

Enrico Fassi

From Global Europe to the Neighborhood: time for a new strategy

The Lisbon Treaty and the new institutional machinery

The Lisbon Treaty, which came into force on 1 December 2009, introduced significant innovations aimed at boosting the EU's international role through the creation of new foreign policy architecture. Key elements of this new structure were: 1) introduction of the permanent President of the European Council, in order to give more continuity to the policies and increased visibility to the EU; 2) creation of the "double-hatted" post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy who is also Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP), with the goal of overcoming the "pillar structure" that had limited the effectiveness of EU foreign policy thus far (*vertical coherence*); 3) establishment of the European External Action Service, intended both as an instrument for assisting the HR/VP in his/her tasks and as an institutional solution to enhance policy coherence (*horizontal coherence*)¹.

Specific attention – and ensuing expectations – were devoted to the new position of HR/VP and the person intended to substitute "Mr. Pesc", Javier Solana. This was undoubtedly a difficult task: Solana, a former NATO Secretary General, was not only apt for the job, but also proved to be particularly able in interpreting the treaties to give shape to his role in a way that significantly enhanced the EU's foreign policy profile. Admittedly, he also enjoyed a favorable context since his mandate coincided with a period of sustained economic growth, the successful introduction of the euro, and the "historical" completion of the enlargement with the entry of twelve new member states. Both the deterioration of this constructive context – with the difficulties of the integration process (from the failure of the Constitution to the

No. 74 – NOVEMBER 2011

Abstract

The European Union is standing at a strategic crossroads. The Lisbon treaty and the establishment of the External Action Service provide the potential for a more coherent, effective and visible foreign and security policy. However, the power shift occurring at the global level, the increasing complexity of its security context and EU's current crisis seem to demand a strategic review of the EU's foreign policy priorities.

This would involve, more specifically, a prioritization of the European neighborhood. To become a significant actor on the global stage, the EU thus first needs to rethink and strengthen its role as a regional power. Both the Arab Spring in Northern Africa and the Middle East, and the deadlock transitions of the Eastern partners, represent enormous, pressing challenges that require an enhanced and more strategic engagement from the EU.

Enrico Fassi, teaches International Relations I, Catholic University of Brescia and he is ISPI Associate Research Fellow.

(* The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

¹ G. QUILLE, *The European external action service and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)*, in E. GRECO - N. PIROZZI - S. SILVESTRI (eds.), *EU Crisis Management: Institutions and Capabilities in the Making*, Quaderni IAI, 19, November 2010, pp. 55-78.

troubled path of the Lisbon Treaty), a prolonged economic crisis, the emergence of “enlargement fatigue” and increasing euro-skepticism in European public opinion – in addition to the complex challenges ahead, placed great pressure on the new *de facto* “EU Foreign Minister”.

The appointment of former EU trade commissioner, Catherine Ashton, as HR/VP thus caused some controversy, given her negligible political profile and lack of significant experience in high diplomacy, particularly in military, defense and crisis management issues². Once in charge, Lady Ashton identified three priorities: 1) creation of the EEAS; 2) more active engagement in crisis areas; 3) strengthening EU cooperation with strategic partners – namely the US, China, Russia, India, Brazil and Japan. While the dialogue with strategic partners has brought limited (if any) results, the scarce performance in crisis response – from the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 to the “Arab Spring” of 2011 and the intervention in Libya – have confirmed the impression that the setting up of the EEAS alone absorbed most of Lady Ashton’s initial energies. More importantly, however, the first two years of the “Post-Lisbon Era” seem to have signaled significant limitations of the whole European architecture and the need for a broad reappraisal of the EU’s foreign and security policy in order to adapt its strategy to the realities of the newly emerging international context.

New context, old priorities

The world is changing, and it is changing fast: the US unipolar moment already seems to be waning and a different power distribution is emerging. While the international system is clearly in search of a new order, it is far from clear which shape this order will take, what this new equilibrium will look like, and which mechanisms will guarantee a sufficient amount of global governance – and common goods – in a system characterized by increased plurality³. What looks evident instead, is that in this coming system Europe (as a region) and the EU (as an actor) will experience a relative decline in terms of its influence and standing, compared with the emerging powers in other continents. This rather long structural process is being worsened and strengthened by the underdevelopment of EU foreign policy and the failure to bring its collective strength (i.e. of the EU *and* its Member States) to bear in order to pursue EU collective interests⁴. The view that the EU is already losing terrain – and that it has so far been incapable of affirming its role as a major actor in the current international system – is confirmed by an analysis of how the EU is perceived both by established and emerging powers⁵. The emerging system will thus be characterized by a more competitive scenario, in which the EU’s relevance – and capacity to give shape to the international order – will increasingly depend on its capacity to act effectively.

In strategic terms, this emerging scenario is also characterized by both the prospective evolution of the current security architectures surrounding Europe and an increasingly complex security context that demands specific choices and a proactive attitude. The first aspect originates from the potential disengagement of the US (and NATO) from a global posture to a more defined, limited and selective role that can no longer guarantee the EU’s security *at any cost*. On the other hand the Putin-Medvedev project for a new Eurasian security architecture and Russian regional assertiveness put pressure on the EU and the US to define the limits of their engagement towards the post-Soviet area.

² D. LISZCZYK, *The EU High Representative’s First Year in Office: a Balance Sheet*, in «PISM Bulletin», 16, 233, February 2011.

³ See S. BERETTA - R. ZOBOLI (eds.), *Global Governance in a Plural World*, Milan 2010.

⁴ Stephan Lehne, for example, underlines that the EU share of world population was 15% in 1950, 7% today, and will represent 5% in 2050. In terms of world GDP the countries in the EU today represented 28% in 1950, 21% today, and around 18% in 2050. See S. LEHNE, *Can Lisbon potential be realized?*, «Strategic Europe», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011.

⁵ S. LUCARELLI - L. FIORAMONTI (eds.), *External perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor*, London/New York 2010.

Secondly, threats are multiple in the current security context – from illegal immigration to organized crime, climate change, terrorism and failed states – demanding a “comprehensive approach” to tackle these menaces at their roots. But today no single actor seems ready to invest on a global scale in the resources – economic, military and political – required for such an approach to be effective, thus pushing towards further regionalization of security complexes⁶. Thus, European security will increasingly depend on EU’s capacity to play a leading role in the definition of the new regional security framework in which these threats could be defined and addressed multilaterally.

The third development is more recent and – hopefully – transitory, and is related to the economic crisis that has invested Europe since 2007. The foreign policy impact of the financial, economic and now debt crisis is at least twofold. Firstly, there is certainly an issue of resources, both economic and political. The almost permanent effort in economic crisis management of the last three years has indeed left little room for foreign policy on the policymakers’ agenda and put massive budgetary constraints on the Member States. To play a credible role on the world stage, the EU would thus first need to go back to sustainable growth and dynamic competitiveness in order to gain both the resources and the confidence needed to invest in new endeavor⁷. Secondly, and perhaps not least importantly, one has to consider the influence of the crisis on the EU’s internal dynamics. Alongside the often invoked solidarity drive and concrete efforts towards the definition of a new European Economic Governance, the crisis has also revealed the emergence of centrifugal forces, prompted by increasingly diverging economic trajectories among EU Member States. These tendencies, reinforced by a process of renationalization of foreign policies by some of the continent’s main actors – namely Germany and France⁸ – may well mean that the EU risks losing its very strategic asset – the integration project itself. And, as a commentator put it, «if integration without an active role in the world would result in a failure, an active role in the world without integration is simply not possible»⁹.

These three factors – the prospect of a competitive multipolar system, the increasing regionalization of the security context, and the EU’s current crisis – taken together suggest that the EU needs to define a new strategy in order to maximize the impact of its limited resources and give shape to its strategic environment. This new strategy thus strongly demands a more appropriate balance in the geographical distribution of EU foreign policy efforts, with a clear prioritization of the European neighborhood¹⁰. It is in this very area that both the major threats lie to European security and concrete opportunities for the EU to exercise a substantial influence on many key issues that figure on the international agenda. In a nutshell, to become a significant actor on the global scene, the EU first needs to rethink and strengthen its role as a regional power.

The EU and its neighborhood: back to basics?

The capacity to project stability around its borders and give shape to its strategic environment does indeed represent the key feature of any regional power. In fact, even before completion of the enlargement, the European Security Strategy had already recognized the area of the new European Neighborhood as a strategic priority, with the specific goal to «promote a ring of *well governed coun-*

⁶ On the regionalization of security see B. BUZAN - O. WÆVER (eds.), *Regions and Powers. The structure of International Security*, Cambridge 2003.

⁷ R. FREUDENSTEIN, *A More Realistic Europe*, «Strategic Europe», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011.

⁸ P. HASSNER, *Who rules Europe?*, in «Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali», 13, novembre 2010, pp. 4-16.

⁹ J. TECHAU, *Time for Strategic Europe*, «Strategic Europe», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011.

¹⁰ For a similar view see R. YOUNGS, *Neighborhood-to-the-World*, «Strategic Europe», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011.

tries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean»¹¹. This input was then translated into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), officially launched in March 2003, with the purpose «to create an area of *shared prosperity and values*, based on deeper economic integration, intensified political relations, enhanced cross-border cooperation and shared responsibility for conflict prevention between the EU and its neighbours»¹².

Since its launch, the ENP has rapidly progressed to the level of being considered – at least rhetorically – as “a key EU external relations priority” and the main instrument of EU relations with its neighbours¹³. The mechanism clearly echoed both the instruments and the logic of enlargement, i.e. *conditionality*: the EU demands reforms in its partner countries and offers incentives in exchange. The areas of intervention and priorities listed in ENP Action Plans substantially recall the Copenhagen criteria applied to the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, while the implementation of these objectives is regularly monitored by the Commission. However, the real difference with the enlargement process relies on the incentive structure: here EU membership is clearly not at stake, there is not a clear end-point for the process and nor do the partner countries look desperate to adopt EU values and rules as was the case for the “Return to Europe” of the CEE states. With these premises, conditionality becomes a blunted instrument; “the level of ambition of the relationship” would almost completely depend on the neighbour’s government choice and commitment, leaving the EU with little room for concrete action.

Neither the Union for the Mediterranean, set up by the French Presidency in 2008, nor the Eastern Partnership launched by a Polish-Swedish initiative the following year have been able to concretely reinvigorate this policy in order to provide a “sufficiently attractive model of cooperation” and break through the vicious circle of limited engagement of the EU and absence of reform in the partner countries¹⁴. At the same time, EU efforts in CFSP in the region have been limited to sporadic crisis management activities and to the (failed) attempt to exert a diplomatic role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, EU’s ambition to drive the change in the region slowly turned to the simple pursue of stability.

Although these policies have contributed to increasing EU presence and visibility in the neighbourhood – the EU is by far the main trading partner for almost all the ENP partners – the EU has failed not only to achieve most of its objectives concerning democracy and security, but also to prevent a deterioration of the status quo in the region. In a few years we have witnessed the somehow paradoxical inversion of the prior assumption that Eastern Europe democratises slowly but steadily whereas the southern partners remain stuck with their authoritarian leadership: Eastern Europe is reverting back towards authoritarianism, while the Arab world proceeds with its anti-authoritarian revolution¹⁵. Both present enormous challenges for the EU but at the same time constitute the best opportunity to transform a so far reluctant attitude towards the neighbouring area into a positive engagement.

¹¹ European Security Strategy (ESS), *A Secure Europe in a Better World*, Brussels 2003. Emphasis added.

¹² See R. ROSSI, *The European Neighbourhood Policy In Perspective*, in F. ATTINÀ - R. ROSSI, *European Neighbourhood Policy: Political, Economic And Social Issues*, The Jean Monnet Centre “Euro-Med”, Department of Political Studies, 2004, p. 11.

¹³ COM (2005), 1521 final, p. 1.

¹⁴ S. FISHER - E. LANNON, *The ENP Strategic Review: The EU and its Neighbourhood at a crossroads*, «ISS Analysis», May 2011, p. 2.

¹⁵ M. EMERSON, *East goes right, South goes left*, «CEPS Commentary», October 2011.

This is an opportunity that the EU cannot miss if it is to guarantee its security and maintain a primary role in its own geopolitical region. The “gravity model” that attracted the EEC is not working in the neighborhood and the EU faces increased economic, geopolitical and ideological competition in this context from Russia, Turkey, Iran and even China. Inaction is not an option. The EU thus needs both a “paradigm shift”¹⁶ in its support for democracy and a more proactive approach towards the establishment of deepened partnerships in its neighborhood to build a new and sustainable regional security architecture.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali e articolati in:

- ✓ Programma Africa
- ✓ Programma Caucaso e Asia Centrale
- ✓ Programma Europa
- ✓ Programma Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente
- ✓ Programma Russia e Vicini Orientali
- ✓ Programma Sicurezza e Studi Strategici

- ✓ Progetto Argentina
- ✓ Progetto Asia Meridionale
- ✓ Progetto Cina e Asia Orientale
- ✓ Progetto Diritti Umani
- ✓ Progetto Disarmo
- ✓ Progetto Internazionalizzazione della Pubblica Amministrazione

Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it

© ISPI 2011

¹⁶ European Parliament, *Need for a "paradigm shift" in EU policy to back progress towards democracy*, 7 June 2011, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/en/pressroom/content/20110606IPR20765/html/Need-for-a-paradigm-shift-in-EU-policy-to-back-progress-towards-democracy>.