIMI campaigns has been to '[distract and distort](#)' from certain narratives or to shift blame (e.g. when Russia [blamed](#) Europeans for the grain shortages in Ukraine resulting from its illegal war on the country). Overall, FIMI operations are manipulative in nature and largely follow a [three-step](#) approach of *planning* (discrediting credible sources), *preparing* (create deceptive messages, images, videos or platforms) and *executing* (flooding the information space and amplification).

Yet, there is a difference between how foreign interference/influence meshes with public diplomacy efforts and more indirect attempts to

influence the diplomatic and political actions of states. For example, through a mixture of financial investments and preying on weak or fragile state institutions and civil societies there is a risk of “[elite capture](#)”. Europe, being an open and decentralised polity, is [increasingly vulnerable](#) to harmful investments, loans, military ties and technological interconnectedness (e.g. 5G). In particular, the EU’s foreign and security policy decision-making is one area of interest for foreign actors, as the CFSP architecture is where member states collectively devise the strategic direction and actions of the EU on the world stage. Active measures to disrupt,

campaign is substantial. A veto by a single member state that, at least in part and albeit indirectly, serves the interest of a foreign adversary or rival is enough to undermine CFSP.

This risk may, however, appear somewhat tenuous and conspiratorial. The truth is that the opaque dealings of the EU foreign affairs council means that we can never know what really motivates member states to veto CFSP decisions. Beyond what intelligence services may know about the links between European elites and foreign adversaries and rivals, we only have incomplete and infrequent

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disarm and disable EU foreign and security policy is no conspiracy theory. Indeed, the Union would not have developed policies designed to counter harmful foreign direct investment, trade and supply chain coercion or disinformation were it not for the risk of foreign interference/influence. As the EU’s [Strategic Compass](#) recognises, there is a need to ensure the decision-making autonomy of the CFSP.

Unanimity, QMV and foreign interference

It is not too difficult to see how foreign interference/influence may seek to disrupt, disable and disarm EU foreign and security policy. First, we should recognise that the issues that can divide EU member states are all publicly known, including migration and sanctions – we should expect interference/influence measures that play on the cultural, social and economic anxieties related to these challenges. Second, individual member states may have cultural and/or economic ties to foreign competitors and rivals, making it difficult to prove whether decisions are made, at least in part, to maintain or favour these relations. EU member states have a commitment to one another, as underlined in the treaties, but they also maintain bilateral relations with non-EU states. When combined with the fact that unanimity prevails in CFSP, the potential effect of a foreign influence

media reports about the context behind the threat and use of a veto. For example, when Hungary blocked an EU human rights statement on China’s crackdown of democracy in Hong Kong in 2021, [press sources](#) pointed to the close ties between Beijing and Budapest. They [claimed](#) that increased Chinese investment in Hungary and Hungary-China cooperation on medicinal and healthcare products during the Covid-19 pandemic, ensured that Hungary did not want to take a hard-line on China. However, Hungary ultimately did not block the parallel EU sanctions on exports of security equipment to Hong Kong, and the [government’s own rationale](#) for blocking the EU statement centred on concerns about the effectiveness of such statements, as well as an ideological position against Europe’s centre-left politicians.

Just because foreign interference/influence is one among many potential reasons for a member state to veto a CFSP-related decision, does not take anything away from the malign actions of foreign adversaries and rivals. Arguments in favour of QMV in EU foreign and security policy have not, however, always focused on a need to counter foreign influence and interference. In fact, most studies and political declarations have argued that QMV would help speed up EU action and thereby enhance its credibility as an international actor.

The case for QMV points to how the threat or use of veto on human rights statements on China or sanctions on Belarus points on an urgent need to overcome unanimity. Critics argue, however, that QMV is a way of [breaking unity and solidarity](#) in the Union, and they question whether decisions taken even by a majority will be effective. For example, how to effectively implement sanctions on third countries when a member state actively voted against the imposition of them in the first place?

Others still may argue that, by and large, member states are still able to reach consensus when it pertains to major crises. In the response to Russia's war on Ukraine, for example, consensus has prevailed over various rounds of sanctions. Indeed, where national interests needed securing (i.e. the protection of sectoral economic interests) EU member states have utilised the principle of constructive abstention more frequently: despite their neutrality, Austria, Ireland and Malta all abstained from the decision to send lethal equipment so as not to stand in the way of a common EU position.

Maintaining decision-making autonomy

While some have [rightly observed](#) that any CFSP decision taken by QMV may command less respect in the eyes of partners and/or adversaries, we believe that QMV could prove a useful approach to countering foreign interference/influence and maintaining the Union's autonomy. In contexts where individual EU member states are particularly vulnerable or susceptible to economic coercion or political pressure, QMV can offer an effective "escape route" from influence and interference. For example, with QMV a government can still vote against a policy measure, which would placate its foreign partner, while still being bound by the agreed EU decision. In essence, this allows vulnerable member states to have it both ways while ensuring that the Union's overall credibility and ability to act are not curtailed.

Using QMV may also send an important signal to foreign adversaries and rivals, and force them to reformulate their strategic calculations. In fact, knowing that QMV will enhance the Union's protection against foreign interference/influence may even prevent foreign actors from attempting harmful investments, influence campaigns and other strategies in the first place. What is more, although QMV may be seen to shed light on divisions between EU member states, when a majority coalesce around a single position it can have advantages in upholding the Union's fundamental principles, norms and values. In this sense, while QMV may be instrumentalised by foreign powers as evidence of a divided Union, the fact that no single member state would be able to undermine decisions that advance the EU's values, norms and principles would send a powerful signal to the world and reinforce the idea that the Union's founding principles are inviolable.

Of course, we recognise the risks of QMV. It is a challenge to the principle of sovereign equality in the foreign affairs council, and QMV can embody some degree of hypocrisy. For instance, smaller member states cannot credibly be accused of being captured by foreign powers when these same powers own critical infrastructure and investments in larger member states. We also recognise that needing to counter foreign interference/influence cannot be the only justification for QMV in CFSP and, for QMV to work, the Union needs to ensure the effectiveness of its policy once agreed: it is no good having faster policy-making procedures if EU policy has little effect in the real world. We also recognise that, short of introducing QMV, the EU needs to counter foreign interference/influence across the board to help lower the risk that foreign powers dissuade, disarm and disable EU action. In the face of a more competitive era, debates about the Union's decision-making apparatus need to pay much greater attention to countering foreign interference/influence rather than just a focus on speed.

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