

THE EXTERNAL CHALLENGES OF THE EU: WHAT STRATEGIES?

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On 13 December 2014, the [European Steering Committee](#) of the Jacques Delors Institute discussed the Union's external challenges and potential strategies to address them. This synthesis summarises key points raised during the first debate, including potential ways forward and topics for further debate.

Introduction

After words of welcome by **António Vitorino**, President of the Jacques Delors Institute, the discussion was introduced by **Javier Solana**, former High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and **Élisabeth Guigou**, President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly. The ensuing debate revolved around three core issues: (1) Europe's troubled periphery and the need to revise the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); (2) the Ukrainian crisis and future relations with Russia; and (3) avenues for a broader strategic overhaul.



Pascal Lamy, Javier Solana, Élisabeth Guigou and Étienne Davignon.
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1. Revising the ENP

The ENP was based on the idealist vision that the Union could create a community of shared prosperity, democracy, and values with its neighbours. This vision rested on the assumption that the Union represents the one and only centre of this community. However, in an increasingly multipolar world this egocentric assumption is flawed. It neglects the fact that Europe's neighbours are surrounded by other

influential, regional players with their own stakes and value systems.

In light of this reality and considering the current accumulation of crises in Europe's periphery, the discussants agreed that a thorough revision of the ENP is necessary. Four proposals stood out in the debate:

1. The EU needs to move away from the 'one-size-fits-all' approach and acknowledge that the 16 countries that are part of the ENP are very diverse. The discussants were generally in favour of a higher degree of flexibility and differentiation that takes account of the countries' willingness and ability to cooperate. Some speakers were in favour of a clearer differentiation between the ENP's Eastern and Southern dimensions, and amongst neighbours. Greater differentiation should, however, not prevent the formulation of a comprehensive approach for each country.
2. The Union's use of conditionality should be reviewed. While modelled on the enlargement process, the ENP lacks its key incentive, namely the promise of EU membership. EU conditionality faces a problem: it is relatively easy for other players such as Saudi Arabia or China to propose better terms and they often refrain from tying them to conditions. The EU should thus strive to offer more or better incentives such as visa liberalisation in the domain of mobility.
3. According to some discussants, the ENP has neglected the 'neighbours' neighbours' such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, or countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. When the policy was conceived, the current transnationalisation of challenges and threats across these countries had not been foreseen. One participant pointed out that state

fragility is one of the main cross-cutting challenges in the region and argued that the EU should thus bolster the ENP's governance and rule of law dimensions. In light of substantial corruption levels, the EU should also pay closer attention to the traceability of its development aid.

4. Some speakers argued that the EU should focus on promising cases where it can have most added value. In this regard, Tunisia was considered a prime example. It is one of the few countries in the region where the 'winner does not take it all' and where there is room for political compromise. It was also pointed out that the EU could play a more constructive role in the Middle East Peace Process. The member states could, for instance, yield more unified political support to the recognition of a Palestinian state to remedy the power imbalance that is currently hampering negotiations.

2. Rethinking relations with Russia

Several speakers criticised the Union's approach to Ukraine prior to the crisis as apolitical and overly technocratic. EU decision-makers had underestimated the political repercussions of the Association Agreement with Ukraine. They also neglected the extent to which Russia perceived a potential NATO membership perspective for Ukraine and Georgia as a provocation.

In terms of priorities, some speakers argued that the EU should provide further economic support to Ukraine and encourage internal political reforms. At the same time, the EU should also support negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. According to one participant, the moment for such negotiations was opportune due to Russia's position of relative weakness stemming from the low oil price and the tangible effect of international and European economic sanctions. In these negotiations, Ukraine would have to be prepared to make concessions on the status of its Eastern regions including a degree of autonomy or neutralisation. Meanwhile, the discussants generally agreed that the annexation of Crimea – a clear violation of international law – was and is unacceptable.

The debate also touched on the future of EU-Russia relations. In the short to medium-term these relations are likely to be characterised by mutual

interdependence. Russia depends on trade with and investment from the EU while the latter relies on Russia in terms of energy security. The Europeans will also have to cooperate with Russia on other international dossiers such as Syria and Iran. As one of the speakers underlined, the EU would be advised to adopt a relatively flexible and patient approach towards Russia while holding on to core principles such as the inviolability of borders. In any case, all communication and coordination channels should be kept open. On this note, one of the participants called the term 'strategic partnership' into question as a partnership tends to be based on a set of shared principles and values. Alternatively he proposed the term 'alliance' to capture the strategic character of EU-Russia relations.

3. A more strategic and political EU foreign policy

The discussion on the ENP, Ukraine and Russia led to a broader debate on the Union's strategic vision, approach, ambition, and outreach. Several discussants called for an update of the 2003 European Security Strategy. The update should take account of the important changes in the international security landscape, redefine common interests and priorities, and outline potential responses. This strategic 'reset' should also include the Union's positioning vis-à-vis important players such as Russia and China. However, one of the speakers also noted that there is a potential trade-off between strategic reflection and action. He argued that the Union should also have the courage to act in a timely and perhaps more effective fashion before having developed an overarching and entirely consensual strategic vision.

To forge a more political approach to EU external action, several discussants called for a reform of the Council procedures. Instead of debating an agenda of roughly 30 pre-discussed items leading to unreadable and lengthy Conclusions, the Council should engage in a real debate on selected priority issues and discuss well-prepared options for EU engagement.

Some discussants advocated a stronger and more politicised EU approach to conflict prevention. One of them proposed the creation of a real crisis prevention centre bringing together strategic, political and academic intelligence and allowing the Union to look beyond the immediate. In addition, the Union should strengthen the implementation of the comprehensive

approach, which is good in theory but often faulty in practice.

Several discussants argued that the Union's level of ambition should reflect its room for manoeuvre and potential added value. Some of them believed that the Union should only deal with cases where the risk of engagement is inferior to that of inactivity. However, the examples of Libya and Syria were used by others to illustrate that this kind of calculation is not always straightforward. Would Libya be better off with Gaddafi still in place? Should we have intervened earlier and more forcefully in Syria to prevent the current conflagration? Should we be doing more to prevent potential escalation in Algeria? The discussion on the level of ambition also led to the question whether the Union *could* actually influence internal developments in bigger and more powerful countries such as Turkey or Russia or whether it should rather focus on smaller or weaker countries. Viewpoints on this question differed.

The discussion also touched on the Union's geographic outreach. Most speakers agreed that the immediate neighbourhood remained priority number one. However, some also underlined the importance of the African continent. Its future development will affect the Union in terms of demography but also due to its enormous potential for both growth and conflict. A few discussants argued that the EU should play a more pronounced role in Asia. The security-related tensions between China and Japan were mentioned as an example where the EU could export its own experience to catalyse the development of a regional security system.

Generally advocating a more political, preventive and comprehensive EU foreign policy, the speakers also noted that divergent national interests continue to represent important obstacles. These include more structural divisions such as that on the future of the Common Security and Defence Policy where the British reject additional institutions or resources. Furthermore, the Union faces at least two fundamental dilemmas in its foreign policy: the false dichotomies between 'dictatorship and chaos' in North Africa and between 'cynicism and starry-eyed idealism'.

Conclusion

The current accumulation of external challenges has unveiled some wrong assumptions: the Europeans underestimated the geopolitical impact of the enlargement process and over-estimated the influence that the ENP could have. The new leaders at the top of the EU institutions now have the potential to build on these lessons to shape a more strategic and political external action. It remains to be seen how they will use this potential and whether they will be able to bridge recurrent member state divisions as well as long-standing foreign policy dilemmas.



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