

# CHALLENGE EUROPE

## Challenges and new beginnings: Priorities for the EU's new leadership

September 2014



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## Renewal through international action? Options for EU foreign policy

Rosa Balfour<sup>1</sup>

*"Actually, this time it is serious. Foreign policy is now compulsory for the EU"*

Robert Cooper, Lecture given at the EU Institute for Security Studies  
Annual Conference, Paris, 11-12 September 2014

### A time for choices

The time has come for the EU to become more curious of the world around it, open and receptive to different ideas, and more articulate and thoughtful about its own. This is a somewhat anthropomorphic description of what would be needed to 'mature' into a global actor. The EU has promoted and managed globalisation while pretending that its political dimension would not require attention. This has led to it punching below its weight globally. Now it is abundantly clear that the systemic weaknesses of globalisation require international action and that the management of internal affairs cannot be divorced from the external context: decision time has come.

Two decades since the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU has become more active internationally and taken some steps to improve its capabilities. While it has moved at snail pace on its hard security capabilities, hiding behind the luxury of external guarantees of the US and NATO, it has endowed itself with a broad, diverse, and innovative tool box for external action reflecting its 'whole of government' approach. It has issued plenty of strategies and policy documents, established relations with governments around the world and, to a much lesser degree, with societies, and has continued its contribution to multilateral institutions.

Yet it falls short of widespread hopes and expectations inside the EU and from some of its international partners to become a fully-fledged global actor. The Union has remained a self-referential and internally indulgent power rather than become an actor deeply engaged with the rest of the world politically as much as it is interconnected economically and culturally. Now the time for making choices has come.

Never before have the intimate connections between the 'domestic' and the 'international' realms been so evident. Global patterns of insecurity and turmoil, state fragility, the scramble for natural resources, climate change are felt in Europe in the price of heating, in the loss of life in the Mediterranean waters, in the rise of xenophobia and of fear of the unknown. Europe's eroding welfare system and slow growth has consequences on what should be thriving multi-lingual school courtyards, on solidarity between multi-cultural and multi-religious communities, and on Europe's ability to connect, rather than conflict, with citizens across the world through the exchange of ideas, people, goods and services.

European politicians seek international trade agreements to secure sources of economic growth while citizens become increasingly insulated and allergic to contacts with the outside world. EU born and bred citizens are moving to fight insurgency wars in the name of religion, while their elected politicians fail to prevent the break-down of those states and security on their borders.

If Europe wants to address its key internal priorities, it needs to do so in an international context of growing and deepening interdependence which the EU itself has contributed to create.

The nexus to unravel is conceptual, strategic, policy-related, and organisational: how are the 'domestic' and 'international' inter-related, and what are the implications? How should the EU position itself globally? What kind of player should it aim to be? What are the implications on policy and how to identify the priorities? How to organise the institutions and division of labour to make the EU fit for the challenge? Whatever the choices and ambition, these four levels need each other for a fuller realisation of the EU's global potential.

### **Options for Europe's global role**

Current and future global trends impose an overarching choice about the EU's global role.

There are two politically possible directions. The first works on the assumption that the current state of EU politics suggests that to keep the EU hanging together it is necessary to lower the level of ambition. A more realist reading of Europe's declining position in the world advises the identification of a smaller and less ambitious set of priorities which could ensure survival and possibly, in the future, renewal.

The second sees the urgency of renewal precisely through international activity. The EU has plenty of assets, experiences and practices which can still be relevant and useful for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. As it was a unique experiment in peace-building after a century of wars which erupted at the heart of Europe and crumbling empires, it now is a unique example of cooperative management of the post-modern world, albeit still imperfect and in need of some fixing.

Both directions have distinctive policy implications, require the next EU leadership to adjust their institutions to address the challenges, and call for a leap ahead in political and strategic cohesion – even if outside the traditional mind-sets through which EU integration is usually seen.

#### ***Option 1: Do less but better***

The meta-narrative about Europe's decline is coupled with the emergence of other powers, which frequently entertain a general 'anti-Western' agenda. Juxtapose this environment to the EU's track record in foreign policy, and the case for downscaling is strong. Many of the EU's foreign policy 'brands' have become redundant in the midst of international turmoil, from the Strategic Partnerships to the European Neighbourhood Policy. This loss of

confidence, all the more striking when compared to the post-Cold War ambitions of shaping a new multilateral, rules-based and cooperative world, has already led to a toning down of rhetoric and to an appeal for realistically-based objectives. The EU should not think 'big' if it can only act 'small'. It should focus on what it is good at and avoid raising expectations it cannot and does not want to meet.

The consequences of the crisis that Europe has been undergoing since 2008 also advise a focus on internal matters to make the EU relevant to its citizens and to refound solidarity in Europe *before* shifting the outlook to the rest of the world. The priorities of the recently designated Presidents of the Commission and the European Council certainly suggest an urgency accorded to economic recovery, citizens' confidence and the pressing need to avoid fragmentation.

Because of interdependence and the politics of scale, however, the EU cannot abandon the international game altogether. Member States would cooperate on a foreign policy with a more focused and determined pursuit of priorities which reflect the main collective challenges and interests. One consequence would be to abandon the already shaken normative rhetoric built up since the 1990s. The argument is that the EU's insistence on 'values' has not been successful; the world has become more hostile; and Europe has lost its traction and its friends also as a consequence of its attempts to proselitise about democracy. The rest of the world, so the argument goes, is not interested in the EU model; on the contrary, some parts of the world are turning against it.

Following this interpretation, the EU would abandon any ambition to have a global voice and just focus on a few, selected interests where the Member States agree, and pursue these without championing visions of the world. The end of the normative model would in time lead to a specific set of policy priorities only: energy security, the pursuit of trade deals and improvement of trade diplomacy, crisis containment and some resolution attempts on the EU's periphery, migration control, differentiation and selective engagement with third countries. It could also entail a progressive abandonment of some goals of EU foreign policy: shaping global governance in favour of common rules and universal principles, human rights diplomacy, supporting peace world-wide. Or it could continue paying lip service to these without investing into making them the cornerstone of a renewed approach.

Even such retreat towards more clearly identifiable and delimited goals would require strong backing of the Member States and EU institutions (which in turn means that the structures for EU foreign policy need continued attention, as will be argued at the end of this paper); the politics of EU foreign policy would still be needed even for a lower scale of ambition. European capitals would still need to go through their differences, especially over relations with Russia, if they were to focus on a more narrow definition of EU-wide interests, such as energy diversification and security. It is questionable whether the EU would be able to pursue such a strategically planned international role with identifiable goals based on clear-cut interests. This is precisely the EU's weakness, due to its complex structure based on 28 democracies stretching from the Atlantic to Russia, from the Arctic to the Saharan desert, working together on the basis of required unanimity.

## ***Option 2: International engagement as a means for EU renewal***

Beyond the EU's ability to act as a hard-nosed single power, albeit with limited ambitions and outreach, it is worth speculating whether it is in its interest to do so. The economic crisis has had a huge impact on the EU's global role and image precisely because the crisis has undermined many of the assets for which Europe was seen as a model. Basic human rights have been under threat within the EU, with the erosion of its welfare systems and economic growth models. If the EU had been frequently accused of preaching standards it was not respecting itself, the crisis has brought evidence to this accusation. With growing signs of intolerance and xenophobia across all European countries and dissatisfaction within some communities of non-European origin, the solidarity model that the EU proposed abroad rings hollow. If then the EU withdraws its support for the empowerment of people and societies elsewhere in the pursuit of its 'interests', its attraction as a model will no doubt diminish further.

Yet it is precisely those assets that have been under threat which are appreciated externally. The nexus between getting Europe's house in order and the consequent impact on the EU's global profile has never been so obvious. The EU has been a live example of multilateralism, devising complex and (imperfectly) representative structures to manage internal diversity. These are still observed by outsiders as interesting. What is less understood is the obsession with them, not their value in themselves.

The EU has been a unique example of cooperative security and peace-building, through the creation of complex diplomatic and negotiating processes which have led to de-securitisation of contentious issues through economic integration and interdependence. These are still seen as the best means to overcome insecurity, as the continuing requests to join the EU demonstrate. The EU has fostered normative socialisation more than any other international organisation, including those created precisely to promote the spread of norms and international law. To date, no other model has proven better suited to offer some reference points in governing international turbulence. The EU as regional integration and peace project is relevant in an Asia, which is seeing rise in military expenditure and worrying patterns of escalating confrontation, or in Latin America, where populism has not solved the welfare gap within its populations. In a world which is exchanging more goods, ideas, services and people, Europe's economic integration model is significant. And the rising middle classes across the globe may be interested in Europe's history of democratisation, class struggle and rights' development.

This does not mean that the EU should reinvent itself by praising its own model. On the contrary, it needs to be self-critical about its own model and about the historical conditions in which it came about. The point is that some of the EU's experience can form a basis to engage in a renewed dialogue with countries and citizens around the world to find new cooperative ways to address common challenges. This would give the international and transnational matter a new centrality around which institutions, governments and policies need to work. It is about addressing challenges through concerted analysis and action, rather than about creating competences, silos, mandates and boundaries.

The EU itself does not need to make a federalist quantum leap to reinvent its international self. It has the institutions, the tools, the resources, and 28 governments. If these acted concertedly, together they would not be ignored.

From a cognitive point of view, what is required is a common strategic analysis of global developments, a recognition that the sovereign illusion is actually damaging to the state is supposed to defend, the acknowledgement that there are more common interests that are vital and threatened by existential risks than particularistic ones, and a new pursuit of solidarity on international issues. These would be enabling steps towards a diversified, flexible Europe acting on the global stage through its EU and national institutions in the name of a shared understanding that it is more convenient to work together than apart.

Whichever path the next EU leadership will embark upon, there are some issues that require fixing – and these cannot wait much longer.

### **The prioritisation conundrum: devising a strategy or thinking strategically?**

Discussions on EU strategy usually fall in the 'Christmas tree' risk of collecting a wide range of priorities that all require actions without producing a clear strategy. The trouble with international politics is that it pushes and pulls actors in different directions. This said, the broad priorities for the next mandate are already clear: the next mandate will have to address energetically, in depth, and with foresight relations with the EU's neighbours (including Russia and Turkey). This will require consolidating the Union's crisis management structures, dealing with energy matters (internally and externally), and will impose some long overdue thinking on European defence, both in terms of its industry and its existential purpose.

In turn, this will by necessity have implications for the more global management of natural resources and climate change, which will lead to rethinking the EU's global network, its friends and allies, its trade relations, its multilateral preferences. Finally, the broad range of emerging risks has been amply reported on: population growth and increased resources consumption pose global risks for societal and environmental security; vectors of connectivity, from the internet to expanding international travel, all have potential side-effects for cybersecurity, global financial institutions, or the spread of pandemic diseases; the fragility of states puts populations at risk of poverty, exclusion, forced mobility, to name but a few.

The risks are evident, and they inevitably end up in the Christmas tree. The challenge is not so much in prioritising their importance but in finding the best ways to address them. The scale of the challenges and the intangible quality of many of them because of their interconnectedness, means that they cannot be addressed simply by building institutions or creating new policies. What is needed is lateral thinking, flexible networks, knowledge exchange, and cooperative frameworks within the EU and between the Union and the rest of the world.

Externally, the EU needs to learn to work better with others. The internal negotiating process is so tough that when the Union then turns to discuss the challenges with other countries, it

has little room for taking on board different perspectives. The recognition of the need to switch to a 'listening mode' does not seem to have produced much by way of results: the global space occupied by the EU's friends seems to be shrinking and in need of a new diplomatic activism.

The EU need not be a bloc or a power in all areas, but it does and can engage with a very broad spread of themes of global relevance. Flexibility should be the keyword – flexibility of representation (it need not be the EU, but a representative of its institutions, Member States or even societies); flexibility of engagement, reflecting the actual interest, influence, feasibility and efficiency; flexibility of means, where in some cases economic clout will make the difference, in others a tailor-made civilian mission.

While governments have always been the prime actors in world politics, the EU has in recent years increasingly tried to engage and give roles to people and their organisations in its international relations. This focus on people rather than on states better reflects the world in making. States and their governments, of course, are unavoidable, but the dilution of power and the continuing emergence of new societal actors create new opportunities for strengthening transnational networks connecting Europeans with citizens around the world.

The EU has always claimed to be a champion of multilateralism but has made poor efforts at reforming its institutions, among other things blocked by its own inability to overcome the post-World War Two representation in the United Nations. But for multilateralism to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to avoid new global divisions, international institutions need to renew themselves to become more participatory and democratic. Together with representation comes responsibility. The relative decline of the West and the emergence of new actors requires more burden-sharing in addressing global risks, from security to climate change and resource exploitation.

For the EU this also entails diplomatic work to deepen ties with its friends and allies, and court more countries into its network. Instead of institutionalising relations with so-called "strategic partners", which frequently are neither partners nor are the relations strategic, the EU should more mundanely better connect with its friends, sharing ideas and exchanging views, while seeking to expand that network, through multilateral, regional and bilateral channels.

### **Fixing the institutions: making the system work for the new leaders**

The Lisbon Treaty took a first stab at making the EU institutions fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Implicitly, it gave up on the longstanding dichotomy between a supranational, federal foreign policy (the single voice debate) and the intergovernmental sovereign approach by mixing the two concepts together and hoping that a more coherent foreign policy would come out of the shaker. This has not (yet) happened, and the 2009-2014 mandate was wrought with divisions and new sources of disunity.

It is unfortunate that the whole summer debate on the next mandate focused exclusively on leadership and insufficiently at structures and challenges: leaderships and personalities play an important role in international diplomacy, but without the structures there is not much

that leaders can do. How to fix the structures is clear. The world cannot wait further for the EU to oil its nuts and bolts: put simply, the system just has to overcome its current dysfunctionality – asap.

The proposal for the organisation of the next Commission addresses many of the shortcomings of the previous system. First and foremost, it lays the basis for a different relationship between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission by placing the headquarters of the High Representative (HR) in the Berlaymont's building, thus strengthening the HR's role as Vice-President of the Commission. Secondly, it organises the College in 'projects' with overlapping competences and responsibilities, forcing the next Commissioners and their officials to work together. While a messy start is to be expected, this organisation will help cross-fertilisation and horizontal coordination. The creation of an external policy group, meeting regularly and chaired by the HR/VP who will be *primus inter pares* in the Commission, and not just in the Foreign Affairs Council, will give leadership and allow for burden-sharing in the many tasks that the HR/VP cannot carry out without deputies. It could even foster more innovative and cross-cutting analysis of challenges and solutions to them, in a way that few states have been able to do, giving the EU as a whole a competitive edge as far as policies and tools are concerned.

The EEAS and its crucial roles, however, must not be forgotten. Fixing the problems in the EU headquarters will also enable its global network to work better. Some of the EU's 139 Delegations have proven a microcosm of what a global EU could become: ears and eyes on the ground interpreting complex events and their meaning for Europe, a strong presence around the world, contacts and outreach with a multiplicity of state and non-governmental actors, good cooperation and burden-sharing with the Member States' missions abroad, network-building, bottom-up understanding of local and global developments, the importance of individuals and people in making a difference.

This asset needs investment if it is to become exemplary, through sound staffing and training policies and by boosting resources to make them better operational. If EU foreign policy were more joined-up with national European foreign policies and with Commission-led external relations, Europe as a whole would benefit from a most formidable world-wide network of diplomats and officials.

The Member States will need to be better and more drawn into the system, especially in view of the shift of power towards the Commission. The temptation to 'go it alone' remains strong in many European capitals and signs of nationalisation have been frequently evident. But beyond some national delusions, Member States would struggle globally even more than alone. Emerging patterns of intra-EU and NATO cooperation are showing a preference for minilateral alliances and solutions, but there has been a parallel tendency to consult and discuss with each other more systematically at EU level through the Foreign Affairs Council, the Political and Security Committee and the European Council. These discussions need to be encouraged, coordinated, often steered, and sometimes driven by the EU leaders, but ideas and solutions need to come from all parts of the system, not just the foreign policy structures. Here, Member States have an important role to play.

## **Between a rock and a hard place: the reality check**

Disentangling short-term consequences of the crisis from the longer-term structural trends is no easy task for observers of contemporary politics. It is pedestrian to forecast disaster; irresponsible to underestimate the depth of discontent and its potential for change. Political leaders too are part of this subjective process of understanding continuity and change.

Even if one avoids Cassandra-type scenarios, the next leadership will have to steer the EU between a rock and a hard place. The fragility of national contexts in Europe has made political life more unpredictable and leaders more vulnerable to accommodating short-term particular interests. This does not create a context in which longer-term vision plays much role in political choice; nor does it support leaders in search of a positive legacy to be remembered.

At the same time, the reality is that EU Member States cannot afford *not* to cooperate more closely on foreign policy, notwithstanding their lack of an appetite to do so. Global trends will demand more EU not more small states – more incisive and faster responses, deeper and longer term approaches which are not a mishmash of different priorities and a long list of initiatives.

The choice is between levels of ambition. Whichever level will require work, commitment, ingenuity, inspiration. Feeding into the that ambition a compelling narrative about a new form of international multilevel engagement with states and citizens in an age of interdependence, while resting on the solid roots of peace-building, could become a source of renewal for Europe as a whole.

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## **Endnote**

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