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**THE RESURGENCE OF BILATERAL  
DIPLOMACY IN EUROPE**

ALEXANDER MATTELAER



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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alexander Mattelaer is an associate professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and a senior research fellow at Egmont – the Royal Institute for International Relations. He is also a visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges. He teaches courses on the European Union, international security, and defence policy-making. Earlier he was a Fulbright Schuman fellow at Harvard University and the National Defense University. He obtained his PhD in Political Science from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Master degrees from the University of Bath and the University of Leuven. He is grateful to Sven Biscop, Johan Verbeke and a variety of diplomats for offering comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. The responsibility for any errors is the author's alone.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>The appeal of bilateralism in Europe and beyond</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The added value of bilateral diplomatic networks</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Balancing bilateral and multilateral approaches in the EU</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Postscript: Implications for Belgium</b> .....	<b>15</b>

## ABSTRACT

*As the conduct of international relations is changing in tone, bilateral diplomacy is back in vogue. This trend does not leave the European continent unaffected: intergovernmental bargaining is on the rise. Many EU member state capitals make good use of their diplomatic network across the continent to better understand what other member states aspire to achieve, and to promote their own voice within the European system. This Egmont Paper seeks to shed conceptual clarity on the resurgence of bilateral diplomacy in Europe. Firstly, it argues that in the absence of multilateral successes, bilateral approaches constitute the fall-back position for structuring the international system. Secondly, it explains in what ways bilateral networks add political depth to intra-European relationships. Thirdly, it addresses the question whether the revival of bilateralism in Europe inevitably undermines supranational institutions. It concludes one must appreciate the conspicuous complementarity between the two approaches: bilateralism and multilateralism may well alternate in prominence, but can also reinforce one another. By way of postscript, it considers the implications this analysis entails for Belgium's diplomatic posture.*

## INTRODUCTION

Bilateral diplomacy has never gone away, but it is again moving to the centre stage of international relations. This trend does not leave the European continent unaffected. The Franco-German declaration adopted at Meseberg expressed the need “to anchor our European cooperation in a strong bilateral cooperation”.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in the newly signed Treaty of Aachen, which codifies inter alia an EU-wide promise of military assistance in case of aggression (Art. 4.1) and a commitment to harmonise financial and economic legislation on a bilateral basis (Art. 20.1).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the periodic ups-and-downs of the relationship between Paris and Berlin, these developments are noteworthy for two different reasons.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, it draws attention to the extent to which European compromises are prepared not just by the proverbial ‘Brussels bubble’. Building European coalitions involves member state capitals and their wide range of diplomatic instruments, including not only their Permanent Representations to the EU but also their bilateral embassies and ministerial headquarters. In this sense, bilateral diplomacy helps prepare the ground for intergovernmental European policy processes. On the other hand, the co-existence of Westphalian diplomatic traditions in member state capitals and the multilateral reflex engrained in the EU’s supranational institutions cannot help but raise the question whether sovereign states or the process of European integration constitute the main political referent in Europe today. As such, the increased emphasis on bilateral deal-making could end up substituting for integration, just as much as it can enrich, complement and anchor European cooperation.

This Egmont Paper aims to shed some conceptual clarity on the resurgence of bilateral diplomacy in Europe. The first section engages with the question what this change of tone in diplomacy signifies within the European context. Is the shift to transactional diplomacy merely a policy choice of today’s political leaders, or are we observing a secular trend towards power politics in international affairs, which cannot help but affect intra-European relations? In the absence of multilateral successes, bilateral approaches constitute the fall-back position for structuring the international system. The second section illuminates the logic that drives the bilat-

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Meseberg Declaration: Renewing Europe’s promises of security and prosperity’, joint declaration adopted during the Franco-German Council of Ministers in Meseberg, 19 June 2018, available from: <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/meseberg-declaration-1140806>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Traité entre la République française et la République fédérale d’Allemagne sur la coopération et l’intégration franco-allemandes’, Aachen, 22 January 2019, available from: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/997532/1570126/c720a7f2e1a0128050baaa6a16b760f7/2019-01-19-vertrag-von-aachen-data.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> For more background on the Franco-German relationship and its relevance to European integration, see Georges-Henri Soutou, ‘L’émergence du couple franco-allemand: un mariage de raison’, *Politique étrangère*, 4:2012, pp. 727-738, available from: [https://www.cairn.info/load\\_pdf.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=PE\\_124\\_0727](https://www.cairn.info/load_pdf.php?ID_ARTICLE=PE_124_0727), and Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol, ‘Rethinking Franco-German relations: a historical perspective’, Brussels: Bruegel (Policy Contribution n°29), November 2017, available from: <http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PC-29-2017.pdf>.

eral approach. Even within the European Union, bilateral embassies continue to provide different layers of added value, most notably in enabling direct contacts between the leadership of foreign affairs ministries and generating convening power abroad. As such, the bilateral network connecting European capitals provides not just the raw foundation of European integration, but also a subtle political overlay to the EU institutions. Far from being relics of a bygone era, bilateral diplomatic posts and novel forms of bilateralism can add political depth to intra-European relationships. The third section explores the delicate balancing act governing the revival of bilateralism in Europe. Precisely because bilateral diplomacy is qualitatively different from the dynamic of multilateral institutions, there exists a temptation to portray these as mutually exclusive categories of structuring intra-European relations. Yet the unfettered pursuit of national interests may trigger a race to the bottom that does not further the interest of any member state. The challenge is to appreciate the conspicuous and enduring complementarity between the two approaches. In a Union that is composed of member states and co-governed by different institutions, healthy bilateral exchanges can help overcome multilateral gridlock by preserving what matters the most in Europe today: a spirit of cooperation and a perspective that encompasses the longer term.

## THE APPEAL OF BILATERALISM IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

In recent years international relations have become increasingly transactional and dominated by state-to-state interactions. Bilateral diplomacy is back in vogue, so to speak. To a considerable extent, this relates to the emerging paradigm that lies beyond the ‘post-Cold War’ period, epitomized by the retreat of the rules-based international order, the obsolescence of the global governance system and the return of great power rivalry.<sup>4</sup> When considering topical policy debates in Europe, such as Brexit, migration policies or EU leadership debates, one cannot help but notice that the EU itself is increasingly being recast into an arena of intergovernmental bargaining, or even circumvented altogether by European states pursuing bilateral deals outside the remit of the European treaties. As such, evidence continues to mount that the turn of the tide – from multilateralism to bilateralism and ad hoc coalitions – has set in.

Few developments symbolize the renewed appetite for bilateral deal-making as much as the US administration led by Donald Trump. The ‘America First’ foreign policy touted by the President of the United States espouses a worldview centred around long-term competition amongst great powers.<sup>5</sup> As this provides only an inchoate response to the different ways in which other players such as China and Russia seek to contest and revise the post-Cold War international order, this new course in US foreign policy has provoked heated debate. Regardless of the way in which the US-China or US-Russia relationships may evolve, the reality is that the country which shaped the post-Cold War order the most is in the process of recalibrating its policies in function of its own domestic imperatives.<sup>6</sup> The earlier vision of the world, articulated around an interlocking set of international institutions with an ever-expanding membership, is becoming null and void.<sup>7</sup> When the US no longer promotes international rules and norms, in the words of Robert Kagan, “the jungle grows back”, and the consequences thereof can be felt everywhere.<sup>8</sup>

This creeping return to transactional bartering amongst nations is not limited to the wider world beyond the European continent. In fact, this trend could already be observed within the European Union for several years. Ever since the dramatic days

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Johan Verbeke, ‘A World in Flux’, Brussels: Egmont Institute (Security Policy Brief No. 92), November 2017, available from: <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2017/11/SPB92-Verbeke.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> One can gather as much from the US National Security Strategy of December 2017, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, and the unclassified summary of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Michael Pompeo, ‘Restoring the Role of the Nation-State in the Liberal International Order’, remarks delivered at the German Marshall Fund, Brussels, 4 December 2018, available from: <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/12/287770.htm>. Cf. also Graham Allison, ‘The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018, pp. 124-133.

<sup>7</sup> See Jean Pisani-Ferry, ‘Wincott Lecture: Can Multilateralism Survive?’, London: Chatham House, 6 November 2018, available from: [www.wincott.co.uk/lectures/Pisani-Ferry%20lecture.docx](http://www.wincott.co.uk/lectures/Pisani-Ferry%20lecture.docx)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

during which policy responses to the Eurozone debt crisis were formulated, a gradual loss of trust and concern over intra-EU solidarity – or lack thereof – has prompted a revival of intergovernmental decision-making and flexible coalitions underpinned by partnerships between like-minded countries.<sup>9</sup> The negotiations between the EU-27 and the UK about the latter's withdrawal from the Union provided a unmistakable warning that bilateral diplomacy 'through the back door' was poised for a comeback in European affairs – even if the risk has been largely contained.<sup>10</sup> In some respects, a balance of power crisis is unfolding on the European continent, which apart from Brexit is animated by US retrenchment, the rise of Germany as the EU's economic and political leader, and Russia's push to recreate a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> These different factors combine into a change of mindset that is percolating across different EU member state capitals and highlighting the need to rethink their diplomatic orientations.

The trend pointing towards bilateralism is the most visible when neither the policy responses led by the European institutions nor the search for intergovernmental consensus bear fruit. As the poisonous debates over European migration policy testify, the faltering of multilateral approaches breeds a need for bilateral stopgaps. When the European Commission was not able to strike agreements with third countries on return and readmission of irregular migrants, various EU member states started negotiating such agreements on a bilateral basis. By including quintessentially sovereign matters, such as intelligence, military and judicial cooperation, individual member states have been more successful in delivering results than the European Commission. In turn, third countries across North Africa have been able to bargain up the price of their cooperation significantly. When the European Council was not able to come to agreement on migration policy reform, the appeal of bilateral deals between EU member states proved irresistible.<sup>12</sup> Even if such agreements are light in terms of their policy content, the message is clear: when European agreement is not within reach, bilateral deals constitute a useful fall-back option. Similar dynamics can be observed with respect to the return of economic protectionism within the single market. The debates within the Transport, Telecommunications and

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jozef Janning, 'The roots of coalitions: Like-mindedness among EU member states', Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, 7 August 2018, available from: [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_eu28survey\\_coalitions\\_like\\_mindedness\\_among\\_eu\\_member\\_states](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_eu28survey_coalitions_like_mindedness_among_eu_member_states). In this regard it is also common to refer to a drift towards a 'Europe à la carte'. See e.g. Bart Sturtewagen, 'Neen zeggen tegen Europa', *De Standaard*, 16 November 2018.

<sup>10</sup> This even prompted the European Commission to warn EU member states of the risk of engaging in bilateral discussions with the UK; see Jacopo Barigazzi and Charlie Cooper, 'Brussels issues démarche on alleged British divide-and-rule tactic', *Politico*, 4 September 2018, available from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/brexit-michel-barnier-dominic-raab-brussels-warns-diplomats-against-uks-brexit-divide-and-rule-scheme/>. Cf. also Kristin Haugevik, 'Diplomacy through the back door: Norway and the bilateral route to EU decision-making', *Global Affairs*, 3 (3), 2017, pp. 277-291.

<sup>11</sup> See Luis Simon, 'The Spectre of a Westphalian Europe?', London: Royal United Services Institute (Whitehall Paper 90), 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, 'Chancellor Angela Merkel advocates bilateral, trilateral deals over migrants to EU', 24 June 2018, available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/chancellor-angela-merkel-advocates-bilateral-trilateral-deals-over-migrants-to-eu/a-44372773>.



Energy Council on the Mobility Package constitute a case in point in which individual member states seek to add bilateral tweaks to EU legislation.

Inside the sprawling network of intra-European bilateral relationships, the Franco-German relationship remains the most important one in setting the tone of the debate. It is hard to ponder meaningful EU-reform that is not driven by the so-called Franco-German engine. The way in which the European sovereign debt crisis developed over the past years has offered a sharp illustration how Paris and Berlin together shape collective EU responses. At the same time, Berlin is finding itself in the position of kingmaker at the middle of the bilateral European network. Soon after coming into power, President Emmanuel Macron outlined his vision for Europe in a series of speeches, most notably at the Sorbonne and at the Charlemagne prize-giving ceremony. Yet all his eloquence could not hide the fact that the final authority to arbitrate on policy proposals has shifted to the German government and the *Bundestag*. Similarly, it is noticeable that Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte chose to deliver his major policy address on the future of the EU in Berlin.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, he could rely on support from the so-called new Hanseatic League in advocating fiscal responsibility.<sup>14</sup> As such, a novel pattern is developing in which different EU member states seek to woo German policy circles as a new mechanism for exercising influence in the EU policy arena in Brussels. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the composition of intra-EU coalitions is constantly in flux, changing from one policy domain to the next.

The return of transactional deal-making amongst the different power centres on the European continent raises memories of a more distant past, in which the interests of smaller countries were not always respected. The Community method was precisely conceived as a mechanism, in the words of Jean Monnet, “to seek a solution to the problems themselves, instead of trading temporary advantages”.<sup>15</sup> Yet the trend towards bilateralism cannot be wished away. Even as bilateral diplomacy comes with risk and uncertainty, the international trend must be properly understood before one can aspire to shape and influence it. Paradoxically, bilateral diplomatic posts constitute the most important asset to do so.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Rutte, ‘Underpromise and overdeliver: fulfilling the promise of Europe’, speech at the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Berlin, 2 March 2018, available from: <https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2018/03/02/speech-by-the-prime-minister-of-the-netherlands-mark-rutte-at-the-bertelsmann-stiftung-berlin>.

<sup>14</sup> See Jim Brunson and Michael Acton, ‘The Hanseatic League 2.0’, *Financial Times*, 7 November 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Monnet, ‘A Ferment of Change’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 1 (3), 1963, p. 206.

## THE ADDED VALUE OF BILATERAL DIPLOMATIC NETWORKS

A sovereign state maintains a diplomatic network in order to help it understand and shape the international environment in which it finds itself. Such a network of embassies and representations constitutes the nervous system at the heart of foreign policy-making. Provided that diplomatic posts reach critical mass individually, the network they form will appreciate the constantly changing character of international relations the earliest, and constitute an instrument for pro-actively influencing the trend in line with the national interest. Bilateral embassies represent the oldest foundation of diplomatic networks. Their attention and activities span across multiple policy domains, from international security and trade to cooperation on domestic matters. For analytical purposes, this section distinguishes between the five functions that such embassies perform, not only outside but also inside the European context. Focusing on the latter helps one appreciate the co-existence of European institutions and bilateral networks in connecting the peoples of EU member states. While these functions only represent ideal-types, it is useful to distinguish between them for the sake of analytical clarity.

The first function of an embassy is to alert one's own country to relevant trends and signals that can be picked up in the host country. Embassies report on all significant political and economic developments in a way that complements media reporting. By drawing on frequent contacts with the host government, parliamentary communities, business circles, thinktanks and NGOs, embassies can add greater depth to the analysis of what is going on in any particular country. By virtue of their institutional memory, they are able to concentrate on long-term trends and help inform government communication on that basis. Within the EU, bilateral Ambassadors are not competent for EU affairs, yet they do alert their respective capitals to the domestic dynamics within different member states. Even inside the thick institutional web of European integration, bilateral embassies continue to provide a critical role in monitoring political developments across the continent.

The second and corollary function of an embassy is to represent one's country in the host country. Traditionally this includes the transmission of official communication between governments as well as the ceremonial aspects of representation. Precisely because bilateral embassies are permanently embedded within the diplomatic tissue of a member state's capital, they can help communicate a member state's EU policy positions, not only towards the host government but also directly towards relevant segments of society. While EU policy is formally produced in Brussels, many EU member states make good use of their bilateral embassies to 'prepare the terrain', i.e. by patiently explaining national policy positions and building support for these in different capitals. In EU member state capitals other than Brussels, the network of

bilateral ambassadors tends to form a secondary transmission belt for intergovernmental debates across the Union. Such interactions may lack the policy detail provided by the Permanent Representations in Brussels, but they do engage wider and more diverse audiences.

The third function of embassies is to support bilateral political and economic negotiations between home and host governments. The days in which ambassadors received wide discretionary authorities from their home government to negotiate quasi-independently are of course long gone. But even in an era of constant government-to-government contacts at all possible levels, embassies continue to serve as the institutional repositories for such negotiations and other forms of advancing national interests, often of a commercial or national security-related nature. Even if national ministers and their departments are increasingly in the driving seat of such negotiations and reaching out to their bilateral counterparts, the relevant embassies can assist with the targeting of key messages and strengthen policy consistency vis-à-vis host countries.

Fourthly, most embassies also feature a consular function. They serve as civil affairs administration for the local expat community (issuing identity papers, residence certificates, civil status etc.) and act as a go-to point of contact for visa applications and other relevant queries from foreigners. In this sense, a bilateral embassy and its supporting consular offices serve as *de facto* commune for citizens living abroad, turning their ambassadors into part-time mayors of small- to medium-sized villages. From the point of view of most citizens outside Brussels, the probability of coming into contact with a bilateral ambassador is much higher than that of interacting directly with the EU institutions. Even if not this function is not as politically salient, this proximity to citizens strengthens the societal roots of the intra-European diplomatic network.

The fifth and final function of any embassy is to provide ‘convening power’ to one’s own national community active in a specific country. Embassies provide support to business entrepreneurs, corporate groups, universities, civil society organisations and all other entities seeking to nurture or expand their international activities. The local ambassador might provide ideas and guidance on how to go about setting up contacts, make introductions or suggest whom to talk to, sponsor or host a promotion event etc. Within the framework of the EU – especially in the case of neighbouring countries – such convening power might not constitute a critical prerequisite, as the obstacles to the cooperation and conduct of business are relatively minor. At the same time, these EU member states tend to be each other’s most important trading partners. The sheer density of bilateral relations does not obviate the need for embassy support; it rather strengthens the case for making such support as efficient and professional as possible.

If there is anything in particular worth noting about intra-European bilateral diplomacy, then it is the observation that the evolving role of bilateral embassies goes hand in hand with novel forms of bilateralism, such as staff secondments within member states' capitals, visiting or 'roving' ambassadors, and/or co-location of diplomatic infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> The high degree of diplomatic trust amongst EU member states has translated into an increased acceptability of posting diplomatic staff directly into the ministry of another member state for ensuring the follow-up of specific dossiers – a practice initiated by the French and German foreign ministries in 1986. In addition, different European capitals have also taken to designating visiting or roving ambassadors that are accredited to (but not based in) another member state, or alternatively, based in one member state but responsible for several states in the same region. This practice, as first developed by Sweden, has become instrumental in reducing cost, compressing the overhead of the intra-European diplomatic network, and customizing different forms of representation.<sup>17</sup>

When taking these different functions together, it is clear that a network of bilateral embassies remains the most fundamental tool in the conduct of international relations. Due to the existence of the EU, the role of intra-European bilateral network has evolved considerably, yet bilateral diplomacy remains an important instrument in the service of the European policies member states choose to pursue. Bilateral embassies feed the analysis of what is going in all other member states, and help enable the member state capital to articulate its policy preferences not only in Brussels, but also in all other national capitals. In that sense, bilateral diplomacy conducted by ministry headquarters and embassies alike both precedes and supplements the policy discussions in Brussels, most notably by exploring possible coalitions and influencing key stakeholders in different capitals. At the same time, it bears emphasis that bilateral embassies alone cannot possibly suffice for allowing the EU's single market to function, or for defending common European interests that derive from the EU's exclusive competences, such as monetary or commercial policy. The question, therefore, is how this bilateral system interacts with the institutional dimension of the EU.

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<sup>16</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see Arjan Uilenreef, 'Alternatives to the Resident Embassy: Intra-EU Diplomatic Networks in the Twenty-first Century', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 25, pp. 356-377.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 'A world-class foreign service', Stockholm: Utrikesdepartementet (SOU 2011:21), March 2011, available from <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2011/03/sou-201121/> (also q.i. Uilenreef, op. cit., p. 365).

## BALANCING BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL APPROACHES IN THE EU

If the resurgence of bilateral diplomacy constitutes a powerful international trend, it raises thorny questions for the political architecture of the European continent. After all, bilateral diplomacy has in the past occasionally been portrayed as something that was superseded by the process of European integration – even if the residual value added provided by bilateral embassies explains itself easily enough.<sup>18</sup> The renewed emphasis on transactional deal-making amongst member state governments can be portrayed as evidence of a reduced emphasis on supranational approaches. It is arguably also in keeping with the upswing of identity politics within EU member states. The key issue is whether such bilateral impulses account for the European continent sliding back towards a Westphalian model, or whether member states are resorting to their full diplomatic toolkit for re-anchoring the European construction at a time when the international system is rapidly evolving. The distinction between these two competing models may strike one either as exaggerated, or as splitting hairs. The principal take-away, however, is that the bilateral and the multilateral logic, just like intergovernmental and supranational models of EU integration, can reinforce one another in times of international stress.

A negative model for describing the comeback of bilateralism would suggest that the European project has itself entered a state of fragmentation and decay. Whether this premise is an analytical or a prescriptive one is irrelevant. Whether by fear or by desire, member states find themselves tempted or obliged to revitalize and strengthen their sovereign toolkit in order to deal with an increasingly anarchical environment. This logic highlights the instrumental value of their national diplomatic, defence and intelligence apparatus, as these would constitute the main instruments for dealing with various scenarios of EU erosion or outright collapse.<sup>19</sup> In this model, bilateral relationships within the European continent and beyond account for a conscious investment in hedging against profoundly negative scenarios of European disintegration accompanying the decomposition of the rules-based order. Most fundamentally, this pattern also relates to the decreasing credibility of the US security umbrella.<sup>20</sup> The negativity of these scenarios derives from the observation

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Øivind Bratberg, 'Bilateral diplomacy in an integrated Europe: The co-existence of institutional orders?', in: Morten Egeberg, ed., *Institutional Dynamics and the Transformation of Executive Politics in Europe*, Mannheim: University of Mannheim (CONNEX Network of Excellence Report Series Nr. 03), pp. 533-561.

<sup>19</sup> For an extensive discussion of how such scenarios might come about, see Ian Kearns, *Collapse: Europe after the European Union*, London: Biteback Publishing 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Hal Brands, Eric S. Edelman and Thomas G. Mahnken, *Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in an Age of Geopolitical Turmoil*, Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018, available from: [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility\\_Paper\\_FINAL\\_format.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility_Paper_FINAL_format.pdf).

that few would label the return to a Westphalian system as a choice for continued stability and prosperity on the European continent.

In turn, a positive model for appreciating the renewed emphasis on bilateral diplomacy is premised on the proposition that it will enable the European construction to endure in an era of increased stress. The value of European integration is not put into question: all European citizens benefit from the international clout and regulatory influence that the single market provides. Yet this model recognizes that there are limits to extending EU policy competences and technocratic governance. Given that the European construction is a product of member states just as much as one of shared institutions, bilateral diplomacy was never going to fade away. Instead, its comeback is rather to be understood as an investment to re-anchor European cooperation as a network spanning across all member states. As such, the task of striving towards consensus is not simply delegated to Brussels, but rather supported and defended by the full apparatus of all member states. Being strong as a Union, in other words, requires strong member states to begin with.

Irrespective of which model one prefers for analysing the current state of the European construction and the accompanying interest for bilateral diplomacy, the key is that this constitutes no binary choice. By definition, all instruments of statecraft can be put to the pursuit of constructive as well as destructive policy agendas. Assertive bilateral diplomacy has the potential of both undermining and strengthening the EU. It risks hollowing out the supranational dimension of integration, just as it promises to defend the process of integration by all available means. Particularly relevant is the notion that if the European project is under siege by a return of great power competition, it cannot be defended by soft power, lofty rhetoric and EU exclusive competences alone. When bilateral diplomacy is the name of the game, member states cannot avoid being pulled along and respond in kind. For every member state, this implies a delicate balancing act that maintains an equilibrium between the advantages that EU membership entail and the high cost of developing alternatives. Seen in this light, many capitals approach intra-European bilateral diplomacy as a complement instead of an alternative to EU integration. It helps each of them better understand what all the other member states most desire and aspire to, and promote their own voice within the European system. In that sense, intra-European bilateral diplomacy is not only relevant in times of stress, but would be continue required even when the Union is functioning well, precisely because supranational institutions and diplomatic networks can reinforce and legitimise each other.

## CONCLUSION

The renewed prominence of bilateral diplomacy represents a symptom rather than a cause of change in the international system. If the preference for bilateral deal-making signals a recalibration of the rules-based international order, then the latter process is explained by the ongoing redistribution of political, economic and military power away from the West. This cannot help but have profound consequences for the architecture of European integration, of which the historical foundations are part and parcel of Cold War and post-Cold War dynamics. The question what lies beyond the post-Cold War paradigm that is now crumbling, is one that all European countries face together – even if they have to figure out their own answer before comparing to what extent these answers converge.

The institutional stress the EU is currently experiencing, is related not just to the turbulence in the wider world, but also to the coming to terms with the consequences of the decisions that were taken a generation ago. In particular, the long-term political impact of German reunification, monetary union and eastern enlargement are only now coming into full view. As a result of these fateful decisions, European integration acquired much more binding characteristics in the economic realm, and has implied a geographical redistribution of political influence eastwards. It is only now, when the post-Maastricht EU acquis is put under intense pressure by internal and external factors alike, that all EU member states are forced to explore which of these achievements are durable and sustainable, and what features may need amending – either by devising national stopgaps or by contemplating changes to the EU acquis.

The salience of intra-European bilateral diplomacy resides in the fact that it allows the member state capitals to test and probe the remits of what is possible and desirable within the European political arena. Such bilateral endeavours cannot possibly hope to offer a substitute for competent EU institutions – that is, not without giving up on much of the added value these provide. But they can help anchor the process of integration for weathering the gusts of political turbulence that occur today in domestic as well as in international politics. It is no coincidence that those EU member states that are most interested and best positioned for shaping the future course of European integration, most notably France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, have all maintained extensive bilateral networks and constantly seek to make good use of it in promoting their policy preferences. The ongoing Brexit negotiations offer a good indication that the single market achievements are being fiercely protected, whilst the protracted debates about migration policy or defence policy suggest that major leaps in integration are not forthcoming anytime soon.

In sum, the resurgence of bilateral diplomacy in Europe tells little about the future direction of European integration *per se*. As it constitutes a mere symptom of a

changing international atmospherics, it represents both a threat and an opportunity to the EU as we know it today. Pessimists predicting the imminent demise of the EU would do well to remember that the European project was itself not born in the most propitious of circumstances, just as perennial optimists who believe that a federal Europe is just around the corner would do well to remember that previous generations of optimists have been occasionally mistaken – sometimes rather badly so. If anything, the analysis above suggests that the search for a new paradigm governing European affairs beyond the post-Cold War period has started in earnest. In times like these, those member states and European institutions who are ready to embrace new models are perhaps the most likely to start from pole position in shaping whatever comes next.



## POSTSCRIPT: IMPLICATIONS FOR BELGIUM

What does this analysis imply for Belgium, one of the founding EU member states with high aspirations for the European project? The trend described in the preceding pages arguably runs counter to deeply engrained Belgian preferences on how the international system should function. After all, ever since 1945 Belgian diplomacy has sought to promote the construction of multilateral institutions, starting with what we know today as the Benelux, the UN, NATO and the EU. This new drift towards bilateral diplomacy within the European construction as well as beyond does not sit easily with the Belgian perspective on foreign or European affairs. In addition, the trend raises uncomfortable questions about the state in which Belgium's bilateral network finds itself in at present, not only when it comes to advancing economic interests, but also with respect to its fundamental role as one of the key departments providing for national security. Can the Belgian foreign policy community avoid coming to terms with the international environment that is in the process of emerging?

This debate can only start from an evaluation of today's situation. While many other EU member states have continued investing in bilateral diplomacy within the EU framework, budget cuts have forced the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to curtail the reach of its diplomatic network.<sup>21</sup> Over the past years, the number of Belgian embassies (i.e. not counting permanent representations, consulates and development cooperation bureaus) has been reduced from 89 to 78.<sup>22</sup> Most significantly, Belgium has no embassy anymore in seven EU member states, namely Cyprus (now provided for from Athens), the three Baltic states (provided for from Helsinki, Stockholm and Warsaw, respectively), Malta (provided for from Rome), Slovakia and Slovenia (both provided for from Vienna). Moreover, many of the remaining Belgian intra-EU embassies are thinly stretched, often relying on an 'Ambassador plus one' or 'Ambassador plus two' structure of diplomatic personnel, and struggle to meet the

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<sup>21</sup> The contrast between Belgium and its neighbours is striking. The Dutch government has already announced additional means for its diplomatic apparatus, and explicitly refers to the increased prominence of bilateral diplomacy in Europe to strengthen not only its Permanent Representation to the EU, but also its embassies in Belgrado, Berlin, Brussels, Bucharest, Budapest, Dublin, London, Madrid, Paris, Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tirana, Vienna and Zagreb; see Stef Blok, 'Brief aan de Voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer: Uitbreiding en versterking postennet', Den Haag: Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 8 Oktober 2018, available from: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2018/10/08/kamerbrief-uitbreiding-en-versterking-postennet/kamerbrief-uitbreiding-en-versterking-postennet.pdf>. Similarly, the push to nurture and sharpen the worldwide reach of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has started, see e.g. Laurence Daziano, 'Pour une réforme majeure du Quai d'Orsay', *La Tribune*, 7 September 2018, available from: <https://www.latribune.fr/opinions/tribunes/pour-une-reforme-majeure-du-quai-d-orsay-789668.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Dirk Achten (v.u.), 'Jaarverslag 2016', Brussel: FOD Buitenlandse Zaken, Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, available from: [https://diplomatie.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/jaarverslag\\_2016\\_buitenlandse\\_zaken.pdf](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/jaarverslag_2016_buitenlandse_zaken.pdf).

critical mass threshold.<sup>23</sup> It is true that Belgian federal diplomacy is frequently accompanied and supplemented by regional diplomatic representations, export promotion authorities and the network of defence attachés, which add value to the diplomatic network too. Yet having said so, the combined efforts of different layers of government remain limited even when optimally coordinated, which itself requires resources too.

One should also be clear about the consequences of the present situation. Should this trend be allowed to persist, it is likely to render the Belgian government's understanding about what is going on inside other EU member states increasingly shallow, and make it less and less able to serve and further the interests of its own citizens and taxpayers. In fact, the extent to which the return of bilateral diplomacy has largely gone unnoticed by the wider Belgian audience proves a case in point. By neglecting or closing Belgian antennae abroad, the risk of being caught unaware by adverse developments on the European and the wider international stage increases exponentially. On the upside, Belgium derives an important boost from the double role of Brussels as national as well as European capital. Yet receiving many European visitors can only offer a partial substitute for a network generating diplomatic influence abroad.

For an EU member state like Belgium, having invested so much in European integration, it may be counter-intuitive to engage in the precarious balancing act between bilateral and multilateral approaches outlined earlier. Precisely because European disintegration constitutes the geopolitical nightmare scenario, it may be tempting to avoid such exercises altogether. Yet can Belgium truly deliver on its European vocation – to be in the cockpit of the EU, to use a popular phrase – if it does not constantly seek to understand and shape what is going on in other EU capitals? More bluntly put, is it prudent policy for Belgium not to engage with an established international trend? Recognizing the need for investing in the bilateral network is therefore equal to accept the reality that the Belgian sovereign state apparatus cannot be hollowed out any further without adverse consequences for all citizens – relating to their economic wellbeing as well as their long-term security. It is worth noting that a hollow diplomatic network severely curtails convening power abroad, whereas substantial influence in an interconnected world is premised on the need to involve all departments of government (federal as well as regional), the private sector and civil society.

If the Belgian government wishes to reinvigorate its European policy and international posture, it needs to consider reinvesting in its diplomatic network, both within and beyond the European continent. Under present circumstances, bilateral dialogue with Berlin, Paris, the Hague and Luxembourg may constitute a more effec-

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that Belgium and the Netherlands both benefit from exchanging selected diplomatic reports and sharing some facilities overseas for making ends meet.

tive means for shaping events than relying on the traditional approach of simply supporting the European Commission. As an aside, it is worth noting that the European Commission's representation to Belgium is becoming an important bilateral partner in its own right, as all member states are coming to appreciate in the context of the European Semester. In addition, the relationship with London and with all other capitals deserves diplomatic attention, too. Irrespective of the outcome of the Brexit negotiation, the UK will remain a neighbouring country, and in the EU-27 context one cannot help build consensus by talking only to those member states one already knows best. Developing a sustained dialogue with Northern, Central and Southern European member states will therefore be a precondition for articulating a full-bodied European policy. In that sense, Belgian diplomacy needs to be strengthened for ensuring and promoting the interests of all Belgian citizens, just as much as for supporting the European project as a whole.

Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations  
Rue des Petits Carmes 15, 1000 Brussels, Belgium  
[www.egmontinstitute.be](http://www.egmontinstitute.be)

Lay-out: punctilio.be

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