

Leading in a turbulent world

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Interviews

From Venezuela to Afghanistan, Federica Mogherini has been the EU's go-to person on foreign policy for the last five years. In an increasingly unstable world, she tells Rajnish Singh that the EU's emphasis on international cooperation is not only relevant but crucial.



Photo credit: European Commission Audiovisual

How would you characterise international politics at present? Is the world a more dangerous place today than at the start of your term?

Yes, it is. It is a world of international power struggles and, at the same time, power is more spread out. Centres of powers have multiplied, and this makes our security less stable. That's why multilateralism and the work to build 'win-win' solutions are more important than ever. A more multipolar world needs strong multilateral governance to prevent chaos.

We, the EU, have stood up alongside our friends and allies, in firm defence of multilateralism. We

have worked to preserve the UN system and some of the great multilateral achievements we have contributed to; from the nuclear deal with Iran to the Paris agreement on climate change.

We have also tried to create new multilateral structures to find solutions to the crises of our times – from Venezuela to Afghanistan. This is the only antidote to the current international instability and unpredictability.

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How successful has the EU's global strategy been in ensuring the sovereignty and integrity of Europe from external pressures, and guaranteeing its leadership globally?

In the difficult world I have just described, the European Union is our best way, as Europeans, to regain sovereignty. This was one of the central ideas of the Global Strategy; none of our Member States individually has the strength nor the resources to address the challenges of our time alone, but together we are a global power.

With this approach in mind, we have taken great strides forward to creating a European Union of security and defence. We have established the first ever EU external policy on migration and have become the main international actor when it comes to protecting multilateralism. We have strengthened our strategic autonomy while also investing heavily in our global network of partnerships.

By doing so, we have become a point of influence for all those working towards a more cooperative global order. While other powers are redefining their approach to global security issues, our partners rely on us more than ever.

Do you believe EU-US relations can survive a Trump presidency, and what are the current challenges and opportunities for further cooperation with Washington?

The close ties between the US and EU are deeply rooted in both of our societies. The US helped us to defeat fascism and Nazism during WWII and supported us in rebuilding our continent. This is something we Europeans cannot forget. However, our relationship has changed over time.

The EU has its own principles, interests and European way of achieving peace, security and development. Cooperation and coordination with our Transatlantic partner is always our first choice. However, we now also have all the tools and capabilities at our disposal to act when we need to.

One such area is in our unwavering support for multilateralism and global rules. Others are the Iran nuclear deal, or the peace process between Israel and Palestine. There is sometimes a false idea that the EU and US no longer work together for the same aims; this is simply not true. Look at Ukraine, the Western Balkans, or counter-terrorism.

The US remains a close friend and partner across many of the most pressing issues of our time. At the same time, we are ready to protect our interests and our values when the US has chosen a different approach.

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How big a blow was the US withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Agreement and what should be the EU's strategy when dealing with Iran?

Four years ago, we finally reached an unprecedented agreement in the history of nuclear non-proliferation. The nuclear deal with Iran, as unanimously backed by the UN Security Council, was a crucial step for the security in the region, for Europe, and beyond.

We deeply regret Washington's withdrawal and unilateral re-imposition of sanctions. Taking several actions to preserve the agreement and its benefits for all, including the update of our Blocking Statute (which protects EU companies from the laws of external countries), and support the work of France, Germany and the UK on "INSTEX" (a trade system to circumvent US sanctions).

At the same time, we are also committed to maintaining cooperation with the US, which remains a key partner and ally. Meanwhile, we continue working for Iran's return to full compliance with the nuclear deal. The JCPoA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) allowed us to open a dialogue with Iran on other crucial issues.

Without a nuclear deal, none of the current disputes we have with Iran will be any easier to tackle. We will be critical when there are differences and cooperative when there are mutual interests. Though preserving the agreement is becoming increasingly difficult, respecting international agreements and safeguarding shared international security concerns remains our common objective.

How fearful are you of political instability in the Balkans and is the EU showing enough commitment to help stabilise the region?

The Western Balkans is at the heart of Europe, sharing the same history, cultural heritage, challenges and opportunities. During my mandate we have made the region a key priority and as a result all of our partners have taken important steps in their path towards membership.

Together we have achieved some crucial gains; the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia, important progress - despite some difficult setbacks - in the talks between Belgrade and Pristina and crucial reforms across the region and in each of the six partners we have in the Western Balkans.

Most importantly, we have contributed to creating a completely new awareness among the leaders and the people of the region, that cooperation among them is more useful than confrontation. No other power has the same potential as the EU to be a force of peace, stability and economic growth in the Western Balkans.

No other presence can be compared to the influence and weight of the EU in each of the Western Balkan partners. But we must continue advancing on the path towards the reunification of our continent if we do not want to foster disillusion in the Western Balkans and force our partners to turn their backs on us.

On the Iran Nuclear Agreement: "We deeply regret the US withdrawal and unilateral reimposition of sanctions. We took several actions to preserve the agreement and its benefits for all"

On a personal level, of the many world leaders you have met during your term, who stands out in your memory and why?

Barack Obama, for always believing in the possibility of change: he strove for goals that seemed impossible to achieve and he made the impossible become reality. King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein of Jordan for his wisdom; he has governed a country surrounded by conflicts and has always been a voice of rationality in the face of chaos. And Shimon Peres, who passed away two years ago: even in the darkest moments, he never lost hope in peace and never stopped working to turn hope into reality.

Developing enhanced security and defence cooperation has been one of your priorities. What have been the main accomplishments in this area and what more needs to be done over the coming years?

Since the launch of the Global Strategy initiative, this has enhanced European defence and our capacity to make autonomous foreign policy decisions and to support our closest allies in the event of a crisis. This does not mean working unilaterally; it means strengthening the multilateral system through our actions. This is usually termed 'strategic autonomy.' I, however see it as 'cooperative autonomy.'

Today, Member States can invest, research, train and now act together. We have created tools which will allow EU capitals to spend defence budgets more effectively by avoiding duplication and achieve the full spectrum of defence capabilities that are required in the 21st century. What we have achieved on defence is a huge leap forward, but at the same time it is only the first step ahead.

The Permanent Structured Cooperation is a powerful tool, but it is now up to national governments to make the most out of it and to continue building on it. Also, the European Peace Facility will now have to become a reality. Making full use of our military potential is only a matter of political will.

Will the withdrawal of the UK from the EU undermine the EU's standing in the world? What do you think the post-Brexit challenges will be and how will the EU adapt to the loss of one of its largest members?

One thing is clear: when the United Kingdom does leave the EU, neither of us will win. We stand to lose a Member State that contributes a great deal, especially on foreign policy, but the UK stands to lose more.

However, a European Union of 27 Member States will continue to be the biggest market in the world and the second largest economy. The EU is our best tool to 'take back control' in today's globalised world.

True, the UK is a valuable player on security and defence, but the contribution it makes to our military operations is not more than five percent. We will remain indispensable for our partners and will continue to work closely with the UK. I do not see Brexit having a negative impact on the EU's global standing.

"To preserve the international multilateral system, the EU needs to continue on the path

of greater unity, consistency and integration as well as global engagement and commitment"

In a world that is dominated by powers who believe in nationalism rather than international cooperation, does the EU's emphasis on issues such as development, climate change and human rights still play an important role?

The EU's emphasis on international cooperation is not only relevant but is crucial. No individual country can have a major impact on important challenges such as climate change, sustainable development and human rights if it acts alone.

This is an important lesson: we can only have an effective and sustainable impact by working together. We have become a point of reference in protecting this approach. We have a responsibility to protect and preserve, but also to expand the multilateral system in today's complex environment.

This is what makes the EU one of the most effective actors in dealing with international matters. Our Global Strategy is based on the premise that multilateralism is the best way to find sustainable solutions to the great issues of our times, bringing more voices and countries together.

To preserve the multilateral system, the EU needs to continue on the path of greater unity, consistency and integration, as well as global engagement and commitment. Those working for positive change know that they can count on our support.

About the author

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