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Guest Editorial

Strengthening Europe's Role in World Affairs: Foreign Policy, Security and Immigration

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Too often in the past, when a great debate has raged about Europe's domestic policies and institutional arrangements, Europe has become introspective and distracted, unable to focus on the world around it, of which it is an increasingly important part. In 2002 Europe no longer has the luxury of being able to shut out the rest of the world while it tries to get on with its own business. What goes on in the rest of the world is now, for better or for worse, the European Union's business. Opting out is copping out.

One only has to pose these three questions, about foreign policy, security and migration, to see that these are three of the most important challenges that Europe faces in the years ahead and are far from being the easiest among them to which to respond effectively. To say this is not to belittle the significance of completing the Single Market and carrying through the Lisbon Process; of successfully managing the Economic and Monetary Union; of bringing to a conclusion the next wave of enlargement, to include the countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. All these are crucial tasks. But they are, in a sense, work already in hand, to which the policy commitments have already been made. Nor is it to minimize the work of the Convention on Europe and of the Inter-Governmental Conference which is to follow it in 2004. That too will require much negotiation and some hard political choices. But every opinion poll shows that foreign policy, security policy and immigration are seen by ordinary people as key tasks for the European Union, tasks that they want the Union to take on and to perform more effectively, tasks about which few would contend that the subsidiarity test is not passed. So even the elusive goals of legitimacy and public support may be more easy to achieve through effective action to strengthen Europe's role in world affairs than by another round of institutional reform; the least one can say is that the latter without the former is unlikely to achieve the desired results.

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Posing the question of who should speak for Europe to the outside world – Henry Kissinger's old tease 'whom should I telephone?' – is of course far from the be all and end all of a European foreign policy. A glance at contemporary Washington, or indeed at Washington on many occasions in the recent past, shows that even the world's only remaining superpower does not always provide an entirely straightforward answer to that question. But to find a voice, and one that will be listened to, Europe needs to have policies. It is already clear that we will have to grapple with a formidable range of thorny, sensitive and explosive issues in our own immediate vicinity – in the Balkans following the wars of the Yugoslav succession, in the Middle East, in the struggle against forms of terrorism which respect no geographical location and no international taboos on the use of weapons of mass destruction, in defining our relationship with the new Russia and the new Ukraine. And that list does not cover Harold Macmillan's 'events, dear boy, events' which will no doubt put Europe to the severest tests. Having policies does not, however, mean simply drawing up blueprints or strategies. That is not how foreign policy works. It has to be beaten out on the anvil of unforeseen crises and developments.

Wherever one looks one comes back again and again to the relationship between Europe and the USA, currently in one of its cyclical troughs. As we both discovered to our detriment in Bosnia in the 1990s, if we get at cross purposes with each other, each will end up by frustrating the attainment of the other's objectives. So any European foreign policy that is going to work will need to have built into its formulation and its implementation a capability for dialogue, for discreet and well informed dialogue, between the two sides of the Atlantic. Are the present arrangements sufficient and satisfactory? I doubt it. It is just too easy for the different European countries to be played off against one another. Is it possible to envisage an organic link which would facilitate the exchange of analyses and intelligence, and the conduct of a serious dialogue, before differences, which will not always be avoidable, become the subject of public debate, but which would not totally undermine Europe's autonomy in decision-making? Perhaps, but it will not be easy.

But one cannot duck the issue of Europe's own institutional handling of foreign policy, if only because the present situation is so unsatisfactory. Here are four suggestions:

– Currently there really are too many cooks in the kitchen. So any solution has to begin with removing, or at least reshaping, the role of some of them. The rotating Presidency is generally recognised to be a weak link, so it should be phased out, a first step being to ask Javier Solana, the High Representative, to chair the new Council for External Relations agreed at Seville. The role in external affairs of the President of the Commission should also be phased out, leaving the job closer to that of the Prime

Minister in the French Fifth Republic.That leaves the overlapping functions of the High Representative and the Commissioner for External Relations which could perhaps be best handled by the latter being double-hatted as Solana's deputy.

– Decision-making too is far from ideal. There is too strong a pull towards soggy consensus; the influence of the larger Member States is powerful, but resented by the smaller, and all the more so because of a lack of transparency. If the UN Security Council can vote, with a minimum number of required positive votes (9 out of 15) and the veto of the Permanent Members in reserve, is there nothing the European Union could learn from this? After all, the requirement of more than a numerical majority to take a decision gives the smaller Member States their own veto. And, if a veto in Europe required two and not one of the larger Member States to back it, would that not remove much of the arbitrary and capricious aspects of the UN system?
– The great untapped reserve of European foreign policy is the world-wide diplomatic network of its Member States and of the Commission. The present arrangements are, frankly, risible – a weekly EU meeting here, a lowest common denominator report there. What is surely required is a systematic review of the resources available and how best to put them to the use of the Union, without neglecting the various functions which the Member States will continue to conduct separately. An independent group of experienced politicians and practitioners could produce an action plan within a few months.
– The parliamentary dimension cannot be neglected; but it needs to take account of the inter-governmental nature of foreign and security policy. Why not establish a European Union Foreign Affairs Committee composed of members drawn from the European Parliament and from national parliaments?

Europe's Security and Defence Policy is currently in the doldrums. The work on capabilities designed to enable Europe to meet the headline goals set at Helsinki is so far producing unimpressive results. The present level of defence spending will not deliver what is required. The British government has now put some money where its mouth is and the French government is showing signs of following suit. But that will not be enough; and it would not make sense, politically or practically, if Europe's security policy became a kind of Anglo-French preserve. Nor will the present level of pooling resources suffice. In a number of areas – heavy lift, air-to-air refuelling and others – there will have to be a qualitative jump if targets are to be achieved in reality and not just on paper. What Europe should be aiming to do is not to catch up with the USA – that is clearly beyond our reach and it is not the USA, in any case, which represents a security threat to us – but rather to equip our armed

forces to deal with the challenges of the future rather than those of a Cold War past.

As if problems over capabilities were not enough, ESDP has also become ensnarled in a cat's cradle of Greco-Turkish rivalries similar to those with which NATO has had to struggle for decades. There is no substitute for patience and perseverance in dealing with these complexities, no viable short cut. What needs to be remembered at every stage is that there is no way back from ESDP which does not inflict considerable damage not only on the European Union but also on NATO. A NATO, a substantial proportion of whose members has just failed to measure up to its own self-assumed targets, will be a poor thing; and the idea that NATO will succeed in raising capabilities where ESDP has failed is simply not credible.

But the hottest political issue of the three is illegal immigration and all the other issues linked to it, including the fight against crime and terrorism. Here it seems to me that the Commission is right in arguing, as they were not over foreign policy, that we need more of what is called the Community method and less inter-governmentalism. The latter is not working well, its procedures are painfully slow and the outcome, as with the first Dublin Convention on asylum, flawed when it comes to implementation. But here too, the challenge is not just to match institutions to needs, it is to find the right balance in the policies we are trying to apply. Is Europe to be panicked by the, possibly ephemeral but in any case objectionable, electoral success of right wing populists into a knee-jerk, Fortress Europe reaction? Is there in any case the slightest chance of our being able to make such a policy work, without inflicting serious damage on ourselves and our neighbours? I believe the answer should be negative to both questions. What we do need to do is to develop a policy which builds on Europe's long tradition of providing asylum for those who are persecuted, which also meets our economic needs to supplement our own limited resources in manpower and which at the same time sets limits and constraints on the inflow so that the policies needed to integrate the new arrivals can cope and not be overwhelmed. Are we really so far away from the need to set Europe-wide quotas of the sort which the USA operated in its period of greatest immigration? Is this not an area where the concept of European solidarity needs to be applied and burdens need to be shared, not just passed on to the next person down the line?

Strengthening Europe's role in world affairs is not going to be simple and it is not going to be quick. There will be no clear watershed, no highly visible breakthrough, like there was for the Single Market or the Single Currency. There will probably be as many setbacks as there are successes. But in the long run these issues will matter to the Union every bit as much as will domestic ones and will determine the future of the whole project. So we need to put our backs into it.