

Essay

'Then Icarus fell from the sky'

Re-evaluating the EU's foreign and security policy

Matthijs Even

Against the backdrop of the Dutch EU Presidency and the soon to be published EU Global Strategy, Netherlands Atlantic Youth ('Jonge Atlantici') and JASON Institute, in cooperation with the Security Policy Division of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, organized an essay competition entitled 'The EU as Security Provider'. The top ten essays will be bundled and offered to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. The prize for the best essay is a day in Brussels, interning with the Dutch Permanent Mission to the European Union. You will find the winning essay, written by Matthijs Even, below.

At this moment, the European Union is recalibrating its foreign and security policy. The Union faces some major challenges, such as the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, the subsequent influx of refugees onto European soil as well as a Russian Federation increasingly more assertive in international politics. Although these global issues seem new, Europe's apparent difficulty in dealing with them shows pronounced similarities with previous poorly managed challenges. By asking *what road should the EU follow*, this essay aims to demonstrate that renewed failures lie ahead should the EU not fundamentally reconsider its actual global capacities.

Too ambitious

A brief discussion of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars, the independence of Kosovo and Russia's response to constant EU and NATO enlargement will make clear that for too long the EU has pursued an overly ambitious foreign and security policy given its actual institutional capacities. Since European integration has not developed further after the above-mentioned global changes, it seems likely that following a similarly assertive policy to those employed during the mid-1990s and early 2000s will fail to live up to expectations and will result in a more problematic relationship with great powers such as the Russian Federation. Therefore, the Dutch government should pursue either a more communitarian arrangement of the EU in order to actually meet the Union's ambitious foreign and security policy, or a more realistic policy in line with Europe's institutional capacity. Since it is unlikely that more European integration would be accepted by EU member states or even by Dutch public opinion, a less ambitious policy seems the most viable option.

Sadly, it needs to be acknowledged that the Common Foreign and Security Policy established by the Treaty of Maastricht failed to fulfil the expectations it created. The member states attempted to create a coherent European approach to global challenges, but Europe's intergovernmental structure of decision-making resulted in a divided Union which was – and still is – unable to speak with one voice. Academic literature regarding the way the EC and later the EU dealt with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars in

the early 1990s clearly shows that Europe's constant disunity hampered its ability to make quick and crucial decisions. Months of internal discussion regarding Yugoslavia's future during its disintegration in 1992, Germany's threat to unilaterally recognize Croatia if other EU member states would not concede and constant opposition to various peace proposals by individual countries are just a few examples that illustrate Europe's lack of a coherent approach to the crises in the Balkans.

Moreover, these situations did not bring home to the majority of European leaders the realization that the absence of a federal European approach doomed their ambitious intention to solve the Yugoslavia crisis. Although the leaders called the situation a 'European problem', urging the US to stay out of the diplomatic negotiations, eventually only Russian and American involvement could solve a crisis Europe thought it could easily handle.

The same situation prevailed regarding Kosovo's assertion of independence in 2008. Many EU member states accepted Kosovo's secession, thereby bypassing the UN Security Council and acting contrary to Russia's interests. Other EU members, however, did not and still do not recognize Kosovo because they themselves have to deal with small secession movements on their territory. Again, no consensus exists within Europe, making the Union's intent to maintain a 'common' foreign and security policy and to speak with one voice implausible. Here again, as in the 'Yugoslavia' case, the fact that these sensitive matters are decided on an intergovernmental level makes ambitious foreign policies inappropriate. The EU seems simply unable to actually fulfil its wishes, however unfortunate that might be.

Confrontation vis-à-vis Russia

In addition, Europe needs to consider that handling global issues 'the Kosovo way', but without the international capacity to back up these acts, has resulted in a more confrontational position towards the Russian Federation. Academics widely agree that Russia shows renewed interest in its 'Near Abroad' now that the EU and NATO are constantly trying to spread their influence eastwards. For example, Russia's recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions Abkhazia and South-Ossetia shortly after Kosovo was recognized by Western countries indicated years ago that the Russian Federation would no longer simply accept more European enlargement to the East.

Recently, during the Ukrainian crisis, the EU again employed an overly straightforward foreign policy towards an Eastern neighbor without taking Russia's opinion into account. In the end, it was not the EU but individual countries that brokered a cease-fire in Minsk. Again, although some members of the European Parliament acted tough at the Maidan Square in Kiev in 2014, a common and effective approach to the conflict was and still is absent. Yet, Europe continues to express the intent to collectively handle issues like those in Ukraine. The EU should ask itself whether or not it is wise to be so overly confrontational towards the Russian Federation. Further deterioration in the relationship with the Russians could be an undesirable side effect of a continuation of this policy, as we have seen with regard to Kosovo. The EU should be more reflective on these delicate matters and needs to acknowledge that pursuing a policy of greater engagement, even with those who threaten and ignore international law, would be wise.

Of course, it goes without saying that the EU should stand up for its values, its way of life, and should therefore be assertive in its foreign and security policy. However, being partially responsible for a protracted war in former Yugoslavia, uncomfortable international positions because of its half-hearted Eastern policies and a growing problematic relationship with the Russian Federation is quite another thing. Europe should therefore learn from its troubled history and should firstly take a step back to fundamentally reconsider its global capacities before acting upon new challenges. Syria, Iraq and millions of immigrants who are coming to the EU do not benefit from a Union constantly divided on issues it wishes to address collectively. The immigration crisis, in particular, shows that Europe is internally more divided than ever and is therefore unable to act in a unified manner. If the EU does not want to add this crisis to the list of failures, it should reflect and conclude from its previous actions that a serious revision of its policies is needed. Of course, this is not to say that the EU should not take any action at all when it internally disagrees. What Europe should do is operate appropriately, according to its institutional capacity. This fundamental re-evaluation will therefore probably result in a less ambitious foreign and security policy than previously pursued, one hopefully formulated and put forward by the Dutch government.

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