



Managing Change in External Relations: *The EU's Window of Opportunity*

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Introduction

There are a few moments in life when a crossroads is reached, necessitating a fundamental choice about the course to follow. Any decisions made at that juncture will have a decisive impact upon the future, for better or for worse. The EU is at such a point in its external action. The international order is being fundamentally reshaped by the emergence of influential actors (the BRIC countries are often automatically, and uncritically, mentioned in this regard) but also by influential non-state actors who act across borders and continents¹. The exact nature of the emerging international system is far from clear – for some it is a complex multipolar system with different influences in particular policy areas or regions, but with no obvious hegemon; for others this looks suspiciously like a 'non-polar' world promising disarray and potential competition (especially for resources)².

The EU's 'actomess'

The EU is in the throes of trying to establish its role in the developing international system, both at the macro level (trying to work out what Herman Van Rompuy's 'economic governance' really means) as well as at the levels of strategic partnerships (commencing with the EU's relations with China, Russia and the United States)³. Against this changing backdrop, the EU has the task of defining its role and identity – or as political scientists say, the nature of its 'actorness'. The mercury disputes last June, where the Council and the Commission split over the question of who should represent the Union in cases where there are shared competences, and the September deferment of a vote on a draft resolution that would have given the enhanced observer status in the UN General Assembly, are symptomatic of the difficulties of defining the EU's role and status as an actor on the international scene⁴.

Black swans

The shaping of the international system is also influenced by 'black swans' – events that no one predicted and thus prepared for and where there is the risk of overestimating knowledge about the event and its potential impact⁵. The emergence of the internet and its profound effect on international politics is an obvious example. The dramatic and still

unfinished foment in parts of North Africa and the Middle East is another, more salient, example. Officials and experts likewise did not predict these events, nor have the full implications been fully understood.

... and Lisbon

The third important development was heralded by the Lisbon Treaty and, in particular, the slow and still painful emergence of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The introduction of a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who is also a Vice President in the Commission, holds the promise of more coherence (and less squabbling) between the EU institutions. The recognition of the EU's international legal personality and, most notably, the advent of Union delegations, open up the possibility for the EU to engage in far broader dialogues – now formally incorporating foreign and security elements alongside the former *communautaire* elements. The centralisation of geographical desks in the EEAS, the creation of multilateral and thematic desks, alongside the advent of the Union delegations, all demand a more strategic approach to the EU's external action. The EEAS may, in time, emerge as a quasi *corps diplomatique* for the EU, but it remains early days and it will take several years to iron the kinks out of the Service. In an obliging international system the stop button would be activated while the EU sorts itself out. But the world moves on.

'The vision question'

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Since the EU is itself in transition, it remains difficult for the Union to assume a pro-active role at a time when its fundamental aims and purpose on the international stage are open to debate. The EU lacks any compelling vision to guide its overall purpose, identity and direction in external action, although this is not for want of a plethora of disjointed strategies. An obvious starting point is the Lisbon Treaty itself which makes it clear that the EU's external actions are supposed to be based on values and interests. This is easily written although formidably difficult to accomplish, but this does not exculpate the Union and its members from trying.

Currently, the EU sends out mixed messages regarding the balance between values (human rights, democracy and the rule of law) and the pursuit of (common) interests. In some cases the EU's interests tip clearly in favour of more pragmatic considerations (like energy security) and, in those cases where the EU enjoys greater leverage, such as its relations with the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific countries, values appear more to the fore in the form of 'essential elements' clauses. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the EU does not attempt to introduce values-based, or normative, elements into its external action, but the manner in which it has done so leaves the EU vulnerable to charges of double standards; none more so than in its relations with the southern neighbourhood.

Lessons from the Arab spring

The foment in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Tunisia are stark reminders of why the question of values and principles should not assume the back seat to energy and trade agreements, or other more pragmatic considerations. The EU will soon face a generation of young Arabs, some of whom will assume positions of responsibility in the new administrations throughout the region. They, in turn, will reflect upon the nature of the EU's agreements with the previous autocratic regimes and where the Union was, alongside other actors, in their hour of need. Salient questions will be posed about the application of the EU's cherished principles (these are listed as liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law). Such questions may, with equal validity, be posed by young Georgians.

The confluence of these three elements – the changing international system, the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, and the changes in the EU's neighbourhood – provide formidable challenges but may also represent a window of opportunity. It is time for the EU to be clearer about what type of actor it wishes to become and what paths it will pursue to reinforce what the EU itself claims is a 'distinctive European approach to foreign and security policy'⁶.

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Responding to change

In response to these three challenges, the EU should consider the following:

1. **A Strategic Concept:** The EU should adopt a strategic concept outlining the fundamental role envisaged for the Union in the years ahead (until, for example, 2030). As noted, the beginnings of such a broad dialogue have already begun, prompted by Van Rompuy's important speech at the College d'Europe in February 2010 and a number thereafter. The concept should though be generated from the EU itself, so that ownership is assured, and then approved by the members.

It should also tie together and prioritise existing geographical and thematic strategies. In practical terms this means moving beyond the somewhat lacklustre discussions on China, Russia and the United States (among others), to identify core priorities and to link these to the broad array of sectoral dialogues represented in each of these cases.

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In spite of the vogueish obsession with the BRICs, and especially ascendant China, no strategic partnership is more important to the EU than that with the United States, which still remains a fundamentally unbalanced relationship. On the one hand there is unparalleled cooperation (and competition) when it comes to economic and trade issues, as well as in critical areas of mutual interest like counter-terrorism; but on the other hand, foreign and security relations are clouded in mutual ambivalence, most notably where relations with NATO are concerned. It is high time to frame the EU's interests with, if need be, more independence from the United States but only when matched by the political will and capacity to act. Any new and more balanced transatlantic dialogue is only possible under this condition.

In its relations with other strategic partners (a term which itself lacks much substance or clarity), such as China, the EU needs a firmer idea of its key interests, the objectives of its partners, as well as the values and principles that the Union represents. Aside from the important role of the European Council, the EEAS should develop much of the detailed conceptual work along with the relevant parts of the Commission. Indeed, in the EEAS context the multilateral and geographical desks all require strategic parameters within which to operate. It is also difficult to understand the rationale behind the offices for Public Diplomacy, Strategic Planning and Strategic Communication in the absence of an guiding strategic concept. Any such agreed concept must, as a sine qua non, be supported by the Member States in their bilateral diplomacy;

2. **Public diplomacy:** Strategy and vision have to be harnessed to diplomacy (including that at the European level) as well as to public diplomacy, in order for the EU to exert its influence most effectively (see Aurélie Courtier's contribution). One of the more obvious weaknesses of the EU in this regard is the weakness of its public diplomacy in external relations. The EU should take public diplomacy far more seriously than it does and invest more personnel and resources towards this end (notwithstanding the confines of 'budget neutrality' of the EEAS). Much of what passes for public diplomacy in EU external relations is, in fact, disseminating information. Public diplomacy is, however, about establishing long-term dialogues with diverse groups – stretching beyond the official channels at governmental and official level. This also implies the ability to listen as well as to communicate. Effective public diplomacy is essential for acceptance of the EU's role and to the tailoring of the Union's activities to the specific locale in which it operates. This obviously has an equally important internal self-reaffirming aspect since the EU's role in the world also informs the internal identity of the Union. The influx of national diplomats into the EEAS, who bring with them often useful experience and knowledge in this domain, could be capitalised upon. More specifically, a number of programmes already exist to promote people-to-people contacts and these might usefully be harnessed and expanded within the framework of greatly enhanced EU public diplomacy;
3. **Rebuilding the Neighbourhood:** As a matter of course in the redefinition of all strategic partnerships, special attention should be paid to the balance between values and interests. The obvious priority for the EU will be in its immediate neighbourhood, where the EU is best placed to capitalise upon its 'power of attraction'. As proximate

neighbours, other states and organisations may also look to the EU for initiative and leadership. But, this must be on the basis of clear values and interests that speak to the younger generations in the southern and eastern neighbourhoods. The moral and political fortitude of the United States, the key European allies, as well as the EU itself, are likely to be questioned throughout the region.

The manner in which the EU addresses foment to its south will be critical in defining its wider global role. The Commission's *New response to a changing Neighbourhood* of 25 May 2011 is a step in the right direction, with the promise of greater support to neighbours engaged in building 'deep democracy', more 'inclusive economic development' and a strengthening of the regional dimension. The Commission's new approach is summarised under the rubric 'more-for-more' (i.e. the faster a neighbour progresses in its internal reforms, the more EU support will be available). By implication, 'less-for-less' also applies.

The Union's role has, however, been hampered by the complicated role of a number of Member States in the region and this is one reason why trade interests have tended to dominate in the EU context. Štefan Füle, Commissioner for Enlargement and ENP, noted that when negotiating and concluding association treaties with these countries and working on the action plan, compromises have been made 'when the Member States thought that in supporting the authorities we were also supporting stability in these countries.' The provision of new instruments, such as the Civil Society Facility, the European Endowment for Democracy and support to civil society organisations promoting media freedom are commendable, even if they challenge the notion of 'joint ownership' underpinning the EU's relations with individual neighbours. It will also make relations with the neighbours far more political and, in many cases, difficult (especially among those southern neighbours who have resisted any dialogue on what are perceived pejoratively as 'western values'). The demonstration by the EU of more overt conditionality in its relations with its neighbours may be of wider benefit to the Union in its relations beyond the neighbourhood since it will send a far clearer message about the type of actor the EU wishes to be on the international scene, as well as the desired balance between interests and values.

One of the most striking aspects of the Arab spring is the astonishing numbers of youths under the age of 30 throughout the region (and, indeed, even more so further south). This clearly suggests that the future of the region rests with young (often unemployed) people. The enticement of eventual deep free trade agreements with the EU ring hollow with many of the unemployed and dispossessed in the region. In order to win back some credibility among the youth in the region the EU will have to demonstrate that it is serious about values and principles, as argued above. This is not an easy sell and it will take time. One additional instrument that should be considered is the establishment of a College of the Mediterranean, bringing together young talented minds from the southern neighbourhood and the Member States, to engage in graduate level studies in the social sciences, law and public administration. The aim would be to draw together talent from the region and to establish enduring links across generations of students who, eventually, will become leaders and opinion shapers. This was, after all, the powerful rationale behind the College of Europe and, later on, the Central European University. The obvious locale for such a College would be Malta, historically a gateway to the Arab world. This could be supplemented by active executive development programmes for the region. It is clearly time for the EU to make an important and sustained investment for their futures – and ours.

Conclusion

The EU is at a juncture where fundamental choices about its future orientation must be faced. One fork in the road suggests growing irrelevance, low visibility and the inability to shape global change. The other road offers a chance to enhance the EU's visibility and to shape global change, commencing with the neighbourhood. It is an immense challenge, but it is also a rare window of opportunity. It was Jacques Poos who, in June 1991, with reference to EU's mediation efforts in Yugoslavia, proclaimed that this was the 'hour of Europe'. This claim met much subsequent ridicule, but he was nevertheless right that there will be decisive points where the manner and timing of the EU's response will shape its future. Now is such a time.

Notes

- ¹ See Cameron, F., *The EU and the BRICs*, Policy Paper No 3, Diplomatic System of the European Union, February 2011, at <http://dseu.lboro.ac.uk/publications/policypapers.html>.
- ² For an overview see Van Langenhove, L., *The EU as a Global Actor in a Multipolar World and Multilateral 2.0 Environment*, Egmont Paper 3, March 2010 (Brussels: Royal Institute for International Relations).
- ³ Address by Van Rompuy, H., *The Challenges for Europe in a Changing World*, College d'Europe, Bruges, 25 February 2010, PCE 34/10.
- ⁴ See Emerson, M. et al., *Upgrading the EU's Role as Global Actor: Institutions, Law and the Restructuring of European Diplomacy*, (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2011).
- ⁵ The term and theory are derived from Nassim N. Taleb, *The Black Swan*, (London: Penguin, 2010) (2nd edition).
- ⁶ *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing Security in a Changing World*, Brussels, 11 December 2008, S407/08.
- ⁷ It is easy with the current focus on the south to overlook the backsliding on democratic practices in the Ukraine or the condemnation and sanctions directed towards Belarus following the fraudulent December 2010 elections which, while warranted, did not evoke such strong action following numerous rigged elections among the autocratic southern neighbours.
- ⁸ Joint Communication to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, *A new response to a changing Neighbourhood*, European Commission, Brussels, 25 May 2011, COM(2011) 303
- ⁹ The Select Committee on the European Union Foreign Affairs, Defence and Development Policy Inquiry on Libya, Evidence Session No 2. Heard in Public. Questions 16-21, Tuesday 15 March 2011, Witnesses: Fule, S.