

The EU as foreign policy actor: the Mediterranean and Middle East regions

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Speaking notes for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)—Institut für Europäische Politik (Institute for European Politics)—Utrikespolitiska Institutet (Swedish Institute of International Affairs) conference 'The EU's Foreign Policy—How to Forward Internal Unity and External Strength? Views from Germany, Poland, Nordic and Baltic Countries, 31 May 2011'.

For the first time in its history the European Union is very close to failure. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) reflects this very serious situation, though it is not a prime reason for it. It is the euro crisis that is at the centre of EU's fight for survival.

The prime source of this failure is a purely political one: the generation currently governing has completely lost interest in political integration and hence has given up on the goal of establishing a true Political Union, which requires transferring sovereignty from the nation state. Unlike in earlier decades, none of the currently responsible political leaders has linked their name and political future to the strategic objective of achieving a political union. The likes of Helmut Kohl, François Mitterrand and Jacques Delors have given way to a generation of eurocrats who are more concerned with their respective nation states than with the future of the union as a whole.

Today the EU is also paying the price for entertaining the fundamentally wrong concept of simultaneous enlargement and deepening. It is not economic circumstances that have caused the life-threatening euro crisis—it is the lack of political integration. It is a recipe for failure and ultimately disaster to believe that a centrally managed attack on the euro from money markets can be successfully defended against by a disintegrated, fragmented political EU management. Current EU action plans for bailing out Greece illustrate how EU member states are attempting to escape political responsibility by taking refuge in financial quick fixes. Such responses will not work and taxpayers will refuse to support them. With no central sovereign political authority, democratically elected and legitimized, the euro will fail and the EU, too, will fall.

On 1 December 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force, ending several years of negotiation about EU institutional issues. Article 4 of the treaty stipulates that 'national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member State'. What a shaky basis for a Common Foreign and Security Policy. The CFSP is a claim not a reality; the truth is that the Lisbon Treaty represents a major setback, and a very expensive one. Ashton-bashing will not help. Catherine Ashton was not made High Representative for EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in order to inspire the CFSP. Rather, the opposite is true: Europe's most brilliant British anti-integrationist policymakers helped her into the job in order to prevent common EU foreign and security policymaking. As a London-based diplomat put it: 'We had hoped she would be successful, though we didn't expect her to deliver so quickly'. The case of Libya illustrates the point: Ashton was 'concerned'; Paris and London chose the path of

war without even consulting their EU partners; Berlin opted out; and other EU members such as Poland and Sweden completely lost their voices in foreign policymaking. No European political leader even asked for EU heads of state and government to meet in a special European Council session to discuss the matter.

Undoubtedly, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are both strategic areas for the EU. Between 1995 and 2013, €13.3 billion has been allocated to countries in the Middle East and North Africa via three consecutive EU funding programmes.¹ However, recent developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria ‘have shown that the EU’s prioritisation of stability over democracy has been ill-judged and too simplistic; arguably, the EU has ended up promoting neither’.² For all the money spent, the EU has failed on at least two counts: euro investment has neither created a politically relevant early warning system that could have signalled the profound changes in the respective polities, nor have EU leaders taken the loss of money and influence as a strong reminder that appropriate consequences were to be drawn and imposed.

The latest UN Security Council vote on Libya marked a disastrous breakdown of the CFSP aspiration. As a fundamental transformation process is under way in North Africa, EU countries allow themselves the luxury of disagreement on how best to support the change. Voting on Security Council Resolution 1970 demonstrated that common EU foreign and security policymaking exists only in theory.³ While France and the United Kingdom claimed special responsibility for Africa as laid down in the Saint-Malo Declaration of December 1998, Germany chose to abstain in the voting.⁴

The EU has not learned the proper lessons from its disunity over Iraq in 2003 or from its profound failure to turn its commitment to and engagement in Kosovo into a lasting CFSP success. To quote a senior diplomat (speaking on condition of anonymity): ‘Kosovo is paid for by the EU, protected by NATO and run by the US ambassador.’

The Mediterranean and the Middle East constitute the most complex political arena for the EU, measured in terms of European interests: energy resources and supply lines, immigration, proliferation and non-proliferation, shaky political systems and regimes, and first and foremost the danger of war given the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Among the many features of President Barack Obama’s most recent attempt to revive the so-called Middle East peace process, one stands out: after the plan was publicly rebuffed by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu speaking in Washington in May, President Obama did not publicly call on the EU to support his concept. True, the EU is part of the Middle East Quartet, is an important source of financial assistance to the Palestinians and is a strategic economic partner of Israel. However, when it comes to the core of the issue—helping the

¹ Scarpetta, V. and Swidlicki, P., ‘The EU and the Mediterranean: good neighbours?’, May 2011, <www.openeurope.org.uk/research/enp2011.pdf>, p. 3.

² Scarpetta and Swidlicki (note 1), p. 3.

³ UN Security Council Resolution 1970, 26 Feb. 2011, on Libya.

⁴ Joint Declaration I on European Defense and Joint Declaration II on Cooperation in Africa, Franco-British Summit, Saint-Malo, 3–4 Dec. 1998: ‘Noting the special role and the responsibility which the UK and France, together with other partners, have in Africa, and their willingness to remain fully engaged there . . .’

Israelis and the Palestinians to find a peace agreement and also backing up the agreement with military power—neither Jerusalem nor Washington will put much hope in the EU. And I cannot blame them. So far, the CFSP has exhausted itself in formulating aims, but has failed to come up with ways and means to implement them. It is not important to have an EU foreign minister who is ‘concerned’ when fire breaks; rather, it is important to be able to fight effectively with appropriate instruments.

It was an Israeli who once observed that ‘The EU is able to decide how to deal with issues of peace keeping in Macedonia—that’s fine, but that’s no real foreign policy. Real foreign policy has to do with issues of life and death and the use of force . . . and there we saw that there was no unified European political commitment.’⁵ This was said in 2003, but it is still true, even after an agreed European Security Strategy, an EU Africa strategy, EU participation in the Middle East Quartet and so on. As Charles Kupchan recently observed: ‘Today, the EU needs a new generation of leaders who can breathe life into a project that is perilously close to expiring. For now, they are nowhere to be found.’⁶

About the author

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⁵ Avineri, S., ‘Europe viewed from without’, *Europe: Global Player or Sideline Spectator?* (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Buch: 2003), p. 54

⁶ Kupchan, C., ‘As nationalism rises, will the European Union fall?’, *Washington Post*, 29 Aug. 2010.