

Guest Editorial

The EU's External Action: Moving to the Frontline

1 2014 A YEAR OF CHANGE

At the time of writing of this article,¹ the EU is in the midst of an institutional renewal which will set the direction of the Union for the next five years. A new Parliament was elected on 25 May, Jean-Claude Juncker was nominated by the European Council as President of the European Commission on 27 June and by the time this editorial is published, the names of the Council President, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the full line-up of Commissioners will have been known. This renewal is partly about personalities, but what is as important will be the decisions Europe is making on its agenda for the coming years.

This usual 'changing of the guard' happens every five years but this time, it comes during a period when the EU is at one of the most significant cross-roads in its integration history. The European Union has just overcome the acute phase of the sovereign debt crisis that at one stage seemed to call into question not just monetary union but the European project itself. Unrest in countries at our borders presents Europe with tough choices. New geopolitical balances are appearing at our doorstep, East and South, as well as further away on the Asian Pacific rim or sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, the results of the recent European Parliament elections have confirmed a certain disconnect between authorities (both in Brussels and nationally) and the voters.

The five-year strategic agenda agreed by the leaders of Europe on 27 June comprised five overarching priorities, one of which is 'The Union as a strong global actor'. In the coming years, the credibility test for the European Union will be whether we will be able to consolidate our role as a political player on the world stage.

¹ Submitted for publication on 30 Jun. 2014.

2 EU EXTERNAL ACTION IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Let me first look at how the EU external action has evolved during the past five years:

2.1 BETTER INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Over the past five years, the EU has redesigned its institutions to improve its ability to act globally.

The Lisbon Treaty ushered in some important institutional innovations. Most significant was the creation of the role of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP), the role of the President of the Council and finally the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS).

The HR/VP has set up the European External Action Service devoted to improving the coherence of EU's external action. The EEAS is now in its fourth year of existence; it has proven that it is possible to combine the strengths and personnel of Commission, Council and national diplomatic services. Thanks to the work of Catherine Ashton, the trust of Presidents Barroso and Van Rompuy, and the support from Member States and the European Parliament, we now have a first-class diplomatic service in Brussels.

We have strengthened our capacity to respond to crises around the world and to put together crisis management missions and operations, mobilizing over 7000 EU military and civilian personnel with about thirty missions launched since 2003. Our strength lies in a comprehensive approach enabling us to combine diplomatic, political, military, trade, development and humanitarian actions.

2.2 SOME EMERGING TRENDS

These institutional improvements have started to impact positively on our ability to work together in the area of foreign affairs. In this context, let me distil some trends that have been emerging since Lisbon.

First, the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is more proactive and responsive. Foreign Ministers meet regularly, at least once every four weeks. The HR/VP sets the agenda and chairs their meetings. We have streamlined the preparatory process so that the FAC is able to address all major foreign policy issues in real time, often with extraordinary meetings and with a more 'activist' stance. The awareness of Member States of the need to work in closer coordination was never higher than now. Even in cases of initial political disagreement, as in the earlier phases of the Libya crisis in 2011, closer interaction in the FAC facilitated shared assessments

and joint EU action, including the opening of our office in Benghazi as one of the first international missions there. Through close regular cooperation, a good understanding and a division of responsibilities have been established by Foreign Ministers, allowing the HR/VP to entrust missions to certain Foreign Ministers on her behalf, thereby multiplying the EU's ability to act. For example, as the EU tried to mediate a solution at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, the HR/VP was chairing the FAC in Brussels and leading the discussions on targeted sanctions on those responsible for the violence in Maidan, while the foreign ministers of Poland, Germany and France were on the ground in Kiev negotiating on her behalf the agreement between the former President and the three opposition leaders.

Second, we are using more joined-up policy making between Europe and Member States to build a comprehensive approach to crisis prevention and management. A truly comprehensive approach combines the security, development and political capabilities of the EU when addressing crises. This is an ambitious goal, yet there are clearly some good examples. The anti-piracy naval operation off the coast of Somalia is part of a larger, more articulate engagement with the Horn of Africa, comprising support to the African Union peace-keeping mission in Somalia, EU operations for the training of national security capacity, EU diplomatic presence, development programmes and wider regional cooperation.

Third, there is stronger focus on mediation. The EU is a regional integration organization, able to speak and act on behalf of its twenty-eight Members, but not representing a single country's viewpoint. It has access to military assets through its crisis management mandate, but it is not a military power posing potential security threats. It has soft power instruments, from sanctions, to stabilization funds and from electoral observation to civilian-administration know-how. With these assets, and under the leadership of HR/VP Ashton, the EU has increased its role as an international mediator, consolidating and accompanying resolution to crises. Our experience in these areas is growing. The very important deals mediated by the HR/VP in Kosovo/Serbia and in Iran are the best known examples. But there are other examples that are highly significant such as promoting measures to accompany change in Burma/Myanmar, responding to the crisis in Mali in 2013 and supporting the peace process in the Philippines.

Fourth, there is stronger focus on partnerships. First and foremost with the UN where the EU has obtained a stronger role in the General Assembly and in the Security Council, intervening on behalf of its Member States. The HR/VP has an in-depth exchange of views with the Security Council once a year, to take stock of cooperation and strengthen coordination. This is an unprecedented development: consultations between the EU and the UN before and during

peace-keeping operations or crisis management missions are now part of a new routine.

We have a longstanding cooperation with NATO based on the Berlin+ arrangements dating back to 2003. We do not only share intelligence but also can use NATO capabilities for EU-led civil and military operations. We have launched two missions under 'Berlin+': CONCORDIA in FYROM and EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The transatlantic relationship has also been strengthened. Regular high-level consultations take place between the EU and the US on all major foreign policy issues – for example the face-to-face meetings between Cathy Ashton and President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry to coordinate our joint response to developments on the Ukrainian-Russian border.

Relations with other strategic partners are another area of priority action. I am thinking in particular of Asia where we have not only broadened our relations with China and Japan to include more frequent discussion of a range of security issues but also considerably strengthened our cooperation with The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

3 WHAT DO WE WANT THE EU TO DO IN THE WORLD?

These emerging trends are encouraging: a more active FAC, joined-up policy making and assessment, a clear focus on mediation and partnerships. But they are not enough. The key question is what we want the EU to do in the world. And in my view there is one clear answer: we need stronger political will to work together and talk to each other before talking to the press. We want to work hand in hand, to be more effective and project the European values of rule-based systems, multilateralism and development through the protection of human rights as well as trade and economic exchange.

The main reason for this need to act together in Europe, Brussels institutions and Member States, is that the EU is now called to play a role in the front line of foreign policy. New geopolitical realities remind us every day that if we want to exercise any influence in today's world, we need to coordinate efforts, share intelligence and agree on action.

Let me give you just a few examples of this new role:

- The crisis in Ukraine is the latest and clearest such example. The rightful aspirations of a vast majority of the Ukrainian population for closer ties with the EU called for a strong European response. The EU is what inspired crowds in Kiev. Therefore, the EU has to provide the necessary support to the Ukrainian authorities to keep the country united,

de-escalate tensions with Russia and the Russian-speaking minorities and build a new legitimate and democratic platform.

- The transformation in the Arab world will continue to call for the EU to act according to its principles, and support democratic inclusive transitions, as well as economic growth and trade. The EU needs to sharpen its analytical tools to better understand where and when to offer support in the complex evolving country contexts where regional, national, religious and ethnic factors are closely inter-related.
- Last but not least, our presence in crisis hotspots, offering mediation, providing support and intervening on behalf of the EU and its Member States is a demanding job. It draws attention to the EU as a new active presence in some of the most difficult crisis theatres in the world. This engagement requires facing risks, both politically and in some cases personally. In some extreme cases lives have been lost, by brave personnel working in and for our delegations, missions and operations. We cannot venture lightly into these situations and we owe it to the local population suffering in such crises as well as to the personnel we deploy to ensure we have clear objectives, adequate resources and common aims.

This is what we should expect from the EU: to be able to take up this front-line role in external relations and to build on our strengths and mobilize all our diplomatic skills, programmes and crisis management capabilities for comprehensive action towards global peace, justice and prosperity. We must continue to refine our skills and our ability to act since the nature of the foreign policy challenge is constantly evolving with the growing role of non-state actors, or of non-traditional security issues such as cyber threats or the tactics being deployed in the Ukraine crisis.

Europe cannot afford to be a bystander in the geopolitical game which is unfolding before our eyes, in our neighbourhood, in the extended neighbourhood in Africa or in Asia. We are a deeply concerned stakeholder in all these events with a distinct European perspective and role to play, complementary to that of even our closest allies.

I can think of no better way in which to demonstrate the relevance of the EU to our citizens than in moving to the front line to address the threats and the challenges we face while seeking to project our values.

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