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# Beyond ‘one voice’? Global Europe’s engagement with its own diversity

Gjovalin Macaj and Kalypso Nicolaidis

**ABSTRACT** This contribution stands as a conclusion to this collection, drawing on its empirical contributions as well as other examples of European Union (EU) foreign policy. We take the pursuit of a single voice as a core goal of EU foreign policy and ask under what conditions unity pays and conversely under what conditions it may be counterproductive. On this basis, we offer a systematic critique of the ‘one voice mantra’ correlating ‘EU unity’ and ‘EU influence’ in the global arena. We do so by distinguishing between, internally, the degree of convergence of interest between member states and, externally, the type of power relevant in the game being played. Only when interests converge and the external game is one where aggregative power matters is it plausible to assume that the pursuit of one EU voice serves the EU’s interests. At least in some cases, EU unity is not a prerequisite for EU influence, and diversity can be a source of strength rather than weakness, internally as well.

**KEY WORDS** Actorness; European Union; external action; foreign policy; one voice

‘If only, if only . . .’. This has been the battle cry of the European Union (EU)’s foreign policy armada since long before Kissinger taunted them with his apocryphal request: please give me a single phone number for Europe. If only Barack had a single phone call to make, if only we had the right institutions, if only we could act as one on the international stage. This we call the ‘one voice mantra’, a mantra whose invocation is not only endlessly repeated for its illusive powers of self-fulfilment, but which can also be counterproductive as it prevents Europeans from engaging with what they otherwise claim as their most precious asset when acting externally, namely the great diversity prevailing among EU members (Nicolaidis 2010). In short, we share the analytical focus of the editors and other contributors in this collection but take a more systematically critical stance. We believe that the issue of whether and how the EU needs to speak with one voice should not be a matter of belief but a pragmatic judgement. When does it pay? When does it make more sense for EU countries to try to better orchestrate their polyphony in a manner more conducive to their collective long-term interest? In short, under what conditions are EU efforts to achieve a single voice desirable?

To answer the question, this contribution offers a set of hypotheses building *inter alia* on some of the insights offered in this collection, through the following steps. First, we discuss definitions, lay out the standard arguments for one voice and suggest three categories of counter-arguments as to why they might be flawed *prima facie* in the existing EU. We then present our hypothesis as to the circumstances under which arguments for one voice fail to obtain across issue areas and negotiation settings. The introduction to this collection highlights three types of effects of internal cohesiveness (i.e. positive impact, no impact, negative impact) on external influence. Our approach moves further by offering a predictive model as to what combinations of factors are most likely to affect the relationship between unity and effectiveness. The EU's one voice strategy, we claim, ought to match the kind of interest configuration and power requirements of the game at hand, an intuitively straightforward hypothesis consistent with Nye's (2011) definition of smart power. Hence, we argue that the pursuit of a single voice is not always the key to the EU's external effectiveness and can even be counterproductive in some circumstances.

From this necessarily simplified, analytical framework, we draw some normative implications. The EU needs to engage with its own diversity, and the kind of radical pluralism it implies, when acting externally as it has done internally (Nicolaidis 2010; Nicolaidis and Pelabay 2009). If the case can be made that the EU is and should remain a *demos*-cracy, defined as 'a union of peoples who govern together but not as one', then it should not aspire to conduct the foreign policy of a single *demos* (Nicolaidis 2013). The one voice mantra fails to do justice to the genuine and unique contribution the EU can make to international politics on both practical and normative grounds. Even if it wanted to, the Union could never become the kind of 'normal' international actor most supporters of so-called *actorness* seem to wish it to be. What is more, attempts to make it so would serve merely to undermine those assets it currently possesses. Instead, and to draw from musical metaphors, it should better learn to orchestrate its polyphony, master the counterpoint and even, in some cases, use its cacophony constructively.

## I. THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF: DIVERSION, PERVERSE EFFECTS AND BENEFITS FOREGONE

Our argument against the assumption that EU effectiveness always rests on its cohesiveness can be deployed in three steps: (i) there are good reasons to be sceptical about the capacity of EU institutions to produce unity from diversity; (ii) if this is the case, there are costs (*diversion* and *perverse effects*) to acting as if this were not the case – this we can call the argument from necessity; (iii) there are also *benefits foregone* in pursuing one voice, benefits that could be reaped from polyphony – this we can call the argument from desirability.

**Definitions: 'one voice', cohesiveness, effectiveness**

In line with this collection, we define 'one voice' as the expression of a common position among EU member states through a single representative or negotiator. The latter can be an EU institution (Council or Commission president, High Representative) or one or several member states. We recognize that the formula 'one voice' is a colloquial term that has not acquired theoretical status in the literature on EU actorness, including in this collection, which favours the concept of internal cohesiveness, defined as 'the degree to which decision-making rules produce a single message spoken with a single voice', thus equating one voice with the rule that produces it (Conceição-Heldt and Meunier, this collection). On our part, and since we seek to propose a holistic model, we consider all expressions of EU actorness, from areas of exclusive to shared competence to areas where one or several member states may act with the tacit or explicit approval or disapproval of other member states. Our definition of one voice is close but analytically distinct from 'internal cohesiveness' since actual behaviour may differ from the rule that constrains it. Of course, the kind of competence involved constrains the behaviour of member states: in areas of exclusive competences, member states do not have a choice but to seek a common position and we agree with the editors that 'one voice' demands that member states accept the final outcome of such internal negotiations without defection. Conversely, 'one voice' is absent when several EU institutions or member states engage authoritatively with outsiders either because consensus has not been reached or because it has not been sought in the first place. This is more likely to occur outside exclusive competence.

Arguably, 'cohesiveness' is a more demanding concept than 'one voice' because, as argued by Conceição-Heldt and Meunier, it requires authority of such voice, external recognition and indeed autonomy from member states. The EU context, however, might create pressure to reach common positions without such pre-conditions in place. The editors also rule out as qualifying as one voice contexts in which states 'seek to carve out exceptions for themselves'. But the fact that the latter tends to happen, we believe, should not be defined away. It is one of the reasons why the pursuit of one voice can be counterproductive. Moreover, internal dissensus does not amount to lack of 'one voice'. Obviously, outsiders may perceive a lack of internal cohesiveness when witnessing the internal negotiation game – something almost unavoidable in any multi-level game conducted by any (at least partially democratic) complex layered polity, be it the EU, the United States (US) or India. But if a common position is arrived at, even with difficulty, and then held externally, this ought to count as 'one voice'. In other words, playing the 'hands-tied game', as both the US and the EU are notoriously apt at doing, may count as (successful) one voice strategies (Meunier 2005). Only if several actors with different positions authoritatively – e.g. with the capacity to deliver – engage with outsiders do these scenarios count as lack of one voice, whether or not the EU as such is formally recognized as competent.

How then do we propose to assess any causal relation between ‘one voice’ and ‘effectiveness’? In asking when is one voice ‘desirable’, we mean when is it ‘effective’ as defined in this volume’s introduction as the capacity of the EU collectively to shape international outcomes. However, we recognize upfront the difficulty any analyst will have in assessing the contribution of the singleness of voice to overall effectiveness of external policy (for a detailed discussion, see ECFR Scoreboard Vaïsse and Dennison [2013]). To assess whether a desirable outcome in the world has anything to do with some action taken by the EU or its member states, let alone with the fact of unity itself, is at best an exercise in probability. Correlation does not imply causation and even careful process tracing gives us at best a sense of likelihood of impact.

We also face a more specific problem with regards to the benchmark of effectiveness. It is one thing to measure it against the collective position reached by the member states, but how do we assess the effectiveness of ‘Europe’ if and when different internal EU factions seem to prefer different outcomes? We can think of various scenarios: member states may disagree on means but not ends, so the absence of an EU position regarding means or intermediate goals can coexist with achieving shared ultimate goals when it comes to certain situations or counterparts; alternatively, the ‘reputation’ or ‘presence’ or ‘relevance’ of Europe often equated with the EU by outsiders may be served in spite of the lack of an agreed position on a given issue; or member states’ shared interest may turn out to be served *ex-post facto* by a position or action undertaken by some of them even if they disagreed *ex-ante*; or it may be the case that different states have more or less readiness to experiment in foreign policy (hence the lack of common position) even if outcomes from such may be desirable for all. In sum, while one voice can never be a *sufficient* condition for external influence, it may often not be a *necessary* one either.

### Speaking with one voice might often be desirable . . .

As the literature on EU actorness often assumes and sometimes demonstrates, it can be highly desirable for the EU to speak with one voice. The need for ‘one voice’ is certainly the unrivalled mantra of both EU officialdom and scholarship on EU foreign policy, whether to applaud its presence (Cameron 2002: 119; Hill 1993; Smith 2002: 2–3) or to regret its absence (Hill 1993). In foreign policy, the pursuit of unity has repeatedly been justified on three interrelated grounds:

- First, the pursuit of unity is held up symbolically as an existential statement, a way to project a distinctive EU identity onto the world arena as a logical extension and further consolidation of the European project. For some, the ability to act externally as a state-like unit is indispensable to the very existence of the EU (Collard-Wexler 2006: 428–9).
- Second, and more concrete, is the idea of one voice as a power multiplier delivering outcomes that could not be obtained through individual state action,

e.g. the 'politics of scale' (Ginsberg 1989: 3). Because the common commercial policy with its common external representation under exclusive competences – a necessary by-product of a custom union – is usually assumed to have served this function, member states have sought to replicate its practices in other areas of external relations under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

- Finally, there is the negative argument – call it the cost of dissonance – that the pursuit of unity (for instance through an 'overall federal structure' [Hill 2002: 79]) prevents member states from pursuing contradictory policies that might annul each other (Gordon 1997: 80).

On this basis, much analysis concentrates on the extent to which 'coherence' can be achieved more efficiently in bilateral or multilateral settings (Gebhard 2011), or on the conditions under which member states act together or fail to, especially at the United Nations (UN) (Laatikainen and Smith 2006; Wouters *et al.* 2006). Analysts tend to use coherence as a yardstick for whether the EU can be considered an actor in its own right (Bretherton and Vogler 2006) or assess it as an end in itself (Cameron 2002; Keukeleire 2003).

To be sure, a few scholars have acknowledged some of the 'undesired effects' of unity at all costs (Fouwels 1997; Frieden 2004). Moreover, the value and limits of hands-tied strategies have been thoroughly analysed by Meunier (2000, 2005). But it is actually the pursuit of single positions that makes vetos effective. More generally, these caveats have generally not led to systematically questioning the value of EU unity in and of itself. Indeed, instances of presumed failure of the EU despite acting collectively (e.g. Copenhagen climate summit, UN human rights issues) are attributed to either ineffective internal co-ordination or unfavourable external conditions. Even in studies where the EU is ineffective despite acting in a united fashion, the main conclusion that unity has not been sufficient to secure EU influence does not usually imply that it might have been counterproductive (Forsberg and Seppo 2009; Macaj 2009; Smith 2010; Thomas 2012). Instead, we simply argue that 'unity pays' should be a conditional proposition.

### ... but must be pitted against the real nature of the EU

In its simplest form, ours is an argument from necessity, a reality check. The EU's complexity and duplication is unlikely to go away. Some argue that the Lisbon Treaty has served merely to exacerbate it. To find their desired interlocutor, Dr Kissinger's heirs still have to choose from a bewildering array of different numbers – or email addresses – belonging to the Chair of European Council, the High Representative, the Commission president, the head of state or government of the state holding the rotating presidency, or the Commissioner for Trade, to name but a few. Add of course every national head of state or foreign minister who in certain circumstances can also 'speak for Europe'. The insistence by member states on their right to control decisions

continues to triumph over arguments for effectiveness through one voice. The EU is not a nation state, not even in the making; it is dominated by its constituent member states which remain sovereign in most areas of foreign policy. While American foreign policy power is concentrated in Washington and individual states banned from that realm, in the Union it is dispersed among 28 national capitals. The tension between member states jealously guarding their prerogatives and the need for concerted action is also to be found within and among EU institutions themselves. Thus, while the Commission controls the EU's foreign policy budget and looks after aid, trade and other 'soft' aspects of security policy, member states rule supreme when it comes to even the civilian elements of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Fragmentation, both vertically between the Union and its member states and horizontally between EU institutions themselves, defines the limits of the possible in EU foreign policy. The Union cannot project power in the clear, coherent and single-minded way that 'normal' great powers have sometimes managed to attain or at least aspire to. It is hard to argue that the need for greater coherence both vertically and horizontally is not desirable (Börzel and Risse 2012). But a 'single voice' is but one possible translation of the imperative of coherence. Its benefits must be pitted against the costs that flow from this picture along three lines of argument.

#### *The diversion argument*

If pursuing EU unity comes at a cost, the first such is to divert attention, resources and political capital from better uses. Simply put, the energy involved in the internal politics could be better spent elsewhere, including in engaging with counterparts. The tendency to consider success in the very process of reaching internal consensus as a proxy for effectiveness is a well-known EU disease. For member states to agree on a position before presenting it externally obviously requires extensive bargaining and co-ordination which may mean that they miss the train externally; or the very fact of a common position being considered a success may lead them to subsequently drop the ball. The one voice requirement cannot only bring with it delusions of success, but such delusion in turn increases its introvertedness (Bickerton 2011). Time-consuming internal games are not specific to the EU. Contrary to other multi-level polity, however, the EU is also multi-centred, with alternative centres of external competence and therefore a much wider spectrum of alternatives to agreement for each state that can thus resist concessions more easily.

The same is true at a meta level, where much energy is misspent proposing institutional fixes to the coherence problem in spite of the simple structural fact of power dispersion and the commitment of member states to maintaining their prerogatives in the EU means. Delegating more power to the central institutions is not a solution since member states' differing preferences will (justifiably) remain a constraint and will tend merely to exacerbate a sense of creeping incompetence that serves to bring the whole enterprise into disrepute.



*The perverse effect argument*

The second category of arguments against the obsession with one voice states that the exercise can not only be a waste of time and resources but can actually be counterproductive. For one, the pursuit of *one voice*, especially in multilateral forums, can reinforce perceptions of 'bullying' and obliviousness to the costs for third countries of an agreed-upon EU position. Isolated bullying behaviour by specific EU states (e.g. France or the United Kingdom [UK]), while unhelpful, is not sufficient to generate sustained bloc reaction from third countries, which can still engage with the rest of the EU states. In situations of complex negotiations in the UN, for instance, the process of producing EU positions leads to hierarchical interactions with counterparts and inflexible 'take-it-or-leave-it' approaches which tend to alienate third countries including potential (ad hoc) allies. This increases the perception of the EU as a monolithic bloc and intensifies counter-bloc dynamics, which can derail substantive deliberation. Often, the one voice thus achieved can be strong enough to limit independent action from member states, but too weak to increase their collective weight. In extreme cases, fruitless efforts to produce one voice at all costs despite irreconcilable divergences can result in complete inaction.

Perverse effects also materialize internally. Frieden (2004) is the only author to have considered the costs of collective positions for individual member states, especially on preference outliers. With unequal gains from common positions, efforts to reach compromise can exacerbate political conflict between member states not only in the short run but in the long run as the domestic costs for preference outliers may decrease the sustainability of agreements. This in turn can undermine the credibility of the EU as a whole.

*The benefits foregone argument*

The previous two categories of criticism call for making the best out of necessity (e.g. the reality of EU member states). But there are also positive reasons for moving beyond the one voice mantra that have to do with the benefits foregone in the systematic pursuit of common positions and actions. At a most general level, this is the flipside of the existential argument, the idea that the EU's reputation and external credibility thrive also on diversity. The 'power of superpowerlessness' (Nicolaïdis 2005) involves *inter alia* foregoing the coercive power for which unflinching unity of purpose is paramount (Moravcsik and Nicolaïdis 2005). The rationale of one voice as a way of bolstering EU identity should not override that of multiple voices as a way of bolstering its effectiveness.

More specifically, if there is a 'cost of dissonance' justifying the pursuit of one voice, there can be benefits to speaking with a multiplicity of accents, emphasis and even messages. Recognition of legitimate differences rather than their denial can strengthen expectations of reciprocity among member states by avoiding clashes over core interests. Foregoing the pursuit of one voice can be a way to counter the use of inaction as a mode of coping with deeply divisive matters. Merely because the EU cannot or does not act in a particular crisis is not to say that 'Europe' has been similarly impotent. Over and

above whatever the EU can or will do, its member states retain their capacity and desire to act independently and serve European interests in the process to the extent that outsiders value such action. That they will continue to do so is a good thing.

In some cases diversifying the EU's foreign policy portfolio is the best way of leveraging its internal diversity. Combining different negotiation strategies and actors can allow for fruitful experimentation in foreign policy and thus better responses to the demands of a fluid negotiation environment. And explicitly taking different positions externally can bolster the EU's credibility as 'another kind of actor', including as a relatively impartial mediating power attentive to the interests of different sides in a conflict or on a critical issue. Strength in numbers may come from disaggregation rather than aggregation, distributed intelligence rather than centralized control.

## II. WHEN DOES UNITY PAY? A SIMPLE MODEL

These arguments may be convincing but when do they hold against the idea that the EU should strive for one voice anyway? We propose a simple model to address this question focusing on two key internal and external variables, and we add a prescriptive dimension over and above our predictive analysis to start to characterize an alternative to the one voice mantra.

### **Internal variable: convergence of preferences**

First, and most commonsensically, the costs of the pursuit of unity are a function of the degree of convergence of interests among member states. National preferences vary along many dimensions including welfare, productivity, incomes, forms of representative democracy, national integration model, economic and military interests, conceptions on the use of force, worldviews and historical affinities with different countries and regions of the world. These differences can translate into different positions, especially when confronted with concrete problems creating tangible short- or long-term effects. There are clearly degrees in preference divergence that can be more or less difficult to overcome through the pursuit of a single voice: different preference rankings, preference intensities on different dimensions of an issue or different assessment of the best strategies to realize any of these preferences. The costs of pursuing one voice can be especially high if member states diverge over common objectives (substantive divergence) as well as ways to attain them (strategic divergence). The expression 'lowest common denominator' connotes not only a necessary ill, but the fact that the process by which a common position is arrived at, as well as the substance of that position itself, is unlikely to buy much externally when covering up significantly divergent preferences.

### External variable: relevant power

Whatever the configuration of interests within the EU, the characteristics of the external context in which the EU operates also affect the costs and benefits of pursuing a single voice. While there is much that can be considered relevant in this regard, we isolate what we believe to be key by asking: what is the 'currency of influence' or 'relevant power' in the game at hand? In other words, does the kind of politics of scale emphasized by 'one voice advocates' matter here? As we know from debates in international relations, operationalizing power is no simple matter. The fact that EU states, acting singly or collectively, possess multiple types of power resources does not imply that they can draw influence from them in all settings at all times. Not even the US, with its manifold preponderant power, can get its way in many important issues, such as with regard to the creation of the International Criminal Court or even in trade disputes. Following neoliberal institutionalists, the effectiveness of different types of power depends mostly on the issue area and patterns of interdependence, in short, the kind of 'game' that is being played.

On this basis, we can distinguish between two ideal typical situations – those where the kind of power that matters is *aggregative* and those where it is *diffuse* – and we expect that the pursuit of unity will matter more, the more aggregative power matters. Games where aggregative power matters are those where overall power resources (such as military capabilities and market power) can effectively be translated into issue-specific power, which in turn depends on whether the issue itself is linked to the application of such resources, whether power is fungible across issue areas and, crucially, whether the EU's counterparts have concentrated power. Alternatively, the relevant power in the game at hand may be more diffuse when power resources are less fungible across issues and influence is more likely to derive from communicative action, persuasion and diplomatic skills rather than coercion, scale and size. Settings characterized by power diffusion mitigate power asymmetries and create room for 'smaller' countries to exert their influence, including through coalition building. This distinction does not correspond straightforwardly with that between hard and soft power to the extent that, for instance, soft power may be derived alternatively from a united front or from a show of diversity (Nye 2011).

### Does unity pay? Four constellations

We derive four distinct scenarios from the combination of these two dimensions, each with distinct prescriptive implications for the desirability of one voice (Table 1). To put our hypothesis in the framework adopted in this collection, our first scenario corresponds approximately to Configuration 1, which correlates internal cohesiveness with external effectiveness, while our other three scenarios correspond to negative or non-existent correlation (what the editors label Configurations 2 and 3). Importantly, the scenarios we present are not categorical but *probabilistic* statements: one voice is likely to be more

Table 1 Does unity pay? Four constellations

EXTERNAL GAME Relevant Power?	INTERNAL DYNAMICS Convergence of preferences?	
	High	Low
Aggregative	(1) Unity generally pays <i>One Voice</i>	(3) Strategic disunity can pay <i>The Counterpoint</i>
Diffuse	(2) Division of labour can pay <i>Orchestrated Polyphony</i>	(4) Empathic diversity can pay <i>Constructive Cacophony</i>

or less desirable under different scenarios and therefore it may still be the case that ‘unity pays’ under some variants of all four scenarios.

(1) *When unity pays (‘one voice’)*

This first configuration constitutes our baseline simply because member states’ preferences often converge, and external games are often sensitive to aggregative power. Unsurprisingly, the pursuit of ‘one voice’ is often the preferred mode of action, as illustrated by most contributions in this collection which find a positive correlation between cohesiveness and effectiveness (Conceição-Heldt, Börzel and van Hüllen, Meunier, Panke). We see at least three lines of causation. First, when the external game lends itself to using access to the EU’s single market of 500 million consumers as a bargaining chip and when member states can all agree to use this currency of power. ‘Market power’ is the ultimate expression of aggregative power but can only be exploited in common since the market is a shared good (Damro 2012). Such advantages of scale are clear both in bilateral trade negotiations such as the EU–Mexico trade agreement (Conceição-Heldt) and in multilateral trade negotiations when the EU engages on the offensive to open foreign markets (Meunier 2000, 2005; Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006); it is also potentially a tool in the EU’s arsenal when linked to other issue areas. To be sure, market power can be misused and subject to group-think.

Second, EU member states may be concerned with *visibility* where a united front through a single representation can be key to symbolic power. When the EU engages the US or Chinese president at a summit meeting, such a single representation can signal singleness of purpose that will make counterparts listen. When facing powerful actors who may or may not themselves be united (think of internal contestation within the Chinese leadership) but nevertheless act *as if*, acting in concert is simply a way to level the playing field. But of course, projection does not conjure up that which is being projected and such a

strategy can only avoid the pitfalls discussed under the diversion argument if member states' interests truly converge.

Third, there may be intra-European consensus on certain principles (say respect for the rule of law in the judiciary) where the lack of unity directly contradicts the kind of principled consistency the EU seeks to signal, undermining the credibility of both the EU and the member states. This is often the case when the EU fails to unite behind 'human rights' positions in bilateral negotiations *vis-à-vis* China or Russia. But here again, collective action is not necessarily costless as issues of turf and political expediency intervene.

(2) *The case for division of labour ('orchestrated polyphony')*

By contrast, one voice is less likely to increase EU influence in settings in which the relevant or issue-specific power is diffuse power, even when the preferences of member states converge. Some power settings neutralize or at least dampen the effects of scale asymmetries. The benefits of division of labour are the familiar part of the argument: in a world of networks, each member state can exploit its special links around the world and interact with specific groups of countries both in their own stead and 'in the name' of Europe, more or less formally – whether Britain with the commonwealth, France with Francophonie, Spain with Latin America, Poland with the eastern neighbourhood, or indeed France, Spain, Italy and Greece with North African countries. But the point here is not only that individual EU states can build on their separate historical ties with different parts of the world (a proposition which itself needs to be problematized in a post-colonial era). The attractiveness of the EU as a whole can also increase through putting its internal diversity 'on offer' – call this *menu diplomacy*. A comparison between EU and US external 'promotion' of the rule of law is a case in point, where the EU can adopt a more flexible and customized approach thanks to its own range of national legal traditions (Nicolaïdis and Kleinfeld 2012). This can be true for ongoing relations or one-off conflict management.

As a result, the EU as a whole could arguably increase its leverage by communicating variants of its message through several voices, in short by better 'orchestrating its polyphony'. As with the environmental negotiations discussed by Delreux in this collection, there are clear benefits foregone when muting more persuasive member states in multilateral settings such as the UN or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), characterized by diffuse power structures where many actors are involved. The EU's efforts to craft common positions in these two settings produce (with few exceptions) weak and skewed responses to third country initiatives and inconsequential EU initiatives. It is an irony that while the EU often holds minority positions in, say, the UN Human rights Council, it routinely delivers them as take-it-or-leave-it proposals.

In a Lockean-type anarchy, where norms, rules and institutions create a space for more inclusive decision making, orchestrated polyphony can be powerful and smaller actors speak louder. When interacting with a large number of

participants, EU states can benefit from emphasizing the manifold aspects of a congruent argument, delivering variants of a position with different accents. And when EU positions face strong resistance from third parties, allowing multiple EU voices to be heard can offset rival radical voices. Thus, and paradoxically, it is when interests converge albeit in a diffuse power setting that the ‘benefits foregone’ argument may hold most sway.

In sum, we need to consider the constellation of instances that create an opportunity for member states to unleash their manifold potential and engage with third countries from different angles and perspectives where their respective idiosyncrasies can help to better connect with different countries and their sensitivities. In orchestrating its polyphony, the EU should experiment with a light version of collective action that does not involve more than a simple division of labour and use of common resources and expertise.

### (3) *Benefits of strategic disunity ('the counterpoint')*

The question of whether EU unity ought to be pursued at high cost becomes especially pressing when the preferences of member states diverge substantially even as they engage in games where aggregative power matters on the external front. In this context, we argue, member states need to consider the real costs of bringing preference outliers into the fold and balance them with the real benefits of unity in credibly facing outside actors (i.e. few powerful players). Countries that are internally divided are obliged to take sides or abstain on contentious issues, while EU states can occupy multiple positions with positive externalities for the Union as a whole.

In these contexts, the metaphorical alternative we suggest to one voice is that of *counterpoint*, which involves the writing of musical lines that sound very different and move independently from each other both in rhythm and contour. The great challenge here is that even with counterpoint, the whole remains harmonically interdependent. In other words, disunity between member states is usually a fact, not a strategic choice, but this fact can under certain circumstances be strategically exploited. Hence the idea of *strategic disunity*, under which EU states pursue separate positions on the external front as the best response to the context in which they operate. Beyond a simple accommodation of differences, strategic disunity implies that discord be managed self-reflectively to turn policy differences into assets by gaining better access to different actors in a complex external game. Thus, strategic disunity differs from ‘hands-tied’ tactics (Meunier 2000; Meunier and Nicolaidis 1999) whereby an internal veto is endorsed and used by an EU speaking with one voice.

Instead, we have in mind other classic strategies, including ‘good cop, bad cop’ strategies whereby member states take on different roles connecting to different constituencies; or what we could call ‘normative disaggregation’ where alternative courses of action may be ‘equally’ defensible in the face of a policy dilemma where ‘principled consistency’ may lead to various kinds of



perverse effects; or 'hedging' to cope with high degrees of uncertainty, where different states 'bet' on different future outcomes and scenarios. The 2011 intervention in Libya by France and Britain could be analysed along these lines. When their preferences converge, the kind of division of labour we advocate above among member states (Constellation 2) may be seen a matter of choice, but here they are faced with a hard constraint: the need to find ways to cope with fundamentally different preferences in settings where the relevant power is aggregative (such as market access or access to EU membership).

Let us use the 'Kosovo question' as an example. This is a game where aggregative power seems to matter (the EU's with its capacity to offer the promise of membership to the parties involved; the other side's in their capacity to deliver) but member states disagreed fundamentally over the 2007 UN plan on 'supervised independence' and famously took different sides on the recognition of Kosovo independence with five member states defecting for fear of the precedent that recognition would create. Yet such substantial internal divisions did not prevent the EU from developing a policy towards Kosovo similar to other countries in Southeast Europe (Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2010). The dissenting ('good cop') member states kept negotiating channels open with Serbia and Russia while recognition by a majority (and *de facto* by EU institutions) proved sufficient to deploy the EULEX mission, the largest civilian CSDP mission ever launched. Normatively, both sides could be said to support legitimate norms themselves in tension in the international system, namely the right to self-determination and territorial integrity. It can be argued that when Catherine Ashton successfully brokered a landmark interim deal for the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo in the spring of 2013, she benefitted from the trust built up on each side by different member states. Notwithstanding the analytical limits of counterfactuals, a quest for unanimous recognition as a prerequisite for engagement would have likely resulted either in paralysis or in total alienation of Serbia in this volatile transition phase. On another front, and somewhat ironically, it would have deprived the EU of a precious diplomatic argument to oppose Russia's recognition of Georgia's break-away provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Against Russia's unashamed use of the 'Kosovo precedent', the likes of Greece and Spain were able to play (a credible and consistent) bad cop to Germany's good cop routine – a stance Russia could not easily dismiss. Regardless of the final outcome, the EU's diplomatic clout was increased rather than diminished by its own disunity, with member states earning it trust on both sides of the Kosovo–Serbia divide. Disunity allowed the EU to hedge its bets where the recognition of Kosovo can be seen with hindsight as both a principled stance and an encouragement of Russia's subsequent invasion of Georgia. In sum, simply accepting the fact of preference divergence and reflectively dealing with the resulting plurality of positions can sometimes benefit the Union as a whole.

Similarly, the split between member states on how to respond to the highly volatile situation created by the Arab Spring has been seen as a failure of the EU to 'get its act together' (Devuyst 2012). This may be true. But given existing

differences between member states in terms of economic interests, migrant and diaspora ties and, crucially, military capacity, acting only on the basis of full consensus would have meant foregoing much of the (admittedly low) influence gained from active engagement of either the EU or its member states. As the case of the Libyan intervention perhaps best illustrates, and whatever one's reading of its desirability, the separate action of some EU states may have allowed a degree of presence of EU states and allowed the EU to hedge its bets. In the Libyan case, aggregative (military) power mattered but such power delivered by the member states that chose intervention was sufficient. This does not mean that all national initiatives, especially in cases when they face opposition rather than ambivalence on the part of fellow member states, serve European interests!

(4) *The value of empathetic diversity ('constructive cacophony')*

Finally, the value added of EU unity becomes even more questionable when seeking to harmonize diverging national preferences may not be called for by a context in which issue-specific power is distributed among many actors with a wide array of positions and assets. In such contexts, not only does EU unity keep member states from achieving their potential individually but it can fail to serve them collectively as well.

The alternative metaphor to one voice that we prescribe could be referred to as 'constructive cacophony', a term used in communication sciences to refer to the use of multiple channels in an ordered way, as is increasingly made possible in virtual worlds. In this scenario, the EU and its member states can choose to exercise 'empathetic diversity' connecting through its multiple tentacles to all actors involved in the external game. Empathetic diversity can help achieve a kind of pluralist leadership and mediating role for an EU keen to demonstrate its normative powerhood (Nicolaidis and Whitman 2013). In short, the kind of flexibility and adaptability that allow actors to enlarge their zones of possible agreement and explore options creatively is dramatically less likely to be achieved when unity is pursued as an end in itself in settings that do not reward it.

Drawing again on the case of the UN Human Rights Council, common positions when member states' preferences diverge have often meant that the most progressive member states have conceded before ever interacting with their UN counterparts, whether with regards to social and economic rights (e.g. Portugal, Spain) or civil and political rights (e.g. Denmark, Sweden). Hence, the EU has come to oppose measures to fight racism and discrimination at the global level, despite the inconsistency with internal EU law pointed out by outlier states. At the 2009 Durban review conference, for instance, the obsessive preoccupation over whether to engage or disengage as 'EU' prevented the member states from engaging constructively. On another front, while member states hold substantively different views on how to react to human rights violations in Palestine, they remain virtually absent from the debates. This not only undermines the EU's legitimacy as a self-proclaimed 'champion of human rights' but it



also and rather ironically gives additional space to notorious rights offenders like Pakistan, Syria or Egypt to skew the Council's actions towards rights violations committed by Israel.

We believe that under such circumstances, EU divisions should open the door for action rather than inaction. EU actors are more likely to have an impact and ultimately serve EU influence as a whole, through active, albeit separate, engagement along different points on the spectrum, which would also prevent notorious rights offenders from monopolizing the process and outcomes. In many similar examples – from the establishment of the International Criminal Court to the Mine Ban Treaty – the EU's capacity to empathize with all sides increased its influence.

## CONCLUSION

Many of those who champion a more assertive global role for the Union fail to draw the implications of the profound changes taking place in the international system and the simple fact that the world is becoming decidedly non-European. The notion that simply upscaling – replacing assertive national foreign policies with an assertive and unified European one – can recreate European global influence is a chimera. If the defining feature of the Union is its novelty, it is strange that its observers envisage for it a traditional role as a traditional power with a unified centre.

Our vision must be more daring. In a broad sense, the case can be made that if EU influence in a non-European world rests in part in being a different kind of power, a post-colonial power, such kind of powerhood is sometimes best served by differentiation between its member states, including with regards to the echoes of empire that still resonate around the globe and at the core of Europe itself (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013). Fragmentation of the right kind can help save Europeans from themselves.

Concretely, we have argued that instead of making the pursuit of a single voice the core aim of its foreign policy, the EU needs to own up to its own diversity on the external front as well as internally. In many realms of external action, the interests of member states may differ sharply while they are facing a multifaceted and multi-faced environment externally. Under these circumstances, the yearning for unity in foreign policy is not only a pipe dream but can be counterproductive. At a minimum, we have suggested that the EU's disunity turns out to be not that bad in a variety of cases. Maybe the Union's partners should stop demanding a single phone number and learn to use a directory instead. At least in some cases, it could prove to be well worth the effort.

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