

Senior political figures urge overhaul of EU foreign policy

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News

A group of senior EU political figures have called for a “change in EU foreign policy” under the European Commission’s new President, Ursula von der Leyen.



Photo credit: Fotolia

They say that unless their suggestions are taken up the EU is in danger of becoming a “plaything” in geopolitics.

A letter, sent to the German official and also targeted at the EU’s other new leaders, has been signed by members of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

The list of signatures includes current and former foreign ministers, citizens of all EU Member States and other European states, prominent figures such as Carl Bildt, the former Swedish Prime Minister, British author and historian Timothy Garton Ash and former Dutch MEP Marietje Schaake.

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Others to have signed include: Douglas Alexander, chair of Unicef UK and former UK Secretary of State for International Development; Emma Bonino, a former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs; John Bruton, the former Irish Prime Minister; Ditmir Bushati, Albanian Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Maria Livanos Cattai, a former Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce.

They set out 3 specific ways that the new leadership can “empower” foreign ministers and Member States to get behind a common European foreign policy.

The first is by setting out on a quest for strategic sovereignty for Europe, making sure Europe is a player and not a “plaything in a world of great power competition”.

The second is by re-operationalising European security and defence. This, said the letter, has strong implications for Brexit as it proposes a new European Security Council which would include the UK.

“As the new leadership takes place, they must focus on upgrading EU capabilities to avoid sliding further down in global relevance” **Carl Bildt, former Swedish Prime Minister**

The third way is by building a stronger link between EU institutions in Brussels and national governments.

Bildt, who served as Prime Minister in Sweden from 1991 to 1994 and is a former foreign minister, told The Parliament Magazine, “As the new leadership takes place, they must focus on upgrading EU capabilities to avoid sliding further down in global relevance.”

He added, “The EU’s current structure allows it to potentially anticipate big crises, but it cannot protect itself or prepare countermeasures for the next problem.”

Mark Leonard, director and co-founder of the ECFR, who told this website, “The eventual appointment of Josep Borrell [as the EU’s new High Representative] offers an opportunity for a new start for European foreign policy.”

“As a foreign minister from one of the big Member States which has emerged as a power centre in the new EU, he [Borrell] has an opportunity to find ways of getting EU institutions to empower and channel the resources of foreign ministers and Member States behind a common European foreign policy.”

“The EU still has the largest market in the world, the biggest aid budgets, the largest diplomatic corps and the second highest spending on defence. If it can put these assets behind a strategic agenda, it can help its Member States become players in the 21st century, rather than the playthings of other great powers.”

The letter, seen by this website, reads, “Now that Ursula von der Leyen has been appointed European Commission President, European governments must turn their focus on how Europe can stand up for itself and its citizens.”

“Europeans are in danger of becoming hapless playthings in a tussle for pre-eminence between China, Russia, and the United States. But this can be avoided if Europeans take their destiny into their own hands” **ECFR members’ letter**

“As the world descends into geopolitical competition, Europeans are in danger of becoming hapless playthings in a tussle for pre-eminence between China, Russia, and the United States. But this can be avoided if Europeans take their destiny into their own hands.”

“The EU Member States collectively retain the biggest single market in the world, more defence spending than any power other than the USA, the world’s largest diplomatic corps and highest levels of development spending.”

“We therefore call on the new EU leadership team, who will take over in late 2019, to understand the challenge that confronts them and receive the tools they need from EU governments to change Europe’s approach to foreign policy.”

“Together with Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel, the EU Council President elect, and Josep Borrell must move quickly to find ways of getting EU institutions to empower and channel the resources of foreign ministers and Member States behind a common European foreign policy.”

The letter says that the measures they recommend will “help renew the EU and show its citizens that Europe can be the first line of defence in an increasingly uncertain world.”

About the author

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