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Malta's Foreign and Security Policy in Twenty Years
of EU Membership: A Small State's Strengths and
Weaknesses in World Politics

RODERICK PACE

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Malta's Foreign and Security Policy in Twenty Years of EU Membership: A Small State's Strengths and Weaknesses in World Politics

Roderick Pace ¹

Abstract

Malta's diminutive stature in world politics significantly influences its international strategy. Leading up to and following its accession to the European Union, Malta underwent a transformation that solidified its integration within Europe, particularly in foreign policy matters. Simultaneously, Malta has upheld its stance of active neutrality, skilfully adjusting to both global demands and EU requirements, thereby steering clear of disengagement from European policies. Joining the EU opened doors for Malta to the European single market and the wider world economy, bolstering its security and driving change across various sectors. Nonetheless, a thorough understanding of Malta's international relations approach is incomplete without considering its internal political dynamics. Maltese politics are notably divided, with a general trend of disagreement prevailing. Yet, this division has not hindered the country from reaching a unified stance during pivotal moments, such as the adoption of permanent neutrality in its constitution in 1987 and the decision to join the EU in 2004. This paper succinctly outlines Malta's international relations since its independence in 1964 and delves in more detail into the impact of EU membership on its foreign policy.

Keywords:

Small states,
Europeanization,
active neutrality,
PESCO,
Mediterranean,
Parliamentary
Diplomacy

Introduction: The Context

Independence and Key Events

In 2024, Malta commemorates three events that have shaped its contemporary politics: the sixtieth anniversary of independence, the fiftieth anniversary since it became a republic and the twentieth anniversary of EU membership. Independence heralded the acquisition of statehood based on a constitution and democratic institutions, an independent foreign policy and the freedom to choose foreign alignments which Warrington (2005, p.1) calls the other face of sovereignty. In the first years of independence, Malta sought international recognition for its statehood by joining the United Nations (UN) (1964) and the Council of Europe (CoE) (1965) and by concluding treaties with other states. Malta's interest in joining NATO was rejected by some of the alliance's members and hence could not progress. In 1970, Malta concluded an Association Agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC). In 1972, a new Defence Treaty was signed

¹ Roderick Pace is a full-time Professor, a resident academic member of staff at the Institute for European Studies of the University of Malta. Contact: roderick.pace@um.edu.mt

with Britain which fixed 1979 as the date when all British military forces were to pull out of Malta. In 1973 Malta joined the non-aligned movement (NAM) and in 1981, two years after the closure of the UK military bases, Malta adopted the status of permanent neutrality based on non-alignment. In 1987, neutrality was entrenched in the constitution by an act of parliament. Forty years after independence, Malta became an EU member state and in 2008 it joined the euro-zone.

Globalisation and Foreign Policy

Traditionally, foreign policy refers to a state's strategy of developing relations with other states and participating in multilateral organizations. It involves bilateral relations, the establishment of diplomatic ties and the exchange of ambassadors. 'External Relations' cover a broader set of activities beyond traditional foreign policy, comprising trade, the environment, security, cultural projection/relations and cross-border health to cite a few examples. Globalization and interdependence have weakened national control of key policy areas and blurred policy boundaries prodding states into joining hands to reassert joint-management in some policy areas as in the case of global warming, migration and pandemics. Diplomacy is no longer the preserve of the traditional diplomat and although Ministries of Foreign Affairs still maintain the leading and often co-ordinating role, they increasingly rely on cooperation with castes of diplomats specialised in trade, IT and climate change. Parliamentary diplomacy has gained saliency as a parallel activity along executive diplomacy. Contemporary international challenges are multi-dimensional: for example, climate diplomacy involves environmental, developmental, economic, security and external relations issues that require inter-ministerial coordination at national level. The impact of growing geo-economic fragmentation and protectionism may continue to slow globalization, but is unlikely to return the world to where it originally started from. The re-emergence of major impact wars such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza and the wider tensions involving Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, the Gulf and the Red Sea fan the embers of uncertainty while acute polarisation characterises the relations between the powers and fragments the world as never before. The world is also witnessing a weakening of multilateralism. It is this situation which a small state like Malta confronts in the realm of world politics.

Methodology: Three approaches to the analysis

This paper on Malta's foreign policy during the first 20 years of EU membership, draws from three research approaches: small state theories, 'Europeanization' and 'de-Europeanization' and the role of national preferences. Small state theories shed light on why small states seek to join the EU; Europeanization facilitates a better understanding of how EU membership influences their foreign policy by reference to Malta; the study of national preferences helps explore the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy and why small states resist the sub-summation of aspects of national foreign policy under a collective EU approach which might propel them towards forms of de-Europeanisation.

Small State Theories

Considering that the puzzle of defining a small state is inconclusive, this paper avoids delving into this issue. The World Bank and the Commonwealth define a small state as one with a population

below 1.5 million. In the EU, four member states fit into this category: Malta with a population of 0.52 million (NSO, 2022), Estonia (1.3m), Cyprus (0.9m) and Luxembourg (0.6m) (Eurostat, 2023). Small states join the EU to address shared vulnerabilities arising from their smallness and for dissimilar reasons related to their individual history and geopolitical location. Alesina and Spolaore (2003) argue that free trade enables small states to overcome the limitations of their small domestic market. For small European states the EU is a gateway to free trade. EU membership provides small states with unfettered access to the internal market and opportunities in the global economy via the Union's trade agreements with practically all countries of the world. Research and innovation programmes help small states upgrade their productive capacities and transfers from the EU budget lubricate their national development (Briguglio, 2016).

Another attraction for small states is security in its wider meaning. Asymmetry in power in comparison to most other states in the international system is the core vulnerability of a small state. Baldur Thorhallsson's shelter theory hypothesizes that small states align with a bigger country or a group of countries such as the EU or the EEA to address economic, societal and political vulnerabilities. These alignments do not always work to perfection and as Thorhallsson admits the EEA did not meet Iceland's expectations during the 2007-8 financial crisis (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2016). Societal vulnerability refers to the risk of social, cultural and educational stagnation linked to smallness. Island societies, small populations, limited resources and at times geographic remoteness and insularity magnify these vulnerabilities, and stagnate legal reforms (Sayers, 2007). These are partially mitigated by modern communications networks and easier means of travel which open a view of the world to the small, otherwise isolated societies, but EU membership can help small European states avoid the stagnation trap, primarily because member states have to implement national reform programmes for the adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire*, and after membership implementing EU law and policies, leading to the regeneration and *aggiornamento* of national law and policies, which is a characteristic of Europeanisation. Europeanisation also influences national foreign policies because small states tend to wield greater influence in international affairs when they collaborate with others, than when they act independently. Such collaboration inevitably leaves a mark on their national foreign policy.

Small states' alignment with a single power or "band-wagoning" in search of "shelter", can erode a small state's sovereignty and lead to a patron-client relationship. In contrast, while EU membership limits national sovereignty, member states participate in the Union's decision-making institutions, in effect pooling their sovereignty. The extent of the loss of national sovereignty depends on the structure of regionalism.

Europeanization

'Europeanization' signalled a new phase in the study of European integration, partially eclipsing the era of grand theories. The genesis of the concept runs deep² and it has attracted attention from

2 In the context of the UK's membership of the European Communities, Helen Wallace (1973) claimed that membership presented Governments with new commitments necessitating the incorporation of an expanding community dimension in a wide range of national policy sectors. In turn, governments contributed to policy-making in the Community's institutions according to their 'national interests'. Wallace did not refer explicitly to 'Europeanisation', but indubitably she had identified the kernel of the subject. Wallace observed that "community business could not be hived off from domestic policy and the need to 'think European' was adopted as the guiding principle in all branches of the British civil service."

various angles. The emergence of several definitions cast doubt on its efficacy in research raising questions on whether it should be discarded. However, Olsen (2002) argued that the “different conceptions of Europeanization complement, rather than exclude, each other” (p.923). For Olsen, what matters is not what Europeanization really is “but whether and how the term can be useful for understanding the dynamics of the evolving European polity” (p.922).

Europeanization refers to the EU’s influence on the member states, and the influence of national politics on the EU. Such EU-centricity led Flockhart (2010) to designate several studies as *EU-ization* which is “a small, but important part of the much broader and longer-term process of Europeanization, which is predominantly concerned with ‘cultural encounters’” (p.791). Flockhart attributes the coining of EU-ization to Helen Wallace (2000) who also defined Europeanization as the product of a centuries-old European experience in managing cross-border connections which produced a set of embedded features that shape European responses to them. This led to a European dimension becoming an “embedded feature which frames politics and policies within the European states” (p.370) and that “the EU provides within Europe a template of ambitious cross-border management.” (p.376). Wallace emphasized that “Europeanisation must not be elided with EU membership. The creation of the EU is itself a response to Europeanisation and reflects a set of choices about ways of influencing Europeanisation” (p.371). It is incorrect to think that it necessarily grinds down internal policies, for it can “co-exist with protected domestic spaces” that stubbornly resist it (Wallace, 2000: 371).

Reuben Wong and Christopher Hill (2011) claim that the application of Europeanization to foreign policy analysis started at the turn of the millennium with Ben Tonra. Wong and Hill identify three dimensions of Europeanization of national foreign policy namely downloading, uploading and cross-loading. Downloading is mainly EU-ization, uploading refers to the bottom up projection of ideas and preferences from the national to the supranational level, and cross-loading occurs when European objectives and norms establish themselves in the member states through a process of socialization leading to the deconstruction and construction of national identities and norms, which in turn affect states’ behaviour in international affairs. This process of socialisation is not always a linear progression.

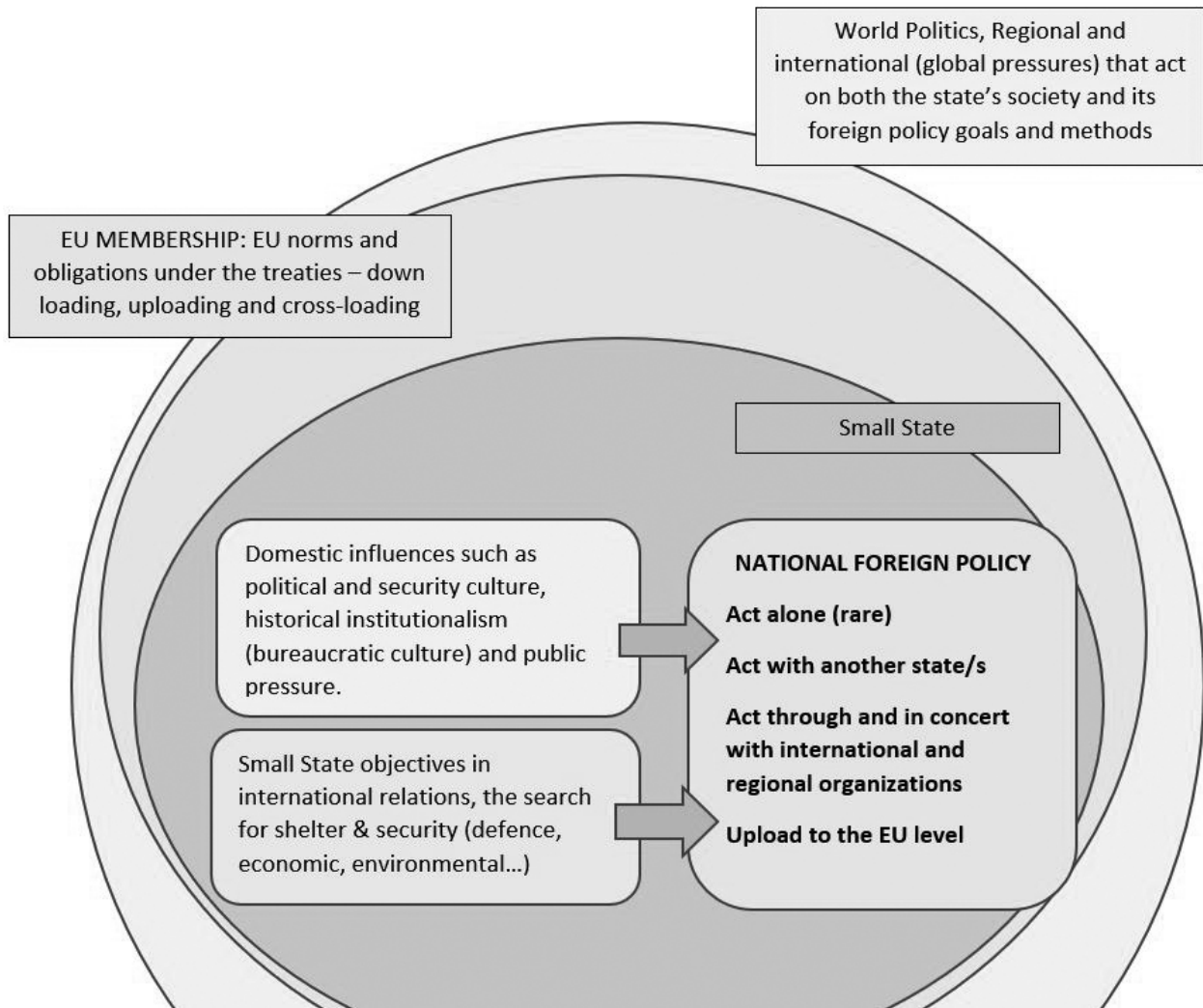
“De-Europeanization” is also relevant: Michael Smith (2021) defines it as “situations where EU foreign policy-making runs against the grain of certain Member States’ declared values and interests; where Member States are less willing to engage in collective foreign policy-making at the EU-level, prioritising other multilateral frameworks or (unilateral) national actions; and where the results of that policy-making are, on occasion, explicitly undermined by Member State practice.” Patrick Müller, Carolina Pomorska, and Ben Tonra (2021: 522-523) identify three intersecting criteria of De-Europeanization. The first occurs when a proposed policy shift clearly violates core EU foundational norms as differentiated from hard bargaining that is normal in EU politics. This could include outright opposition to the EU’s culture of cooperation in foreign policy. The second consists of a consistent and pervasive defection from EU norms that can be described as a re-orientation of a member state’s foreign policy away from the EU. The third criterion is when the rest of the member states begin to expect that “the Member State(s) concerned is/are consistently positioning itself/themselves either outside the range of existing Member State positions or else consistently at their furthest fringes” (p.523). The third and second point are in my view quite similar.

The Foundations of a Small State's Foreign Policy

A simple analytical model which is applied in this paper is shown in Figure 1. The underlying objectives of EU small states' foreign policy are not much different from those of other states. National objectives are moulded by the global system and national dynamics, which in turn influence EU policy-making. In EU policy-making Malta is one of the 'owners' or principals. In turn, EU policies impact national decision-making and the formulation of national foreign policy (down-loading & cross-loading). Domestic forces are salient in the small states: the ideologies of political parties, lobby groups and NGOs, security perceptions, public opinion, the media, government bureaucracy and decision-making institutions such as the cabinet of Ministers, parliament and the constitution influence policy output. Policies are also influenced by the nature of the state, whether it is democratic or authoritarian. The power of the Executive, which is extremely strong and centralised in Malta, is constrained by public reactions, the media, and to a more limited extent by parliament and on rare occasions by the judiciary. A small European state has a choice of four pathways in world politics: acting alone; acting through international organizations; by uploading its objectives and norms to the EU level; and by following a hybrid combination of any of the other three. Small states approach their security in different ways, choosing between alignment and neutrality. Lack of power predisposes small states more toward 'soft' than 'hard' power. They are more likely to uphold international law and norms, reject 'might is right', prefer multilateralism to imperialism, the peaceful settlement of conflicts and mediation, rather than the use of force.

Small state security refers both to the defence of the territory including in the case of islands the adjoining territorial waters and the protection of their citizens against a host of non-military threats. Lack of power debilitates their ability to face up to military and non-military threats alike. This is the main reason why they resort to bilateral or multilateral alliances, which protect them but diminish their sovereignty. Montesquieu's concept of 'confederate republic' is probably the wisest course to resolve small states' security dilemmas (Montesquieu, 2000, book IX). But alas in the world of hard power this remains just an ideal.

FIGURE 1



Unlike larger states, small states are weak in comprehensive information gathering and analysis, lack a global diplomatic network that acts as a connector, a conveyor of national influence to the outside world and a source of information. Their small size and limited power means that they have a diminished capability to influence other states. Consequently, they focus mostly on their geographic region, relations with the powers, a restricted set of primary objectives, and activism in international organizations. Jeanne A. K. Hey (2003: p.4) quotes Maurice East's (1975) claim that "small states were more likely than larger states to engage in risky behaviour" due to their lack of information. Hey contrasts this with Peter Katzenstein's (1985) view that small European states outperformed their larger neighbours in policy flexibility and adaptability. In short, small states are not entirely helpless and they have ways of protecting themselves. The emergence, proliferation and survival of so many small states since the Second World War is indicative of this claim.

Examples of small states' skilful diplomacy in handling difficult situations abound. Finland's and Austria's 'tight rope treading', Cold War diplomacy, shows how they avoided all-or-nothing situations and successfully used neutrality to navigate the treacherous waters of super-power rivalry and preserve their democratic societies. San Marino's eighteenth-century polite rejection

of Napoleon's offer to extend its territory is an example of strategic foresight – territorial enlargement would have invited future aggression by those forced to forfeit it. The republic's adherence to its republican norms, by providing refuge to Garibaldi and a host of other Italian revolutionaries at great risk to itself from the reactionary powers, helped San Marino survive the Italian *risorgimento* as an independent republic.

In brief: Four phases of malta's foreign policy

Malta's foreign policy developed in four phases. The first (1964-71) started on independence, with the establishment of a ministry of foreign affairs and a diplomatic corps, the cementing of bilateral ties with several countries including the 'great powers', as well as membership of the UN (1964) and the Council of Europe (CoE)(1965) (Gauci, 2005). Membership of the CoE strengthened Malta's human rights and democracy, as well as its Europeanness, amidst the uncertainties of the Cold-War. Malta's overtures to join NATO were rejected, but it still maintained a western-oriented foreign policy and strong relations with its Mediterranean neighbours. In 1970, Malta signed an association agreement with the EEC. In this phase, the government was led by the traditionally pro-western Partit Nazzjonalista (PN).

The second phase (1971-87) started when a new government led by the Malta Labour Party (MLP) shifted the balance towards a non-aligned and neutralist foreign policy. The dominant context was still the Cold-War. Diplomatic relations were established with the People's Republic of China in 1972. Relations with the EEC and membership of the CoE were counter-balanced by adherence to the Non-Aligned Movement (1973) and a stronger accent on Mediterranean peace and security, epitomised in Malta's role in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE or Helsinki Process). The 1972 revised Anglo-Maltese Defence Treaty, led to the closure of UK military bases on 31 March 1979. The rebalancing of external alignments was certainly not a case of complete 'de-Europeanization'. In 1978, the PN declared its readiness to apply for EU membership once in government. This second phase ended in 1987 with both parties agreeing to entrench neutrality in the constitution defined in terms of non-alignment which meant that Malta had adopted permanent neutrality.

It is evident from this that foreign policy was influenced by the Maltese party system and the ideologies of the two main parties, the PN and the MLP, which dominated Maltese post-war politics to this day, prompting Lijphart (1999) to label Malta a "perfect two-party system". The parties converged on some foreign policy issues such as relations with the EEC, but diverged on the salient ones such as neutrality and non-alignment until the 1987 consensus on neutrality. Domestic forces and the ideology of the dominant party at each stage, were as crucial as international pressures in determining the thrust of national foreign policy and this continued in successive phases. Since Malta is at one and the same time both a European and a Mediterranean state, the PN and the MLP/PL tried to give adequate importance to both regions – but the mix of emphasis was different: PN-led governments tended to emphasise 'Europeanness' while Labour governments saw Malta as a 'bridge' between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. The 'bridge' was just a figment of the imagination particularly in the 1970s when several other European Mediterranean countries eager to strengthen their relations with the Arab World made similar claims for themselves. In Malta's case the metaphor symbolised how it wanted the world to see it.

The PN in government from 1987 went in search of EU membership, hampered by opposition at home, a narrow parliamentary majority, a weak diplomatic punch and the constitutionally

entrenched neutrality. Favourable political windfalls resulted from the fall of communism, the melt-down of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the EU's decision to open its door to enlargement, including several neutral countries. Malta applied for membership in 1990 and joined in 2004 together with the Central and Eastern European Countries and Cyprus. Following a decade of intense national debate, membership was followed by inter-party consensus when in 2003, the MLP accepted membership. The ease and rapidity with which the Labour Party (PL) switched policy is not surprising considering that European culture and norms were embedded in Maltese society as a result of a long historical process. Malta's membership of the CoE, its Association Agreement with the EU and the PN's stubborn defence of human rights and democratic freedoms between 1971-87 had prevented Malta from swinging completely away from Europe during that phase.

The Fourth Phase: Europeanisation & EU-ization

While negotiating EU membership, Malta accepted the *acquis communautaire* in External Relations (Chapter 26) and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (chapter 27) as from the date of membership. In Declaration 35 attached to the Treaty of Accession (2003), Malta affirmed its commitment to the CFSP as set out in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), and that this did not prejudice its neutrality. Malta also stressed that "any decision by the Union to move to a common defence would have to be taken by a unanimous decision of the European Council adopted by the Member States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements" (Treaty of Accession, 2003). This presumed that a decision on whether Malta joins a European defence union would ultimately have to revert to the Maltese.

The Lisbon Treaty (2009) did not change the legal situation since the phrase "shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States..." was inserted in the new Article 42.7, the mutual assistance clause, and Protocol 10 on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Additionally, CFSP decisions continued to be based on unanimity, while "constructive abstention" enshrined in Article 31 (TEU), allowed a member state the flexibility to abstain without blocking a decision, although Malta made little use of this proviso until lately. In this context, when the Maltese parliament ratified the Lisbon Treaty, the opposition LP declared that there was nothing in the new treaty which eroded Malta's neutrality (Parliament of Malta, 2008). The PL's vote in favour of the Lisbon Treaty was tied to the conditions which the party had set when voting in favour of the Draft Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, which had also been unanimously approved by parliament (Parliament of Malta, 2005b). In that debate, Labour stressed that one of the conditions in supporting ratification was that: (free translation)

"the Constitutional Treaty does not prejudice Malta's neutrality as defined in its constitution. Malta will not be tied to any undertaking for mutual defence or common defence...In particular Malta will not be bound by any commitment to the development of a European army and the participation of Maltese military contingents outside Malta under any section of the CSDP would continue to be guided by the Maltese Constitution."³

3 The actual text in Maltese can be accessed at Parliament of Malta, (2005) p.376.

Article 42.7 (TEU), the mutual assistance clause, read together with other provisions of the treaties, was an important development in the EU founding treaties brought about by the Lisbon Treaty and pointed in the direction of the EU eventually developing into a defence union. However, as presently worded this clause transforms the EU into a weak alliance. The mutual assistance clause made little impact in the national debate, until 2015 when in reaction to its invocation by France following the Paris terrorist attacks of 13 November, the Maltese Government (Labour) reacted positively declaring that “the government has been advised by the Attorney General that when an (EU) member state requests help on the basis of the Lisbon Treaty this does not mean or it does not necessarily lead to actions which contravene the neutrality clauses in the Constitution of Malta.” (Department of Information Malta, 2015). By then, the national consensus on the meaning of neutrality had evolved considerably. The end of the super-power confrontation and the demise of the non-aligned movement had ensured that substantive parts of the definition of neutrality in the constitution where reference is made to non-alignment and the superpowers, had become anachronistic. In the meantime, the PL had caught up with the PN in publicly accepting ‘active neutrality’.

Government statements consistently refer to the “solidarity” rather than the “mutual assistance” clause, but in this case confusion in the use of terms reigns in EU as well. However it could be more than just a matter of semantics: in 2005 the LP's position was that the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, later incorporated in the Lisbon Treaty, did not include provisions on mutual defence (Parliament of Malta, 2005a), despite the fact that Article 42.7 is a “mutual assistance clause” (collective defence) even if it lacks the strength of NATO's Article 5 and is fogged by the “Irish Clause” and reference to the position of member states which are also in NATO. It is commonly referred to as such by the EU institutions in contrast to Article 222 TFEU, the “solidarity clause”. Article 42.7 TEU cannot be triggered right away, as in the case of NATO's Article 5, but assistance must be negotiated bilaterally by the country which invokes it. All EU member states are obliged to assist a fellow member state which requests help. The key phrase in Article 42.7, the “Irish Clause” which says that “This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States” gives EU neutral states the possibility of opting out in certain situations. Piris (2010) argues that for this reason the EU is not a military alliance. However, when a member state requests assistance from the other member states, this turns into a politically weighty decision for any member state to take and very difficult to refuse – although the modalities in the provision of such aid are more flexible and include non-military aid.

POLICY PRACTICE

Participation in the EU Institutions, CSDP and P4P

The impact of Europeanisation on Malta's foreign policy can also be assessed by reference to Malta's participation in the EU decision-making institutions where Malta has consistently supported the EU's positions including recent decisions leading towards closer union in defence. Maltese ministers participate in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and other council configurations covering external relations. Public officials permanently based in Brussels participate in the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), and other committees of the Council. Two Brussels-based AFM officers serve as military attaches within

the Maltese Embassy, another officer is seconded to the European Union Military Staff (EUMS), and one serves on rotation as special assistant to the Chairman of the EU Military Committee.

Malta's 'active neutrality' permits it to become involved in post-conflict, peace-building missions approved by the UN Security Council, mostly as part of UN, CSDP and OSCE missions (AFM, 2020).

Foreign Policy Strategies

The foreign policy strategies adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2006, are indicative of a Europeanisation trend and the role accorded to the EU in the country's foreign affairs. Comprehensive "Strategic Objectives" comprising 20 targets, were first published in 2006, after a discussion in Parliament's Foreign and European Affairs Committee (FEAC), discussed further below, behind closed doors in January 2006 (Parliament of Malta, 2006). Later, while introducing the strategy, the Foreign Minister Michael Frendo stressed "that the formulation of the Strategic Objectives of Malta's Foreign Policy must be seen within the context of the new reality of membership of the European Union" (Department of Information Malta, 2006). Eventually the strategic objectives were published on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs web-page. In 2013, the objectives were fine-tuned by a set of "Guiding Principles" (Department of Information Malta, 2013). Relations with the EU was the first item in the list. In 2022, following public consultations, Malta unveiled a new Foreign Policy Strategy. This strategic document outlines Malta's aspirations and priorities in the realm of international relations starting with a reference to active neutrality as a tool to promote peace and security (p.7). On the EU the main goal is "to continue to ensure that important matters of national interest are raised high on the European Union's agenda while continuing to be a team-player in the day-to-day construction of a stronger European Union" (Government of Malta, 2022). However, the strategy also affirms that as an island-state on the Union's southern periphery it wants its interests to be protected (p.31) a clear indication that it wants to continue to upload the responsibility for the management of migration in the central Mediterranean onto the EU.

The Mediterranean region continues to be of special interest, but Malta wants to look further afield. Reference is made to Malta's 2020 Africa Partnership Strategy (Government of Malta, 2020) as well as the development of relations with other regions (p.32). The Strategy declares that Malta has a "significant role to play in championing the interests of small states, in particular of Small Island Developing States (SIDS)" (p.32). This is a new approach considering that Malta has never been keen in associating itself with the SIDS, notwithstanding that it rubbed shoulders with them in the British Commonwealth.

Overall, the strategies reviewed here confirm what was discussed in the opening parts of this paper, that for a small state with limited resources and a small domestic market and negligible power in world affairs, the EU is a gateway for global relations. Continuity in foreign policy as represented in these strategies stretches from 2006 to the present.

Active Neutrality and Participation in the EU's Peace Keeping Missions

Notwithstanding that the PN and PL had reached a national consensus in 1987 on the inclusion of neutrality in the constitution, the issue continued to bedevil Maltese politics. In the period 1990-2004, one of the main claims in the campaign against EU membership was that it would

undermine Malta's neutrality. The PL's position on the results of the EU membership negotiations was that "Malta's neutrality, given its geo-strategic position in the central Mediterranean, will be deeply affected" in the light of the government's undertaking to actively and unconditionally support the development of the CFSP once Malta joins the Union (Malta Labour Party, 2003).

In retrospect, the national debate on neutrality had started heating up in 1995 when Malta joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and left it in 1996 following the return of the PL to government. Both the decision to join the PfP and to suspend membership proved controversial and split the Maltese public along party lines. The pursuit of PfP membership was partly consequent on Malta's application to join the EU and the creation of the CFSP following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (1993). The end of the superpower rivalry, opened possibilities for neutral states to seek EU membership and cooperate with NATO which was re-inventing itself to better fit in the new emerging European geostrategic scenario. Malta's decision to join PfP was doubtlessly also helped by NATO's launching of the *Mediterranean Dialogue* with the Mediterranean non-NATO states, which went into effect in 1995.

When the PN was returned to Government in 1998, it did not immediately re-join the PfP, but this decision led to some negative effects in the first four years of EU membership when together with Cyprus, Malta could not fully participate in the Berlin Plus cooperation between the EU and NATO since they were neither members of the Atlantic Alliance nor of the PfP. Malta "reactivated" its PfP membership in 2008, a decision which was roundly criticized by the PL as a violation of the Maltese Constitution, further aggrieved by the fact that it was not mentioned in the PN's 2008 general election manifesto. In that election, the PN had secured a one-seat parliamentary majority by a handful of votes.

Back in 2004, the PL had already criticised Malta's accession to the European Defence Agency (EDA), pledging to pull out of it once in government – a threat that was later forgotten. These episodes show that Malta was capable of resisting Europeanisation by swerving away from key steps in the European integration process. However, when the PL was returned to government in 2013, Malta did not leave the PfP and is currently renewing its Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITTP)⁴ which was scheduled to be signed in September 2023. The government and opposition are in consultation on the progress of the negotiations. (Parliament of Malta, 2023a). NATO-Malta cooperation is focused on building capabilities and strengthening interoperability. The PL's acceptance of the PfP and the EDA represent a big policy shift by the party. The PL's outlook towards NATO seems to have softened further, when NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met Malta's Prime Minister in April 2017, the first such meeting since Prime Minister Dom Mintoff met Joseph Luns in 1972 in the midst of a crisis generated by the re-negotiation of the UK-Malta Defence Agreement. Stoltenberg was in Malta to attend an informal EU defence ministers' meeting as part of Malta's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

PESCO

In the light of this shift in the PL's policies on European Defence, it was surprising that Malta did

4 Formerly called the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP).

not join the 2017 Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). It is hard to designate this decision as an act of de-Europeanisation since Malta did not oppose it and initially maintained an ‘open mind’ on joining it at a later stage. In a statement to the Maltese Parliament (Parliament of Malta, 2017), the Prime Minister acknowledged that PESCO was in line with the Maltese constitution, but since it was still in its infancy, the government was exercising caution to see how the structured cooperation develops in the future. He also stressed that the initiative did not change any of the fundamentals of the Accession Treaty “in the event (that Malta) needed military or security aid on the basis of the solidarity clause” (Parliament of Malta, 2017). In 2018, a group of PL supporters wrote to the Prime Minister, urging him to refrain from joining PESCO and even to work against it within the EU framework (Martin, 2018). This internal division within the governing PL highlights one of the reasons why the government may have adopted a cautious approach on the issue. Fast forward to 2023, when Denmark and Ireland had already joined the initiative, and amidst Russia’s war against Ukraine, Malta’s foreign minister reiterated that there was no change in Malta’s position on PESCO (Sansone, 2023). The PN concurs with this stance. However, the Maltese position is perplexing. Despite that all other EU member states (except Malta) having joined PESCO, and considering that the initiative aligns with Malta’s Constitution, both political parties seem hesitant, mainly because of the possibility of a public backlash. A public opinion survey conducted in February 2022 revealed that 63% of Maltese citizens support neutrality, considering it “very important to them” (Marmara, 2022).

The Positive Side of Active Neutrality: Three Examples

Active neutrality has so far allowed Malta to align its foreign policy with the EU without the need to ditch it. In the process, neutrality has been redefined and the Maltese political parties have adapted their positions. The prospects of Malta following Sweden and Finland into NATO are slim because for the moment Malta does not feel threatened by any power. Malta’s experience with active neutrality is discussed in this section by reference to three cases: the Libyan revolution of 2011, the War in Ukraine and Israel’s war in Gaza. In all three there is no sign of a de-Europeanization in Malta’s behaviour whose approach fully respected EU norms and positions.

Libya – UNSC Resolution 1973

The outbreak of civil war in Libya in 2011 and the approval of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (UNSC 1973) thrust Malta into vortex of a conflict that directly threatened its security and pressurized the government in maintaining Malta’s neutrality. As a UN member, Malta was obliged to enforce all UNSC resolutions, including UNSC resolution 1973 which called for a cease-fire in Libya, the protection of civilians, a negotiated settlement to the conflict, stronger sanctions and the arms embargo as well as a no-fly zone to ensure that combat aircraft were not used against civilians. The resolution was in line with Malta’s normative framework based on neutrality and its EU commitments. However, Malta did not participate in the NATO-led military campaign to enforce the no-fly zone and did not allow its only airfield, which is used exclusively for civilian purposes, to be used for the Alliance’s military operations. Instead, Malta participated in the humanitarian aspect of the crisis particularly by facilitating the evacuation of thousands of foreign nationals from Libya and by providing medical assistance to some of the war casualties. A decision to join NATO’s military campaign would have irretrievably tarnished Malta’s reputation

with several neighbouring Mediterranean countries. For 30 years Malta had insisted that its neutrality precluded the use of its territory to attack other countries. The Maltese government was later criticised of breaching the Constitution by allowing NATO aircraft to use specific corridors in Malta's airspace when enforcing the no-fly zone. However, this was defended as a measure to prevent the disruption of civilian air traffic.

From the start of the crisis, Malta's stance was backed by cross-party national consensus and public support. Its active neutrality had allowed it to join the intervention without compromising its norms. Its actions did not hinder the EU member states or NATO in achieving their objectives and its humanitarian actions contributed to the entire European effort in the crisis.

The Ukraine War – Treading the tight rope of Neutrality

Malta's approach during the 2011 Libyan crisis set the parameters for its behaviour in future conflicts so that when Russia invaded the Ukraine in 2022, Malta joined the international community in condemning the invasion. In the EU Council, it aligned with Austria and Ireland to constructively abstain (in accordance with Article 31(1) TEU) from the European Council's decisions to provide Kiev with lethal weapons financed from the European Peace Facility (EPF). At the same time the three EU neutral states agreed to provide "a corresponding contribution to the budget for assistance measures in support of Ukraine which do not involve supply of such lethal equipment or platforms" (Council of the EU, 2022).

Malta has firmly condemned Russia's rhetoric regarding the use of nuclear weapons during the ongoing Ukraine war. Addressing the United Nations Security Council, Malta's Foreign Minister unequivocally stated that any suggestion by Russia that the use of nuclear weapons is justified is unacceptable. Such language only increases uncertainty, erodes trust between parties, and escalates tensions (UN Security Council, 2023, p.6). Malta has consistently advocated disarmament and as outlined in its 2022 Foreign Policy Strategy, it opposes the proliferation of nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction, conventional arms, and new military technologies. Notably, Malta, along with Austria and Ireland, are the only three EU states that have ratified the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which took effect on January 22, 2021, after more than 50 signatory states ratified it.

At the start of the same UNSC debate, ostensibly on the "Maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine" held on 24 February 2023, Russia's representative asked the Presidency (i.e. Malta) to clarify why contrary to procedure the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Mr. Dmytro Kuleba, was going to be allowed to speak before members of the Council (UN Security Council, 2023a). Subsequently, Russia accused Malta of double standards for allowing this to happen. The incident marked the extent to which Malta was willing to confound a super-power in defence of what it and the rest of the EU perceived as more important international norms.

The War in Gaza

For several decades Malta has been a consistent supporter of the Palestinian people urging a peaceful solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict and a two-state solution backed by international guarantees which perfectly fits into the EU's long-standing approach to the conflict. This policy has stood the test of time even in the midst of uncertainty created by the 2020 Trump Plan for the Middle East. As an EU member state, Malta has concurred with EU positions. The Maltese

government roundly condemned the Hamas “barbaric terrorist attack” on Israel of 7 October 2023 which is the immediate cause of the current conflict but later criticised the disproportionate effects on the Palestinians provoked by Israel’s military operation. On 25 October 2023, three Arab and the Turkish Ambassadors resident in Malta, discussed the war in a meeting of Parliament’s FEAC where they applied pressure, which was resisted by the Committee, for Malta to take a more robust position in favour of the Palestinians (Parliament of Malta, 2023b). The Maltese position of criticising both sides for their violent behaviour is in line with its active neutrality and preserves its credibility in a volatile diplomatic context that engulfs the conflict. Since assuming the two-year membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC) on January 1, 2023, it was even more urgent for Malta to remain cautious and neutral if it wanted to be accepted as an honest broker in the difficult UNSC confrontations. Although Malta has regularly called for a complete cease-fire in the Gaza war, continuous opposition to it within the Council by veto-wielding members, led it to table a resolution on November 15, 2023 calling for extended pauses in the fighting to allow humanitarian action particularly that addressing the plight of children, and the release of all the hostages kept by Hamas (UNSC, 2023b). The resolution was approved with three abstentions, the first such resolution on Gaza to survive the permanent members’ sickle. Maltese diplomacy has since been pressing for the implementation of all sections of the resolution with mixed results. The success of the initiative shows the value added which active neutrality provides Malta with as well as the opportunities that small states can exploit in international organizations guided by their objectives in world politics.

Parliament and Parliamentary Diplomacy

Standing Committee on European and Foreign Affairs

Since its establishment in 1921, the Maltese Parliament had always met in plenary sessions, although temporary select committees were set up from time to time. In 1988, the growth in the volume and complexity of Parliament’s work led to the start of a review process which culminated in 1995 with the establishment of several committees, including a Standing Committee on Foreign and European Affairs (FEAC). The establishment of FEAC coincided with a surge in diplomatic activity between the EU and Malta following Malta’s 1990 EU membership application and the generally positive reaction delivered by the Commission in 1993. The Parliamentary scrutiny of foreign policy thus made a modest qualitative leap. The FEAC further gained in importance during the membership negotiations (2000-2002) and its relevance increased after Malta’s EU membership. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 gave national parliaments a new role as “guardians of subsidiarity” and the task was delegated to the FEAC. The establishment of FEAC has in effect thrust parliament in the core of European Union politics and brought national foreign policy under parliamentary scrutiny in its daily operation.

However, the scrutiny of foreign and European policy could potentially have improved even more had parliament been allocated additional resources. Members of the Maltese Parliament are part-timers, a situation which was critically highlighted by a periodic review carried out in October 2021 by the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which proposed that “a full-time parliament should be established with sufficient autonomous capacity to fulfil its legislative and oversight functions properly in an increasingly complex and interlinked society” (Council of Europe, 2021). Parliament’s backup resources have

been improved, but still fall short of requirements thus weakening its ability to keep up with its tasks as required by the Lisbon Treaty (Pace, 2015). In addition, Parliament's autonomy is weak and since Independence governments (executive) have been able to dominate it. For example, the structure of the FEAC does not reflect the separation of the Executive from the Legislature since the foreign minister sits on the committee. In the UK House of Commons, whose rules and working procedures have influenced the Maltese parliament, the so-called Westminster model, the Foreign Secretary does not sit on Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, though he regularly interacts with it.

Parliamentary Diplomacy

Most of the international activities of the Maltese parliament are linked to international organizations to which Malta belongs such as the EU, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the international Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM), the parliamentary meetings of the 5+5 in the Western Mediterranean and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM).⁵ The Speaker participates in the annual meetings of the small European states. Outside these semi-obligatory engagements, parliament has not structured its autonomous activities which remain of an ad hoc nature.

The Maltese Parliament sends a delegation to the annual Inter-Parliamentary Conference on the EU's CFSP and CSDP and the Chairperson of the FEAC attends the meetings of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for European Union Affairs (COSAC) while the Speaker (President) participates in the annual meeting of the European Parliament's conference of speakers and presidents of the national parliaments. A similar but wider meeting of Presidents/speakers of national parliaments is organized by the Council of Europe.

These links between Malta's parliament and other European parliaments, would not have been possible outside EU membership (except for those organized under the aegis of the Council of Europe) and the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty which gave national parliaments a new role after years in which they saw their powers slowly diminishing. These 'new' roles have further Europeanised the Maltese Parliament but the question remains as to the extent of the impact that such interactions have on the Maltese parliament, whether a process of 'socialisation' usually associated with parliamentary diplomacy is taking place and how the outcomes of these international meetings feed into the work of the parliament and Malta's foreign policy.

The Mediterranean Region

Mediterranean Priorities and Multilateralism

As a small state in the central Mediterranean, the strategic importance of this region for Malta persists. Throughout its history as an independent state, Malta has been affected on several occasions by spillovers from serious conflicts or economic downturns in the region. Maltese policy on the Mediterranean, which was accorded extensive space in the 2022 Foreign Policy Strategy, is aligned with EU policies and is cognoscente not only of the long-standing challenges in the

⁵ The international activities of the Parliament are included in the Parliament's annual reports which can be accessed at <https://www.parlament.mt/en/menues/reference-material/publications/annual-reports/>

region such as the ‘frozen’ conflicts⁶, but also of the newer threats posed by climate change, cyber insecurity and environmental degradation. In a nutshell the Strategy outlines:

For national prosperity and security, Malta needs peace and stability in the Euro-Med region. Malta...continues to strive to make a positive contribution to the enhancement of security in the Mediterranean, to lead dialogue on issues such as the displacement of persons, irregular migration, trafficking of human beings, and the need to harness mobility for human equality. Malta also recognizes that the regions south of the Mediterranean are also part of Europe’s extended neighbourhood, and development and stability in such regions are crucial.

Consequently, crisis management humanitarian action and civilian missions are also key aspects of Malta’s role in promoting peace and security (pp.24-25)

The extent of the Europeanization of Malta’s foreign policy is visible in the fact that Malta is a founding member state of all the current EU Mediterranean policies, namely the Barcelona Process (1995), the Neighbourhood Policy (2003) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) (2008). It participates in multilateral diplomacy with other EU member states such as the 5+5 in the Western Mediterranean established in 1990.⁷ In 2019, Malta started participating in the “Sommet des deux rives” (Summit of the two shores) based on the 5+5, launched by France. Then there are the informal meetings of the southern EU Mediterranean countries in which Malta was a key participant from the start: the Olive Group which met for the first time in 2006, the MED9 and MED5 on managing migration. These fora have made little impact in the academic literature but besides helping the EU Mediterranean countries coordinate better their positions prior to crucial EU council meetings when regional issues are on the agenda, they help to mould EU policies based on shared European norms and interests.

Key Bilateral Relations: Libya and Italy

Malta’s priority bilateral relations are with its neighbours Italy, Libya and Tunisia. The main subject in recent years has been the management of migration, although other issues abound such as the still unresolved maritime borders and in some case the right to exploit the resources of the seabed. The political situation in Tunisia needs to be watched carefully but for want of space these issues will not be broached here.

In the past 20 years cooperation with Italy was consistently strong notwithstanding the occasional diplomatic spat on who should take responsibility for migrants rescued at sea. Italy is the only NATO member states that entered into a formal agreement with Malta in 1982 to recognise its neutrality and provide security guarantees and a financial aid package which ran until the start of EU membership. Malta indirectly benefitted from Italian initiatives to contain irregular migration in the central Mediterranean such as the 2008 Treaty of Benghazi (Repubblica Italiana, 2009) and the 2017 Memorandum concluded by the Italian premier Paolo Gentilone and

⁶ The Palestinian Question, the Cyprus Question, the Western Sahara and the Greece-Türkiye rivalry.

⁷ The 5+5 involves Algeria, France, Italy, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia.

Libyan leader Fayez Mustafa Serraj (Governo Italiano, 2017). It also benefitted from the Italian naval mission *Mare Nostrum* (2013-14) and FRONTEX missions Triton and Themis in the region. But in 2020, Malta also concluded its own agreement with Libya to combat “illegal immigration”. As part of this agreement, Malta agreed to work to secure EU funding to help Libya build its maritime assets and secure its borders to stop irregular migration (Tripoli Memorandum, 2020). Helping Libya to stop irregular migration to Europe was one of the main objectives of the informal European Council held in Malta in 2017 which is discussed further down. However, since Libya does not respect the rights of migrants and still has not ratified several international conventions which protect the rights of migrants and refugees, the *entente* with Tripoli squarely contradicts EU norms and erodes Malta's humanitarian objectives in international relations. It also shows the delicate balance that a small state confronts between safeguarding its sovereignty and its norms.

Limited Resources Make ‘Uploading’ more Useful

Given its limited resources, since 2006 Malta has sought to ‘upload’ to the EU level the responsibility of managing irregular migration in the central Mediterranean. In the early stages of membership, Malta attempted to Europeanise the management of migration by insisting on the establishment of an EU-wide responsibility sharing mechanism and for the reform of the Dublin Regulation, two issues which remain unresolved. Maltese diplomacy succeeded in convincing the EU to launch an intra-EU relocation program, the first of its kind for the Union, the Pilot Project for Intra-EU re-allocation from Malta (EUREMA) which was approved in 2009 and renewed in 2011, as EUREMA II. Both were funded under the European Regional Fund. However, the EU member states’ interest in accepting the relocation of refugees eventually began to wane in 2013.

Malta's next attempt came at the November 2015 Valletta EU-Africa Summit, when the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was established to encourage African countries to cooperate with the EU in tackling the root-causes of emigration. The Joint Valletta Action Plan unveiled at the end of the summit, proposed a series of measures designed to discourage migratory flows by means of EU-funded development projects to create opportunities for would-be emigrants to stay in their countries. Migration was to be mainstreamed in development policy and ‘regular’ migration opportunities to the EU were to be improved. Although the Trust Fund boasts of some success its impact on migratory flows in the central Mediterranean are doubtful. Two years after the launching of the Fund, Malta re-focused attention on the problem at an informal European Council meeting in Valletta on 3 February 2017 during Malta's Presidency of the Council of the EU. At this meeting all eyes were on the chaotic situation in Libya, and, the need to stabilize the country. EU leaders agreed to strengthen the EU's borders and to step up the training of the Libyan national coast guard to stop the migratory flows, to set up receiving centres in Libya and to help Libya better manage its land borders. (European Council, 2017). The ensuing results were mixed: according to FRONTEX migratory flows through the central Mediterranean route peaked in 2016 but ebbed there after touching the lowest level in 2019. The number of detections picked up again in 2020 and have been progressively increasing. In addition, the treatment of returnees and migrants in Libya is abysmal and EU/FRONTEX has been criticised of complicity in abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Conclusion and Assessment

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. Since joining the EU, Malta's foreign policy has gradually become more Europeanised. This process was strengthened by Malta's EU membership and the opportunities which it provided for Malta to participate in the EU institutions and policies. However, we must not overlook that Malta's *Europeanness* was already well-established before membership in terms of its culture, democratic norms, history and institutions and its involvement in European politics was helped on the way by its membership of the Council of Europe and its 1970 Association agreement with the EEC.

As an EU member state, Malta has remained committed to the CFSP-CSDP, has not succumbed to fits of de-Europeanization defined as permanent or radical departures from EU policies and in a word experienced an identity reconstruction in its foreign and security policies according to the model developed by Wong and Hill (2011). While remaining committed to neutrality, it has had to periodically adjust its approach to keep in line with its EU commitments as exemplified by membership of EDA, NATO's PfP and Article 42.7 commitments, to stay in line with the EU's policy evolution. It is the only member state that has not joined PESCO, but it has not closed the door on eventual membership. 'Active Neutrality' has enabled it to remain at the centre of the EU's External policy-making without changing its military non-alignment. It has successfully limited itself, so far, to humanitarian actions and peace-keeping. As a small powerless state it has relied on the power of persuasion, strong insistence on multilateralism, dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Despite its many difficulties, its weak autonomy and resources, the Maltese Parliament, has also become more involved in EU policy-making and oversight of the CFSP and national foreign policy. For the first time since independence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has had to better articulate national foreign policy by the publication of strategies, starting in 2006 when a reorganization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also completed and later in 2022. These strategies are in almost perfect synchronization with EU norms and objectives and further testify to the shift in policy that has occurred since membership.

The analysis highlights that domestic politics play a crucial role in shaping the foreign policies of small states, including Malta. Various factors within the domestic sphere significantly influence how a state engages with the world. The main conclusion is that Malta's foreign policy is a dynamic interplay of domestic forces—ranging from public opinion to political parties—interwoven with external challenges. This intricate mix has led to both continuity and transformative shifts in Malta's global engagement.

The prevailing political culture is relevant: it includes deeply rooted historical norms, values, and practices. Political culture and the functioning of institutions impact foreign policy decisions. In Malta's case, the country's political culture has influenced its stance on neutrality, EU membership, and adapting to changing geopolitical dynamics and public sentiment matters. For example, neutrality is highly valued by citizens. A 2022 survey revealed that 62.6% of respondents considered neutrality to be very important. Public opinion acts as a compass, guiding policymakers toward choices that align with citizens' views.

The role of the Maltese political parties and ideologies need not be overtly emphasized, but they matter. Their orientations shape Malta's stance on international issues, reflecting the worldviews of the ruling party which often has to adjust to its rivals' stances, international and EU pressures. This

explains why it has at times been possible to achieve consensus amid party polarization which has frequently emerged at critical junctures such as EU membership and neutrality. Lobby Groups, NGOs, and Civil Society have steadily grown in importance and exert influence by advocating for specific foreign policy positions. They amplify voices and contribute to the overall policy mix. Their activities ensure that diverse perspectives are considered. Hence, while dissensus more than consensus characterises Maltese politics and society, foreign policy consensus has grown from dissensus.

For the future perspective, when consideration is made that the number of EU neutral countries has now been reduced to three, namely Austria, Ireland and Malta with Cyprus as outlier, or *sui generis* case, the EU is likely to encounter less obstacles in achieving a common defence. International realignments and geopolitics have and continue to force the EU in the direction of a closer union in defence. This will call on the remaining neutral states to make further adjustments and continuously reassess their positions.

Article 42.7 (TEU), the mutual assistance clause, and Article 222 (TFEU) the solidarity clause, provide Malta with a credible level of security for the time being, but Malta's normative goals, its support for international law, multilateralism, the peaceful settlement of conflicts and global disarmament, as well as its unimportance in terms of power, provide it with additional tools because all these factors increase its trustworthiness in international and regional affairs. This asset should be evaluated carefully.

Malta's foreign policy suffers from drawbacks such as lack of power and resources. But despite this, not all aspects of national foreign policy are uploaded to the EU level and Malta retains a number of objectives and stances which it pursues outside the EU framework, although in most cases it uses its EU membership to amplify its international profile. EU membership has helped Malta secure its election to the UN Security Council in 2022 and to the presidency of the almost defunct Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) from 2023; it also helps it in its new approach to the SIDS and in its relations with the Mediterranean countries.

Cooperation with fellow EU states in informal, regular consultative gatherings like the 5+5, MED9 and MED5 is a form of Europeanisation and an opportunity for the small state to stamp its mark on developments.

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