

EU EXTERNAL ACTION: TIME FOR A STRATEGIC REBOUND



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On the occasion of the publication of the "Think Global - Act European. Thinking Strategically about the EU's External Action" report, *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* organised a conference in Brussels on 15 May 2013 in order to present the recommendations of 16 European think tanks on how to strengthen EU external action. This Synthesis summarises the main elements of the debate.

Introduction: The impact of euro-pessimism

António Vitorino, President of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, believes the EU has entered a new phase of its common endeavour. "Institutions and citizens alike express existential doubts about the EU's added value". The results of the recent PEW global assessment of public opinion clearly identify that the growth of mistrust across member states can no longer be disregarded.

Pascal Lamy, Director-General of the WTO and Honorary President of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, recalls that the economic crisis is providing the ingredients feeding into euro-pessimism, which has now reached an unprecedented scale. "This pessimism is now turning into scepticism or even outright rejection of the European cause". Indeed the EU has lost credibility, not so much because of diplomatic failures or the lack of external engagement but - in many ways more dramatically - because of the fading belief both within and outside the EU, that the future of Europeans lies in their unity. In this context, António Vitorino concludes, "having a common foreign policy is key not only to have a say in world affairs, to defend values, but it is also key for the internal legitimisation of the European project".

Stefano Manservigi, Director General for Home Affairs at the European Commission, applauds the scope of the 'Think Global - Act European' (TGAE) report¹, underlining that it is of the utmost importance to refocus on thinking strategically, as we are well equipped in what concerns tools, but less so in terms of coherence. Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister for Defence, as well as Elmar Brok, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the

European Parliament, both welcome the timing of the report and the fact that it offers material to inform the European Council's December 2013 meeting on the topic of Common Security and Defence Policy as well as the upcoming revision of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The conviction that there is a compelling and urgent need to re-legitimise European external action is conveyed clearly and forcefully by the report's recommendations, recognises Eneko Landaburu, Former Director General External Relations at the European Commission. The



issue of legitimisation, he underlines, is a common one and deserves a collective mobilisation so as to deliver concrete answers to the questions that our citizens have been posing.

1. The EU in the global competition over values

In many ways, the global battle over values will be a battle over regulatory convergence. As Pascal Lamy emphasises, whilst regulation tariffs or subsidies are in many ways ideologically neutral, regulation is not². The real issue of global competition will be how we harmonise discrepancies in standards and norms. This convergence will have to take place in

the name of market efficiency. This is where values will come into direct competition.

Within this context of increasing global competition and at a time when the attractiveness of the EU model is fading, David O’Sullivan, Chief Operating Officer of the EEAS underlines how – quoting President Jacques Delors – “the process of integration is a race against our ability to organise ourselves internally in a way which enables us to lead and shape external events, and if we are too slow we will instead be driven by these”.

1.1. The European Union - the global ‘village idiot’?

The EU needs to tackle the question of its positioning in global affairs. This requires a strategic understanding of the long-term challenges it faces – an understanding which at times it seems to lack. Nevertheless it would be an error to attribute the EU’s strategic weakness to an inherent trait of the Union; whilst it is clear that our role in global affairs is inevitably going to diminish, it is erroneous to suppose that the EU is fairing worse than its partners in positioning itself globally.

Philip Lowe, Director General for Energy at the European Commission, points out how indeed in many fields the EU manages to “punch above its weight”. Yet as underlines David O’Sullivan, the EU’s nation-state counterparts are better equipped at communicating a sense of having a global agenda due to institutional set up, and despite internal differences they manage to stay on message once a policy has been decided. On the other hand, one of the EU’s singular characteristics is the extremely transparent and public nature of its institutional debates, which tend to highlight the difficulty of the consensus-building process and allow for the expression of persisting contrasting positions within the EU system even once an institutional decision has been made. This can often make the EU’s decision-making process appear confused and extremely messy.

“The EU is not the village idiot”, stresses Pascal Lamy. It is capable and willing to defend its own interests. This issue is linked to the EU’s construction rather than its very ‘nature’. Undeniably, the EU’s capacity to integrate and pursue highly politicised objectives remains limited, as highlighted by the TGAE report. Defining a set of EU strategic interests further requires rationalising 27 sets of disparate interests and then ensuring the coherent pursuit

of these across the complex and convoluted EU operational system. This means guaranteeing coherence between the internal and external dimensions within EU policy fields, as well as across different policy fields. As Elmar Brok points out, this is hardly self-evident when different institutional bodies possessing different legal background are called upon to overcome institutional incongruence and positively pursue a unique and coordinated policy. As underlined by the TGAE report, indeed, “the fragmentation of external policies and the delimitation of tasks between the Commission and the EEAS stands in the way of a more political mindset; which is a prerequisite for developing a comprehensive forward looking strategy”. “Building a bridge between the inter-governmental and the communitarian approach on a staff level remains an essential priority – efforts have been made – yet not enough has been achieved”, emphasises Elmar Brok. Simplifying and clarifying the roles of EU bodies is still necessary in order to ensure the effectiveness of the Union’s tools. The role to be played by the EEAS in ensuring horizontal coordination – its mandate being precisely that of “bringing greater coherence to external policy” – must be once again reiterated, argues Hans Martens, Chief Executive of the European Policy Centre (EPC), presenting the migration chapter of the TGAE report.

1.2. A distorted geographic radar

The EU’s incoherence, coupled with the largely inward looking policies pursued over the past 50 years, have brought about a situation where the EU seems to lack an outward-looking global strategy and endowing the EU with a somewhat distorted geographic radar. As highlighted by Pascal Lamy, whilst the EU-US partnership remains crucial, the EU is failing to sufficiently anticipate global evolutions and embrace a ‘new narrative’ – China and Africa most notably are insufficiently ‘on the radar’ of EU priorities. With respects to China the need to find a European way of engaging with an ever more economically and politically potent partner, appears manifest. As advocated by the TGAE report, the EU is to find equilibrium between its recent increase in assertiveness – which must be pursued to ensure protection of EU economic interests in China – and continued support for constructive cooperation in areas of shared interest, of which Pascal Lamy reassures that there are plenty. Africa in particular is “a China next door” and yet EU policies are distant and inadequate, failing to understand the huge economic opportunity that the former represents

- particularly, as identified in the report, as a source of young labour force. Much more can and should be done in terms of growth investment opportunities in Africa. Besides, Elvire Fabry, Senior Research Fellow at *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* and director of the TGAE report, notes that “for the EU to succeed in maintaining global influence it must behave not only as an economic actor but also as a political one, notably by refocusing European external action towards its neighbourhood, where it is being called upon to take on more responsibility”. Indeed whilst the EU objectively remains, despite the crisis, a relevant geo-economic actor, it is barely a geo-political one capable of anticipating new geopolitical challenges and how these may affect EU security and prosperity. A globally relevant EU is at odds with a weak EU in its neighbourhood.

1.3. The plague of EU (un)reactivity

Yet the EU also faces a serious problem of poor reactivity - a weakness that is all too manifest when it comes to EU defence. As Jean-Yves Le Drian underlines, national reaction times are not comparable to those of the EU - a truth that has been highlighted in the Malian crisis. “If the EU cannot gain the necessary reactivity, the affair of EU defence is over”³. We must work on simplifying the EU’s modus operandi in times of crisis - the relationship between tools, concepts and the rapidity of decision-making, otherwise the EU’s global role will be compromised”. The EU’s slow reaction time is not a singularity of its defence sector, much to the contrary it also undermines well-established policies such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), where it is unable to offer short-term solutions to partners in times of crisis, a weakness best illustrated in the case of Egypt’s liquidity crisis. “As they drowned, we tried to teach them to swim”, admonishes Hugues Mingarelli, Managing Director for the Middle East and Southern Neighbourhood at the EEAS. As the TGAE report explains, there is an evident mismatch between on the one hand the EU’s long-term policies and institutional slowness, and on the other the fast-paced changes and urgent demands of its neighbours. Indeed, unrest in Tunisia and Syria also points to the limits of the 2011 ENP revision - the fast yet rather formalistic European response to the Arab Spring.



2. Leveraging the misplaced weight of the EU

Yves Bertoncini, Director of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, recalls that whilst the EU has been historically considered an economic giant but a political dwarf, “the EU will be less and less an economic giant, making the issue of leveraging its weight - be this economic or political - ever more central”.

In order to avoid excessive introspection in a time of shifting geopolitical tectonic plates, the current context of austerity and of the Union’s general loss of credibility, exhort the EU to lead by example, and focus on how to leverage internal achievements to ensure its external relevance. Indeed, David O’Sullivan advocates that external strength is a function of internal cohesiveness, and thus to achieve external objectives “one cannot simply start from the external and work backwards”, but must build solid internal foundations for strengthening external consolidation.

2.1. The effective representation of EU economic prowess

Jean-Luc Demarty, Director General for Trade at the European Commission, maintains that “whilst not perfect, trade offers a good example of how Europeans can work efficiently together” and of how internal policy can contribute to the effective pursuit of foreign policy goals. Notable examples being the Free Trade Agreement signed with Korea or the defence of EU interests pursued in the negotiation of Russia and China’s accession to the WTO. Common trade policy has illustrated what can be achieved if we are able to harness our internal market”. Yet beyond the Commission’s mandate for negotiation of market access, there is insufficient emphasis placed on trade as a coordinated EU external action, and member states prefer to pursue competing trade diplomacies at the expense of their long-term economic competitiveness. The underlying question remains that of defining clearly what it is that we

want to achieve with the EU's weight. Indeed a lot more can be done internally to leverage EU performance externally - the single market on its own will deliver more productivity and growth in the short term than international liberalisation. Completing it, and in particular doing so in the services sector, remains an essential tool for EU economic performance, spurring growth internally whilst providing added value for partners and thus more negotiating power for the EU. Leveraging EU economic performance though also requires strengthening the EU's external representation in macroeconomic and financial affairs, Daniela Schwarzer, Head of the EU Integration Research Division at SWP and Federico Steinberg, Senior Analyst at Real Instituto Elcano, presenting the economic chapter of the TGAE report, argue that it would particularly benefit from the creation of a single voice for the eurozone, in turn contributing to project European norms globally.

2.2. EU strategic resources: making use of the EU's regulatory power

Sustainable development may well be the field where external ambition is most driven by internal achievements. Recent international sustainable development negotiations have highlighted that despite EU efforts, in a time of global economic crisis, the Union's ability to influence debate in the field has been drastically reduced. The EU must realise that change starts at home, yet the EU's efforts are often frustrated by poor implementation across member states. Sami Andoura, Senior Researcher at *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, presenting the strategic resources chapter of the TGAE report, states that energy specifically, remains a shared competence, limiting what the EU can effectively accomplish on its own; yet considering the vital importance of energy policy, the EU must overcome resistances and learn how to be more assertive internally, with its own member states, or it will fail to do so externally. Energy-efficiency in particular is an area where all the elements are already in place, all that is lacking is implementation. Similarly, the completion of the European energy market encounters significant opposition despite it being the cheapest and most reliable solution to ensure the industry's competitiveness. Nevertheless the TGAE report affirms, the creation of a European common market for energy must be complemented externally by a commitment to unified EU energy partnerships tailored to the diversification of supply and the strengthening

of member states' negotiating power. The economic weight of Europe can further be preserved by using its regulatory power, in order to defend our competitiveness. Philip Lowe claims that we must ensure that suppliers respect EU norms, and adopt a more assertive stance reaffirming that "if you play in Europe, you play by European rules". That said, the regional aspect of energy policies cannot be stressed enough, energy does not travel well, so the EU's energy policies must tailor not only to political Europe but to the integration of our neighbours and play into their dependence on European markets. Here as well there are plenty of answers to turn EU dependence into a regional network of strong integrated interdependence, based on an EU rule-book, contributing to formulating *actual* 'strategic partnerships'.

2.3. A dose of pragmatism to save European defence

Similarly European defence requires internal consolidation, calling for a more pragmatic approach, focusing on concrete actions to improve European capabilities. The futility of yet another grand ideology-fuelled strategic document is underlined by Daniel Keohane, Head of Strategic Affairs at FRIDE, presenting the report's defence chapter, who warns against the risk of "too much comprehensiveness" and calls for restating the purpose of CSDP via a European *'Livre Blanc'* (White Paper) designed to drive European defence consolidation. "It is absolutely imperative to be concrete above all else, and once that two or three bricks have been built, then we can talk about describing and reflecting on a wider European defence project", stresses Jean-Yves Le Drian. There are many aspects of EU defence that do not touch member state sovereignty - these could easily be achieved. All that is lacking is simple political will. Transport capabilities, in-air refuelling, space exploration, and the consolidation of the European defence industry - notably with regards to future programmes such as drones - are just a few areas where progress is possible. The EU has a treaty that outlines the possibility for PESCO and for EU battle groups, the legal bases are already in place. The hope is that the upcoming CSDP review will concentrate on issues of implementation, focusing on the 'how to' based on the present legal basis rather than initiating new ideas. The necessity for European defence is growing stronger, due to the US pivot, increasing budgetary constraints and the persistence of very real threats to European security. "I am convinced that member states will acknowledge this

pressing necessity, if not we will suffer from a loss of collective sovereignty”, concludes Jean-Yves Le Drian.



3. You and what army? Addressing the lack of political support for the European project

The EU and subsequently its policies seem to be suffering from a generalised lack of seriousness on the part of member states towards the implementation of policy measures. Often the means are there, yet the political will to make use of these is severely lacking. This is true for defence, and denounced by Jean-Yves Le Drian who challenges member states to make a move towards relaunching PESCO which he claims “would be a sign of welcome pragmatism in times of austerity”. A similar denunciation is made by Hugues Mingarelli, elucidating how often, as is the case with the use of conditionality, member states lack the political courage to enforce both ‘more-for-more’ (notably in the area of mobility) and ‘less-for-less’. As the TGAE report highlights, rewards are dispensed somewhat randomly – prominent examples being Morocco and Jordan, amongst the winners of ‘more-for-more’ yet with a questionable political reform record. EU bureaucracy, Hugues Mingarelli warns, should not be accused for the failures of our political leaders. Whilst such an observation is true and describes a situation which seems to plague all policy areas, it must also be said that, as Christophe Hillion, Senior Researcher at SIEPS, points out, EU institutions are not perhaps without fault. Article 8 of the Lisbon treaty, which effectively serves to ‘constitutionalise’ the ENP, has failed to be internalised in the institutions’ discourse, and is consequently being underexploited. The article provides the European Parliament with the power to sue the Council before the European Court of Justice (ECJ) for failing to deliver on ENP, and should thus have served as a tool to mobilise member states into action, yet it is largely ignored.

3.1. The EU: yes or no?

David O’Sullivan observes that the ultimate question to be addressed remains whether or not all member states and their citizens are effectively signed up for collectively engaging in the strengthening of the EU’s global role. Indeed, often it is not the ‘how to’ that is lacking, “the answers to what are the necessary steps are in the report”, David O’ Sullivan claims, we know what needs to be done what we don’t know, to paraphrase Jean-Claude Juncker, is how to get people elected that will do it – how to convince citizens of the necessity and the usefulness of solving problems at a European level. The risk, that is already being realised, is the disconnect between analysis at European level – and what ordinary people are actually thinking. The EU provides the hardware not the software; without public support and citizen willingness the European project cannot go ahead. There is a limit to what can be done top-down, and it seems this limit is rapidly approaching. Politicians have to change the discourse about Europe and be honest about the limits of what member states can do individually and more forthright about how we can cooperate together. Defining Europe’s global role needs to be the result of a debate and of hard political activity tailored to convincing citizens. Jo Leinen, Member of the European Parliament, highlights how presently, amongst the public, there is a fair amount of confusion, fuelling contradictory views, “in support of bail outs but contrary to more competences to Brussels”.

3.2. The case of migration: hostile public opinions undermining EU policy

Citizens realise something must be done yet still have not understood that it has to be done collectively. Hans Martens emphasizes how this phenomenon is particularly manifest in the ambit of migration policy. The European welfare state is clearly on the way to a permanent crisis, and, truth be told, in various sectors it is already being financed by migrants, clarifies Stefano Manservigi. And yet Europe and Europeans remain fairly hostile to migration with negative public opinions consistently undermining the successful implementation of measures for EU mobility, integration and for the attraction of highly-skilled migrants. Here too sensitive policy areas are touched upon, such as internal social policy and labour policy. A profound and open debate must be engaged with our citizens and particularly with the opponents of migration in order to prepare to manage and successfully absorb

the workforce that the EU will soon be in desperate need of. Growing xenophobia and negative populist sentiment and tensions are not to be dismissed too quickly, warns David O’Sullivan. The upcoming European elections in May 2014 present an opportunity to address issues like these, one we cannot afford to miss, affirms Jo Leinen.

Conclusion: Learning to think European

Authors and speakers alike express concern over the state of the EU’s external action, and whilst recognising the need for urgent action, they do not embrace a necessarily pessimistic view of Europe’s unified future. Euro-scepticism they say, has been seen come and go, the EU is now entering a new phase of its construction where it will be called to, once again, justify its *raison d’être*, and notably its role and actions in the international sphere. The real challenge will be that of convincing the citizens of the added value of the Union – and mustering sufficient public support for the burdensome reforms that remain necessary. European citizens may nevertheless decide not to go down the path of further EU integration, preferring to retain their independence and certain distinctive national characteristics. Yet, David O’Sullivan warns

“this would be a betrayal of future generations if we are unable to build a Europe that can reconcile global influence with national characteristics, diversity and a national way of life which need not be homogenised”. While the ‘Think Global – Act European’ task force embraces such a statement fully, it should also be said that, as Yves Bertoncini observes, Europeans may well need to “first learn how to ‘Think European’ in order to then ‘Act Global’”.



1. Elvire Fabry (dir.), ‘Think Global – Act European IV. Thinking Strategically about the EU’s External Action’, Foreword by Pascal Lamy and António Vitorino, *Studies & Reports No. 96, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, April 2013.
2. Pascal Lamy, ‘Engaging with middle and global powers’, *Tribune, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, May 2013.
3. Jean-Yves Le Drian, ‘Europe of Defence: A pragmatic approach’, *Tribune, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute*, May 2013.

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