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Game of zones: power struggles in the EU's neighbourhood

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In the 25 years since the end of the Cold War there has rarely been a year without conflict in one or other of Europe's neighbours. In 2015 many crises are coinciding, which reduces the bandwidth that European leaders can devote to any one of them, and thus creates a pervasive sense of continually running behind the facts. The European Union (EU) feels ill at ease in this "game of zones". With an assertive Russia trying to establish an exclusive zone of influence in the East and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) taking control of a large zone in the South, this clearly is a game for high stakes. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's framework for dealing with its six eastern as well as its southern neighbours, has obviously been unsuccessful in stabilizing Europe's periphery. But is Europe really as ill-equipped to play the game as it feels? In spite of policy failures in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods, which do demand a strategic reappraisal, the EU is intrinsically well placed to assume long-term responsibility for security in its own neighbourhood – if it finds the political will.

Keywords: European neighbourhood; strategy; Russia; Middle East

Introduction

Europe's neighbourhood has rarely been quiet. The post-cold war era was inaugurated by a civil war on Europe's eastern borders, in Yugoslavia, and by an inter-state war in its southern periphery, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. In the 25 years since there has rarely been a year without conflict in one or other of our neighbours. It is true however that in 2015 many crises are coinciding, which reduces the bandwidth that European leaders can devote to any one of them, and thus creates a pervasive sense of continually running behind the facts. The European Union (EU) feels ill at ease in this "game of zones". With an assertive Russia trying to establish an exclusive zone of influence in the East and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) taking control of a large zone in the South, to name but the two most striking challenges, this clearly is a game for high stakes. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's framework for dealing with its six eastern as well as its southern neighbours, has obviously been unsuccessful in stabilizing Europe's periphery. But is Europe really as ill-equipped to play the game as it feels? This article will argue that in spite of policy failures in its eastern (section one) and southern neighbourhoods (section two), which do demand a strategic reappraisal (section

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three), the EU is intrinsically well placed to assume long-term responsibility for security in its own neighbourhood (section four) – if it finds the political will. The pre-condition is of course that Europe tackle the ongoing crises in the East (section five) and the South (section six), but the EU should already now begin to elaborate a new concept for long-term relations with its neighbours (section seven).

1. No more quiet on the eastern front

Contrary to what Europe's unease might lead one to believe, Russia's annexation of the Crimea and subsequent incursion in Ukraine does not constitute a game-changer that changes the face of European security. It is just a reminder that at least since the war with Georgia in 2008, if not before, Russia has been and still is playing the "game of zones", aimed at (re-)establishing a sphere of influence. Many Europeans had forgotten that, or had pushed it to the back of their minds, preferring to believe that they were not engaged in a zero-sum game in their eastern neighbourhood. The EU's hope was that the countries of *Zwischeneuropa*, wedged in between itself and Russia, would be able to make their own choices, instead of Brussels or Moscow choosing for them. If they would choose to develop close ties with Europe, the EU would gladly oblige, on the condition that they would undertake economic reforms and commit to improve democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law. But the EU never asked that they would sever relations with Russia. Russia however does not see the world through this lens. And because a win–win situation requires that both sides perceive a benefit, Europe and Russia *were* engaged in a zero-sum game, whether the EU wanted to or not.

Those who deride Europe for failing to understand that it was stumbling into a zero-sum game, especially in the USA, are not entirely wrong. The ENP was simply not political enough. A focus on the "low politics" of economic and technical cooperation, to the detriment of the "high politics" of diplomacy and defence; a wide range of ongoing activities, but without a strategy linking these to well-defined political ends: these were the consequences of the EU's conscious avoidance of any fundamental debate on how to deal with Russia, for fear of bringing out the divisions between its member states. Activities under the flag of the Eastern Partnership, the multilateral dimension of the EU's engagement with its eastern periphery, went on without it being clear which relationship the EU eventually aspired to with the six countries concerned. Unfortunately, activity is no substitute for strategy: if you do not know what your objectives are, even the most diverse array of activities is unlikely to achieve them. Warnings were issued by EU member states' embassies and from within the EU apparatus itself (notably the European External Action Service or EEAS) that appearances were deceptive and the signing of the envisaged far-reaching agreement with Ukraine would not proceed that smoothly, for domestic political reasons first of all. Implementing its far-reaching stipulations was in fact incompatible with the nature of the regime. Pushing on regardless, the EU set in motion a chain of events that led to an (itself unpredictable) Russian overreaction when the domestic political crisis in Ukraine escalated. Thus it learned about the geopolitical implications of technical cooperation, export of norms and trade relations the hard way.

Just a few years ago however, in 2006–2008, the Europeans prevented the United States from making exactly the same mistake, when they resisted NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. Surely that move would not have remained without a Russian reaction either. Alas, neither Washington nor Brussels seems to have learned very much from that episode. In fact, at the time Ukraine itself eventually declined to join NATO. That ought to have taught both Europe and the USA that when a country itself is too divided over its own future, pushing it to make an untimely choice is unwise, for it is bound to increase domestic tensions.

And those tensions are easily exploited by that country's other neighbour, Russia, seeking to advance its pawns in the "game of zones".

Russia is acting more out of weakness than out of strength, however. Rather than executing a master plan, Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to be making it up as he goes along. He has proved very apt at putting Europeans and Americans off balance, by taking actions that while greatly perturbing always stayed below a certain threshold, so that Brussels and Washington remained in doubt over the correct reaction. Putin is a brilliant tactician, but he is not the master strategist. He supported Ukrainian President Yanukovich to the very end, probably because he did not see an alternative way of safeguarding Russian influence. Then Yanukovich fled the country, either without prior warning, which means Russia lost control of events, or with Russian connivance, in which case Moscow gravely miscalculated. For immediately the Ukrainian opposition filled the void and came to power, and naturally turned to its western neighbour for support. At a stroke, Putin lost most of his influence in Ukraine.

The subsequent annexation of the Crimea can be seen as an overreaction. The peninsula's only strategic asset is the naval base, the continued Russian use of which the new Ukrainian government guaranteed right away. But it is typical of a bully to grab by force even what he could get by asking politely, because that is what the bully's reputation depends on. The legitimacy of the regime is based to a great extent on the pretence that Russia remains a great power on a par with the USA and China (much more than that Putin cannot offer to his population). The easiest way of maintaining that mirage is by acting as a spoiler in the West, simply because we in the West are such polite company. It is difficult to imagine Putin taking similar risks vis-à-vis China, which would likely react with somewhat less circumspection than Europe and the USA. But to take on a bigger part than that of spoiler, be it a very irritating one, Russia no longer has the means.

The real game-changer for Europe is that the USA has made the same assessment and has reoriented its strategy accordingly. Seen from Washington there is only one strategic competitor: China, hence the "pivot" or rebalancing of the focus of US strategy towards Asia. Of course "events, dear boy, events" will continue to pull the USA in other directions. But a great power will also aim to shape events in priority areas – China and Asia are that priority for the USA today. The not so implicit message to Europe is perfectly logical: Europeans must assume a lot more responsibility for security in their own neighbourhood. The "European Reassurance Initiative" that President Obama announced in early June 2014, asking Congress for $1 billion to deploy additional American forces temporarily to eastern Europe, organize exercises and train allies and partners, was meant to underscore this message. Rather than a reversal of the pivot, it said to Europeans, in the run-up to the NATO summit in Wales in early September of the same year: shame on you, for you ought to be doing this yourself. The Wales Summit duly decided upon the creation of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, in the framework of which forces will rotate through bases in Eastern Europe for exercises and manoeuvres, and which will demand a serious investment from the European allies. The more capable Europe is, the more safely the USA can focus on Asia; in that sense, the pivot hinges on Europe.

Of course, NATO's Article 5 is credible only because of the USA. It is there to guarantee, through conventional and nuclear deterrence, that Europe's own territory is not under threat. As indeed it is not, for impressive though Russian operations in the Crimea may have been from a military point of view, taking on a NATO or EU member state is another thing entirely. In all non-Article 5 situations in Europe's broad neighbourhood however, Washington expects Europeans to step up to the plate.

2. The Arab Spring's cold view of Europe

At first sight, the ENP seems to have suffered from the same weakness in the East and in the South, which led to the EU being overtaken by the Arab Spring just as much as by the crisis in Ukraine. But while in the East a focus on

"low politics" masked the actual absence of an EU strategy, a closer look reveals that in the South "low politics" masked a very much "high politics" approach by the EU – but one that was also very much at odds with the rhetoric of the ENP. Not so much the absence of strategy as the discrepancy between the declared and the actual strategy handicapped the EU. In practice, the ambitious ENP agenda of stimulating neighbouring governments to provide equally for all their citizens in terms of security, prosperity and freedom was abandoned in favour of a short-term focus on energy, illegal migration and terrorism. Whichever regime was ready to cooperate with the EU in these areas could count on its support, quite regardless of the human rights situation. The former colonial powers' special relationships with most countries of the region did not help. As a result pictures featuring embarrassing embraces with since ousted dictators can be found of quite a few European leaders. Thus in the end the EU no longer adhered to its own principles. This was the context in which obviously flawed elections in, for example, pre-Arab Spring Tunisia did not lead to condemnations but to congratulations. Compare with the EU reaction to equally flawed elections in, for example, Belarus.

Had the EU remained true to its principles, the region probably would not have seen a speedier or less violent transition, but the EU would have enjoyed much greater legitimacy. In Ukraine demonstrators used their support for the EU's model of society to signal their dissatisfaction with Yanukovich. In Tunisia people rose in revolt demanding exactly what Europe stands for, but they saw the EU as an obstacle rather than an ally in their struggle. Because of historical reasons people in Europe's eastern neighbourhood can of course connect more easily with Europe than in the South. Less than in cold war Poland perhaps but much more than in present-day Egypt, people in Ukraine can think in terms of a return to Europe and a restoration of the freedom which they briefly enjoyed and was then taken away from them. In the South, history inevitably leads people to see Europe as foreign, paternalist or even imperialist. Having just made a revolution they are loath to accept any outside model. Fortunately that means that other outside powers that are also in "the game" in Europe's immediate neighbourhood (the Gulf States, Russia, China) find it is not a walk-over either. But they are intent on gaining influence and they are on the rise.

At the same time even domestic actors who prioritize a religious agenda over the political, economic and social concerns of the people meet with strong resistance. One positive conclusion can be drawn therefore. Revolution and protest in both the eastern and southern neighbourhood of Europe have vindicated the core *idea* of EU foreign policy (as expressed, for example, in the 2003 European Security Strategy). An equal share in security, prosperity and freedom is a universal demand and not a European or western conception; without it, no durable peace and stability are possible. On this the EU can build to revitalize its strategy for the neighbourhood.

3. Time for a strategic reappraisal

The start of a new Commission, including a new Vice-President and High Representative, Federica Mogherini, is the perfect opportunity to make a new start in the neighbourhood (Lehne, 2014). Fortunately, nobody seems to doubt any longer, as was long the case, that the EU should set priorities with respect to its vital interests. They are obviously at stake in the neighbourhood: preventing spillover of security threats to EU territory, ensuring trade routes and energy supply, managing migration and refugees, combating trafficking of humans, arms and drugs, maintaining international law, safeguarding the autonomy of European decision making.

Europe cannot keep quiet therefore, but that does not mean that Europe too should play the classic "game of zones" and try and establish an exclusive sphere of influence, as other actors try to do. The best way of preserving EU interests is not by attempting to bring Europe's neighbours under its control. As Russia is learning in Ukraine, even if part of the population supports you, you will

inevitably antagonize others, which is a recipe for perennial instability. EU interests are better served by empowering its neighbours to make their own choices, and to offer mutually beneficial partnership if they also, but not exclusively, choose to cooperate with Europe. The EU does not need its neighbours to look up to it, but it does not want them to look away from it either – that would be very harmful for its interests. Empowerment starts with domestic stability, which starts with integrating all citizens in the political arena, guaranteeing their security, and their share in the wealth of the country. The EU certainly does not need to abandon the core idea of the European Security Strategy therefore.

But it does require new regional strategies on how to bring this grand strategy into practice. Strategies, plural: the notion that a single Neighbourhood Policy can fit all of Europe's neighbours has been proved wrong. The dynamics in the East (geographically and culturally in Europe, but also within the ambit of a power with irredentist designs, Russia) and the South (in Africa and Asia, where multiple powers compete for influence) are just too different. At the same time, the EU has come to realize that "the neighbours of the neighbours" are often as crucial to its interests. Indeed, the EU is a major actor in stabilizing the Horn of Africa, where its anti-piracy operations have bred a comprehensive regional strategy, as well as the Sahel, for which another regional strategy is in place. As a leading negotiator with Iran, the EU plays a crucial role in Gulf security as well. In reality therefore, five partially overlapping and strongly interrelated areas are of vital importance to European security: the eastern neighbourhood; the Mediterranean; the Sahel; the Horn of Africa; and the Gulf.

In diplomacy, symbols matter. If and when it does adopt a new approach to its neighbourhood, the EU would do well to phase out gradually the ENP brand, which rightly or wrongly has become associated with failure, in favour of an Eastern, Mediterranean, Sahel, Horn of Africa and Gulf Policy. These policies should be issue-based and thus geographically overlapping. The EU has a tendency, manifest also in the ENP, to see the world through the artificial geographic divides that are but its own creation and do not always reflect reality on the ground. Different issues generate different regional dynamics, hence the EU should be flexible and approach the same country in the context of different regional policies according to the issue at hand. If on one issue it makes sense to have, for example, Algeria and Jordan around the same table, on other issues one needs to convene Algeria and Mali while Jordan would have but little interest. Such a flexible approach of course requires prioritization and strong coordination between the five regional policies, in order to avoid that neighbouring countries would be confronted with contradictory expectations.

4. An ambitious long-term security provider

Before any new long-term regional policies can be put in place however, the EU must address the ongoing crises in its neighbourhood.

To start with Europe must make it clear that it does consider the security of this broad region to be its responsibility. Not just because that is what the USA expects, but in the first place because the EU's comprehensive regional policies will not be credible if the impression persists, as in the past, that its engagement ends where hard security problems begin. Europe must be the first-line security provider in its own neighbourhood. Whenever a security problem arises, the EU must take the lead, initiate a response and forge a coalition to deliver it. In many instances a diplomatic response will be called for, at which the High Representative and the EEAS have already proven to be proficient (on Kosovo and Iran for example), supplemented as required with sticks and carrots from the comprehensive EU toolkit (trade, development, SSR, sanctions, etc.).

But the EU must also display the ability and the will to use force, first of all as a credible deterrent that will enhance the effectiveness of its diplomacy. Actual military intervention is the last resort when vital interests and the

responsibility to protect cannot otherwise be upheld. Even if the EU would formally declare the broader neighbourhood a security priority, at the level of grand strategy, whether or not to intervene in a specific crisis will always depend on an ad hoc cost–benefit calculation. What positive effects could intervention achieve, but which negative fall-out might it generate and which risks would our forces run? Crucial to the military success of recent interventions (in Libya and Mali) is that a major part of the population welcomed them.

It will in any case be a *European* decision. As a consequence of the pivot, the USA will no longer take the initiative in Europe's place but will look to Europeans to take charge. The EU evidently is the best forum through which Europeans can assume this comprehensive security role, as here they can integrate diplomacy, development, trade and defence into a single course of action. If in a specific crisis Europeans through the EU take the political decision to take military action, they will of course call upon a member state or NATO to provide the command and control for a European-led operation, through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or through NATO, depending on the circumstances. Assuming responsibilities has capability implications. Europeans must drastically step up military cooperation and integration through the CSDP to enable them to fulfil the Headline Goal (deploying at corps level or up to 60,000 troops) in the broad neighbourhood *over and above* any ongoing operations – that would provide them with a real deterrent and strategic reserve. Furthermore, they must aspire to be able to deploy in this region relying on their own enabling capabilities (air-to-air refuelling, intelligence, etc.) rather than continue to be dependent on the USA, thus freeing up American assets for deployment elsewhere.

5. But not without short-term crisis management: in the East

These long-term security obligations provide the framework for the EU's short-term crisis management.

The EU actually has responded pretty adequately to the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis: adopting sanctions to signal its dissatisfaction with the annexation of the Crimea, keeping further sanctions in reserve to warn Putin against similar military incursion in mainland Ukraine, providing economic support to the Ukrainian government and helping to organize the presidential elections, and engaging in high-level diplomacy. Indeed, Obama aligned himself with this approach in his Brussels speech on 26 March 2014, putting paid to rather more belligerent utterings in some American quarters. Of course, EU decisions were preceded by difficult debates between member states, but too often we allow these initial divisions to overshadow the outcome. They are inherent to decision making in any actor, the only difference being that usually debates in the EU are out in the open as opposed to those between the State Department, the Pentagon and the National Security Council in the USA.

The separatist rebels forced the EU's hand when in a fatal mistake they shot down Malaysian airliner MH17 on 17 July 2014, with missiles that could only have been provided by Russia. Confronted with the death of 298 innocent civilians, many of them EU citizens, the EU imposed additional (mostly financial) sanctions that hurt. Unfortunately, Putin did not use this opportunity to phase out his support quietly for the armed separatists, even though the MH17 disaster greatly damaged his international position, forcing even Russia's usual partners to at the very least remain silent even when not openly condemning it. Yet, as before, the rebellion was not allowed to escalate beyond a certain threshold. Furthermore, only rather weak counter-sanctions were adopted by Russia. The threat to stop importing second-hand cars from Europe is hardly indicative of great power status – and even that threat was not made hard. Putin too seems to have noticed that in eastern Ukraine there may be a lot of dissatisfaction with rule from Kiev, but it is neither as massive as (it apparently is) in the Crimea nor does it necessarily equate with a wish to join Russia. Unlike in the Crimea

therefore, pushing things to extremes may lead to a bloody and protracted civil war (as civil wars usually are) in which Putin likely prefers not to be involved. Russia may in fact have more interest in keeping Ukraine together but weak, which creates opportunities to wield influence nationally, rather than in splitting off further parts, which would cut it off completely from the western-oriented country that would remain (Wood, 2014).

That also implies that the EU and the USA should aid Ukraine to build up its armed forces, but with the objective of maintaining a presence of the central government throughout the country and control the borders – not to try and resolve the issue by force. That would only fuel internecine violence, which could tempt Russia in turn to intervene militarily anyway, bound as it has itself by its statements about protection of Russians everywhere. The people who stand to lose from civil war are the Ukrainians. In the same vein, Europe should not over-react to Russian military posturing (such as overflights): it is but posturing, in order not to create the impression that Russia is scared off by the strong declarations emanating from NATO's Wales Summit, and it probably indicates rising nervousness inside the regime because of the dire effect of sanctions on the economy. At the time of writing, winter is coming however: a much more effective instrument for Putin to wield is energy supply. Yet his margin for manoeuvre is limited, given his dependence on income from energy export, whereas alternative markets (such as the gas deal hastily signed with China in 2014) will take years to develop fully. If EU member states remain united, that is, and do not allow themselves to be pried apart by Russia. The EU should maintain sanctions and at the same time continue its diplomatic engagement to try and forge a consensus on a federal solution for Ukraine that can satisfy all Ukrainians, including in the east of the country, which can therefore also be a face-saving way out for Russia. A commitment by the Ukrainian government not to apply for NATO membership could be part of an honourable deal – in any case, most allies do not currently want Ukraine to join NATO, if they are honest about it. Only when the Ukrainian government has effective control of all outside borders of mainland Ukraine, can sanctions be lifted.

In the end, the outcome might be very advantageous for the EU, except that Europe will likely be the one having to pay for it for a long time to come: the gradual stabilization of a more democratic Ukraine, free to build constructive relations with all of its neighbours. The economic and political challenge is huge though.

The question that Europe should ask itself is: is it willing to establish as close relations and spend as much treasure on the other countries of the Eastern Partnership? If they so desire, of course. In the case of Moldova a positive answer seems already guaranteed from both sides; as regards Belarus the question does not now pose itself. But what about the South Caucasus? What are their aspirations, how far is Europe willing to go to meet them, and how can it avoid another clash with Russia? Putin may have damaged his own long-term interests for even those who are inclined to look to Moscow rather than to Brussels did not count on cessation of territory being part of the bargain.

What EU policy will not achieve is to return the Crimea to Ukraine. The peninsula will join South Ossetia, Abkhazia and others in the category of territories of which Europe does not recognize the proclaimed status but also does not actively attempt to alter it. That is unsatisfactory, but it ought not to be a surprise. The history of international relations since World War II shows that the Permanent Five do not wage war against one another, and that even proxy wars tend to be very costly for all sides. Just as, earlier in this century, Russia and China protested against but could do little in practice to end the evidently illegal US invasion and occupation of Iraq, so the balance of power impels us to live with a Russian Crimea, however much we disapprove.

6. As in the South

In recent years, awareness has sharply increased across the EU that security in the

broader southern neighbourhood concerns all of the 28 member states. That does not yet translate, unfortunately, into a great willingness to act when forceful intervention is required. In Libya in 2011 and in Mali in 2013 ad hoc coalitions outside the EU had to take the military lead, at the initiative of Britain and France, with the EU as such not coming onto the stage until the follow-up phase. But the EU does now have comprehensive regional strategies for the Sahel and the Horn, in the implementation of which is has deployed training and capacity-building missions as well as the naval operation Atalanta. It also deployed a border assistance mission in Libya, and it attempted to play a vital role in the diplomatic processes to end the civil war in Syria and to prevent nuclear proliferation to Iran. The success of none of these engagements was guaranteed in the first place, but turmoil in the region reached another level with the military take-over of significant parts of Syria and Iraq by the IS in 2014. What is required first of all is staying power: the will and the means to sustain engagement until an acceptable end-state has been achieved.

The security situation in the Sahel appears manageable, but fighting in Mali remains ongoing and the EU will have to sustain its military deployment as well as its economic and financial support for years to come if the region is not to slide back into major instability. The vastness of the region is a challenge, but on the other hand even a limited number of major assets (notably air support) in support of local forces can make a difference as insurgents are mostly but lightly equipped. The EU might wish to consider an additional effort in this sense, alongside its training missions. In the Horn of Africa, the efforts of years are finally bearing fruit, but here too a sustained effort is necessary. It will be some time to come before Somalia is sufficiently stable and prosperous to eradicate the root causes of piracy. Until that time the EU has no choice but to keep patrolling the neighbouring waters.

Much more challenging is the situation in Libya, which is far too chaotic and dangerous for the border assistance mission to be more than a token deployment. Unfortunately, gravely deficient follow-up has almost completely negated the effects of the successful military intervention in 2011. The crisis in Mali in 2013 has already demonstrated the damage that spill-over from Libya can cause. Though success is by no means guaranteed, the EU has both the greatest responsibility and the most instruments to work with the Libyan authorities to try and create a semblance of stability. That implies a much more ambitious role than it is assuming today.

The gravest crisis is the civil war in Syria and Iraq. Initially military intervention in Syria was calculated to cause more harm than good. Even the use of chemical weapons did not affect this calculus, as President Obama's final reluctance to use force demonstrated. The war however has proved too intractable for the diplomatic process to achieve anything beyond the destruction of chemical weapons – a good thing, but it does not in itself stop the war. At least spill-over of violence to where it was most feared (to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey) has so far been limited, but the risk remains; military action may yet be called for to prevent it from materializing. In June 2014 the war spectacularly hit Iraq, when the extremist IS that was fighting Assad in Syria took everyone by surprise by capturing large parts of northern Iraq. Another proof (if more was needed) of the error of invading Iraq in 2003, but Europe cannot consider this to be just an American problem, for the stability of the entire Middle East is at stake. Furthermore, the IS is exactly the group that many fighters originating from Europe have joined, hence Europeans have a responsibility to contribute. Suddenly military intervention was seen as imperative. Yet again only a few European countries joined the US-led air campaign against the IS in Iraq, where the government formally requested assistance; they do not participate in the campaign over Syria, for lack of a UN mandate. Some countries from the region participate as well, but overall the perception remains that of another western intervention.

Meanwhile the EU, together with the UN, the USA and (in spite of the crisis in

Ukraine) Russia, has no option but to keep putting pressure on all parties in Syria to bring them to the negotiating table. In view of the stalemate in the civil war, any agreement may have to include a continued role for Assad, at least in a transitional phase, for it to be workable. However much we may dislike the idea on principle, the crisis in Iraq has probably tilted the balance in favour of realism. A cease-fire between the non-IS opposition and Assad is indeed what the latter has been aiming at by consciously targeting the former and avoiding to attack the IS. But as continued fighting is unlikely to break the stalemate it would only result in more loss of life, while a cease-fire would allow efforts to be focused on the IS.

The attempt to involve Iran in the Syrian negotiations was very wise and has to be kept up. A settlement for Syria has to take into account the proxy war with Saudi Arabia that is going on and that will continue beneath the surface even though Iran and Saudi Arabia are now objective allies in the fight against the IS. The EU's role is not to take sides in this quest for regional dominance, but to strive for a regional arrangement in which all find their place. Hence the strategic importance of the broader negotiations with Iran itself. Care must be taken not to jeopardize the outcome of these by appearing so eager that Tehran would no longer see a reason to make many concessions – European energy companies especially are chafing at the bit. Yet a "normalization" of relations with Iran would be a breakthrough indeed. "Normalization" can only go so far, in view of the serious human rights issues in Iran (such as the hanging of homosexuals), though the situation in Saudi-Arabia, the West's "ally" in the Gulf is hardly any better. But even a limited shift towards constructive relations on an issue-by-issue basis would be a game-changer for the Middle East and the Gulf – and there probably is a much bigger chance of transition in Iran, which is in many ways a much more open society, than in Saudi Arabia.

Europe could thus try to maintain an equidistant position between Riyadh and Tehran, further diversify energy supply and help stabilize the Middle East. As the US role vis-à-vis Iran remains constrained, for domestic political reasons, the EU is best placed to imagine an ambitious diplomatic scheme to take this forward. Even the USA has stepped up its engagement, for the crisis in Iraq, where Sunni IS fighters are massacring Shia, is of great concern to Iran as well and has immediately produced informal consultation between Washington and Tehran. But the priority remains to contain the IS. The military intervention is but a stop-gap measure, to prevent the IS from taking control of an even larger territory and fending off the threat to Baghdad. Training and equipping the Iraqi armed forces will not suffice either, for until they see a credible political end state that they can believe it, they will not fight, no matter how well we train them and how much advanced equipment we lavish them with. A clear political project for the future of Iraq and the region that can be supported by all of our allies in the fight against the IS: that is the enormous diplomatic challenge that Europe and the USA ought to concentrate on. And if the viability of such a project demands that borders be changed: so be it.

7. A partner in pragmatic idealism

If the security situation can at least be kept under control, the EU can revitalize its long-term multilateral and bilateral relations with the countries in its broader neighbourhood.

A multilateral forum would add value to bilateral relations, at least as a confidence and security-building measure for the countries of each of the five regions in Europe's neighbourhood, which often are embroiled in tensions and disputes, but also to foster cooperation between sets of countries on concrete issues. The more operational the multilateral forums can be the better, of course, which requires a focused agenda. That certainly holds true for the existing forums: the Eastern Partnership and the ill-fated Union for the Mediterranean; with the participants of these the furthest-reaching bilateral relations, such as association agreements, can be envisaged. Multilateral relations with the Gulf countries, via the Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC), need to become more political. For the Sahel and the Horn, European security initiatives in these regions can be the starting point for less institutionalized but focused multilateral meetings. In addition, ad hoc meetings in various constellations can be envisaged, including Iran, with respect to the issue to be addressed, for example, the security crisis in Iraq.

At the bilateral level, a reconceptualization of relations is in order. Partnership is indeed the aim, but it cannot be the starting point. Partnership at first sight does not work. By declaring all neighbours to be partners from the start, the EU has weakened rather than strengthened the incentive for reform. Why change if you are on the list of the good guys already? Instead of changing its neighbours, the EU itself has become tainted by associating itself too closely with unsavoury regimes. Real *partnership* implies systematic consultation and regular joint action on an agreed range of issues. That requires a degree of agreement on both values and policy objectives which can be achieved with democracies and countries in transition but probably not with authoritarian regimes. The EU should of course have a *dialogue* with all neighbours, starting from the realization that in the absence of a membership perspective and because the paternalistic conditionality approach no longer fits in with this multipolar and post-Spring era, having a *reforming* role from the outside is extremely difficult. Playing a *moderating* role, curbing excesses, is realistic and important however, and can go hand in hand with issue-based cooperation on an ad hoc basis, as a prelude to eventual partnership. This is what could be called pragmatic idealism. When transition and democratization does happen, the EU can and must of course offer full support. In such a scenario Europe has a comparative advantage, for few other external actors can fully support democracy, in view of their own lack of it.

Within this context the EU should phase out the language of partnership, except where it really applies. A return to classic diplomacy is in order, speaking with all actors at all levels, privately but also publicly, in full view of public opinion in the country. For this is Europe's strongest asset throughout its broad neighbourhood: people have become active citizens and will continue to exert pressure on their governments when they perceive their rights to be ignored. Once found, this "class consciousness" cannot be put back in the bottle. Supporting free media and Europe's own public diplomacy are very important in this regard. Second, the EU has a lot of expertise to offer (e.g. on security sector reform) and should be generous when it is requested, especially in countries in transition. Third, although other external actors at times have more resources to spend and the scale of the challenges is immense, the EU still can allocate significant budgets (e.g. €15 billion for the European Neighbourhood Instrument for 2014–2020). Or at least they would be significant if they were concentrated on more specific priorities rather than fragmented across a wide array of well-intentioned but not always very effective initiatives. The highest priority appears to be investment in economically viable projects that stimulate employment and long-term development (such as transport and energy infrastructure).

Conclusion

As violence and foreign intrusion threaten the stability of many of Europe's neighbours, with full-blooded war going on in several countries, our broader neighbourhood certainly is in the worst state since a long time. But that does not mean that Europe is impotent to deal with this. If the EU deploys them pragmatically, its diplomatic, military, civilian and economic instruments, and indeed its values themselves, can have a great impact. The key, as ever, is strategy: setting clear objectives and choosing instruments and allocating means with respect to those priorities. In the simplest of terms: not just doing things with the neighbours, but doing things for a purpose.

In this context, the EU has to work with the great powers, simply because they are the great powers. Their non-obstruction, if not their active cooperation, is needed to advance in key areas, such as the negotiations about

Syria and Iran, and economic ties are way too close and important to put at risk permanently. Tempting though some may find it to revert to cold war frames, it is imperative to maintain constructive relations with Russia where possible. Issue-based cooperation with all of its "strategic partners", whenever the EU finds that it can agree on the way to protect shared interests, is precisely the way of pulling them into effective and rule-based multilateralism as Brussels sees it. Partnership is not marriage: we do not have to declare our love, but we do have to be able to compartmentalize and proceed where we can.

In the end, it has to be repeated, the Ukraine crisis is not a game-changer for European security. It would have been a game-changer had the USA, Europe and Russia managed to build a real and equitable relationship of trust. The brief interval in which that seemed to be on the cards ended in the early 2000s already. Not for the first time in history Europe now sees Russia as a great power that it dare not trust. But it is no longer such a great power that it actually threatens Europe's own territory. Consequently, the stand-off about Ukraine also does not threaten global stability in a truly multipolar world, in which notably China is much more powerful than Russia, to the extent that a similar crisis would have during the cold war. Regrettably, the Ukraine crisis has rendered a real strategic partnership between the EU and Russia impossible, probably for some years to come, but that does not mean cooperation on specific compartmentalized issues should not be attempted. Finally, one other conclusion imposes itself: in a multipolar world, Europe and the USA cannot expect even democratic powers such as Brazil and India to condemn such a blatant violation of international law as the Russian incursion in Ukraine if they do not respect the rules themselves. Seen from Brasilia or New Delhi, there is not much of a difference between Iraq in 2003 and Ukraine today. In that sense, the USA and Europe have lost power as well, but they remain powerful enough to achieve a rule-based international order in partnership with the other poles of the multipolar world.

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