



Conference Report – Some Personal Observations and Reflections

Elfriede Regelsberger, Deputy Director, IEP

On May 30-31st, 2011, around 30 experts - both from academia and EU practice – met at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm to discuss “**The EU’s Foreign Policy – how to forward internal unity and external strength? Views from Germany, Poland, Nordic and Baltic countries**”. The seminar, which was organized by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI/SIIA) and the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Germany focused particularly on the following aspects:

- The impact of the Lisbon treaty and in particular the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR)
- Sub-regional cooperation among the 27 as a way to promote an increased role for the EU as a global actor
- Dilemmas and strategic choices in policies towards eastern Europe: European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership,
- Challenges for the EU as a foreign policy actor: the Mediterranean and the Middle East regions.

The present performance of the CFSP was described as lamentable. According to many, the CFSP is suffering much more from a political deficit than from an institutional deficit, because political vision is lacking and contradictory national positions hamper the cohesion on CFSP issues such as the Middle East and Northern Africa. Some even went further and described the **Lisbon CFSP provisions** as mere claims while CFSP reality was close to a complete failure due to the lessening interest of some (big) member states in engaging in common actions. Critics argued that the EU has exhausted itself in formulating aims but has remained unable to use appropriate means including, at the extreme, military means. This is very much due to the absence of political leaders willing to go that far nowadays, it was argued.

Optimists in the seminar pointed out that the foreign policy innovations of the Lisbon Treaty were still in their infancy and could not be fully assessed yet. They wished to underline the potential the EEAS and the HR offers in terms of developing a

European diplomatic culture and of promoting a further “Europeanization” of national foreign policies. Less optimistic voices saw a much greater competition between “Brussels” and the member states (e.g. concerning the relationship between national embassies and EU delegations in third countries), the emergence of new players such as the European Parliament (illustrative here the EP’s role in the setting up of the EEAS) and trends towards a “Presidentialization” of the system i.e. a strengthened role for the European Council including its new permanent President and the Heads of State and Government, to the detriment of the Council and the Foreign Ministers . More optimistic contributions suggested the development of new CFSP instruments like permanent civilian-military planning capabilities / European headquarters and a new European Security Strategy (ESS) would address the changed international environment (such as the “Arab spring”, the debt crisis, the emergence of other international actors like the BRICs/ G 20) and could foster mutual understanding and create “ownership” of the Lisbon innovations among the member states.

Similarly the potential of “**sub-regional**” **groups** for progress in the field of EU foreign policy was assessed differently. Participants agreed that sub-regional cooperation per se is no guarantee that common EU positions will be forged; but to the extent that key players in such a grouping might be able to narrow their differences this kind of cooperation could facilitate consensus-building at the level of 27. While some warned against “closed shops” in general as being geared against EU integration, others identified situations where core groups and in particular the “big three” took the initiative to develop the EU security and defence policy further both in terms of capabilities and “Europeanising” national foreign and defence policies (e.g. ESS 2003, battle groups, permanent structured cooperation). However, nowadays trends towards a “de-Europeanization” / renationalization seem to prevail on CSDP issues which might cause fragmentation among the 27 and encourage others to do the same.

So far, it was argued, the smaller countries profited much from the collective EU “voice” in the international arena and seen from a “Nordic/ Baltic” perspective there is a still general interest in sub-regional cooperation inside the EU e.g. before European Council meetings. At the same time, if other international actors (like the G 20) gain ground while the EU fails to deliver on international challenges smaller EU member states (e.g. Finland) might be tempted to move away from the collective path and look for alternative regional/ bilateral “avenues” also outside the framework of the 27 to promote their foreign policy interests.

As per the previous sessions the one on the **European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership** concentrated more on the dilemmas and deficits than on the progress achieved in this field, which ranks so high on the foreign policy agenda of the EU. Discussions started from the most recent (25 May 2011) joint communication from the European Commission and High Representative Ashton entitled “A new response to a changing Neighbourhood” reaffirming the

modest results the ENP has produced thus far. Several participants recalled the well-known and for some “natural” east-south divide among the 27 on which region or country to offer a privileged treatment while others saw this as an unhealthy competition between the beneficiaries. It was thought the EU would be strong enough to encompass both the southern and the eastern dimension of the ENP in a non-contradictory way, though the methods and offers might differ, not only from region to region but also from country to country.

Not surprisingly, participants from Northern Europe and Poland warned against the establishment of strict borderlines between the EU and the ENP countries and called for “inclusiveness” of the EU approach instead. According to their view this should encompass the possibility of EU membership as a pull factor for both economic and political reform (e.g. for Moldova). This view is not shared by others in the EU. Some focused on the need to reconcile EU interests with those of Russia though underlining the EU’s security needs while others stressed Russia’s “natural” interest in a “shared” neighbourhood and the importance of establishing close (economic) ties between Europe and Russia which might produce a more cooperative Russian attitude towards the ENP and the Eastern Partnership. Other contributions warned against competition between the eastern and the southern dimension of the ENP given public and media interest in the ongoing “Arab spring” and several speakers deplored the overall meagre financial offers the EU has made so far. Next to “money” two other “M’s” i.e. market access and mobility (for young people in particular) were seen as key to improve the credibility of the ENP though several speakers also recalled existing resistance among the 27.

Conditionality – another guiding principle of EU’s external action - was raised. The debate confirmed that its application is not always consistent and the EU’s normative approach here might collide with significant economic interests (as it does with regard to EU policies in other parts of the world, such as China). Furthermore the question was raised whether the EU’s “more (money) for more (application of EU values) strategy” would be sufficient or whether one should also consider a “less for less” strategy in case ENP beneficiaries fall back in their efforts to promote Western political and economic standards. Overall the need for a greater differentiation and individual treatment among the ENP countries was underlined, while the multilateral approach chosen for the Eastern Partnership should also be kept. With reference to the recent Communication on the ENP participants acknowledged a greater readiness on the part of the EU to engage more in resolving the “frozen” conflicts though concrete EU steps were still pending.

Compared to the eastern dimension of the ENP the challenges the EU is facing from **the Mediterranean and the Middle East regions** for its southern ENP seem to be the biggest ones the EU has ever seen. Participants strongly criticised the EU for neither contributing to solving the most pressing political and economic problems there nor promoting its own political standards. Some pointed to the fact that the Arab - Israeli conflict had hijacked the EU’s efforts to foster interregional cooperation e.g.

in the Barcelona process / the Union for the Mediterranean and regretted that the EU approach had helped to stabilize autocratic regimes instead of changing them. While some condemned the EU for limiting itself to producing aims instead of translating them into real politics others went even further and did not see enough potential for common visions and internal cohesion of the 27. It was highly contested whether or not the “big” EU-3 (France, the UK and Germany) and less so the Weimar triangle (France, Germany, Poland) should form an avant garde and design the CFSP policy beforehand. Not surprisingly participants from the smaller EU countries questioned the correlation between economic and political size of an EU member state and its presence and influence in a conflict region like Northern Africa and the Middle East.

A key question was how to escape from the errors of the past and prevent the EU from failure, which would be disastrous for its image. Despite well-known weaknesses many contributions underlined the potential of the EU as a comprehensive security actor - something which many other players on the international scene could not be. This is not to say that the EU is the exclusive actor on the stage and recommendation was made to establish some sort of a powerful triangle between the EU, Turkey and the United States.

There were different opinions on what the countries of the “Arab spring” would need most urgently. Some argued that “everything is about the economy” and stabilizing the southern shores of the EU was the priority. Political reform at a later stage would be more prosperous in such a new economic environment. Urbanization was said to be key in countries where the rural sector was strong though not sufficient to achieve social equality and to prevent social upheavals. Illiteracy was mentioned as another hampering factor for economic growth and stability. Other contributions focused more on building “deep democracy” (in the words of High Representative Ashton) first but admitted that security sector reform is a pressing need both in Tunisia and Egypt and might be a precondition for success to let democracy grow.

Local ownership from within the region was another decisive factor for making the “Arab spring” a win-win-situation for both sides of the Mediterranean, participants argued. There seems to be large uncertainty on the EU side about what to do and what “the other side” wants the EU to do. Calls were numerous to be “innovative”, to use and improve the human capital of the region but at the same time it was admitted that the financial offers of the EU were modest so far and possibly not spent in the best way. In any case, speakers identified a collision of interests between promoting development in Northern Africa and safeguarding European economic, energy and in particular agricultural interests. Similarly the demand for mobility and access to the EU countries on the part of the young generation in the Arab world does not automatically match with EU “domestic” interests not to mention the nexus between migration from the southern Mediterranean and EU internal security interests.

To conclude: After one full day of intensive debate participants left with a wealth of information and impressions ranging from a general unease with the EU’s present international profile to concrete proposals on how the EU might regain credibility in

this field. Contributions covered a wide range of issues, with a clear focus on the institutional and procedural changes in the area of CFSP since Lisbon had come into force, and also on perceptions and proposals of member states to promote CSDP and the EU's foreign policy performance in its relations with its eastern and southern neighbourhood.

Obviously the issues raised could not be totally resolved within two days and will be continued in another seminar. New items not yet on the Stockholm agenda referred to the question of the democratic accountability of the EU's foreign policy and to the need to convince European citizens of the value of a collective "EU voice". Some participants even went further and suggested some more academic "boldness" to think the unthinkable i.e. to develop a set of scenarios on what the EU foreign policy might look if certain conditions (such as the collapse of the Euro or the opt out of major EU countries from the CFSP system) were to materialize .

No doubt, there will be much "food for thought" left for future discussions and they will hopefully take place in Finland in 2012!