Can the European Union become a major power?

Maxime Lefebvre

Director of International Relations at the
ENA. Professor at Sciences Po

Abstract :

Before reviving the concept of "*Europe as a World Power*" the European Union first has to overcome the euro zone crisis that at present is resulting in introspection. If it emerges more united, showing greater solidarity, the European Union might also provide itself with the means to improve its profile in the international arena, increase its strategic autonomy and have greater influence over globalisation. We have to be clear about this: undoubtedly the European Union will never be a traditional *Westphalian* power with a totally harmonised foreign and defence policy. Good coordination between the Member States (especially between the biggest of them, who still enjoy power status in the international arena) and the authorities in Brussels, together with the support of common, stronger and more refined instruments is the necessary condition for the claim "*Europe as a world power*". Nor can we avoid the issue of the limits of this project: if the Union continues to enlarge, the revival of political Europe based on a more integrated euro zone may come under challenge.

INTRODUCTION

Right now the European Union is bogged down in the euro zone crisis. The settlement of this – via a mix of shared disciplines, solidarity and improved coordination of economic policies at the service of growth is evidently a prerequisite for the future of the European project. This does not stop us however from looking beyond these present problems to think seriously about how a closer knit community of Europeans might come together to have greater say in a world in which their relative influence has been waning.

And yet the promises held in the Lisbon Treaty, of a stable Presidency of the European Council and of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the creation of a European External Action Service, hardly seem to have led to anything – for the time being at least. The European Union did not play front stage in the "Arab Spring" and has not launched any further military operation as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) since 2008.

Do we conclude that the idea of "Europe as a world power", that has been complicated by an ever growing number of Member States (28 Member States after the accession of Croatia on July 1st 2013), has to be shelved along with all of the incomplete dreams of our philosophers and visionaries? If we look at the question from a long term point of view, it is possible to graduate our pessimism. It has taken 20 years for European integration, launched by the Schuman Declaration in 1950, to take political shape via cooperation on a foreign policy level and 30 more for it to take on board the idea of security and defence. The very nature of the European project is slow and progressive, alternating between phases of progress and stagnation. Rather than lamenting over the European Union's present state, we should be thinking about how we might progress matters by looking at some basic issues and methodology.

1) Debating "Europe as a world power" in a realistic manner

The European Union is not, and probably never will be, a Federal State, enjoying, as is the case in Germany, the US or Switzerland, the competence of competences. Likewise it cannot be a "*Westphalian*" power either, based on political power embodying a unity of command, employing the "Westphalian" State's instruments of sovereignty (diplomacy and defence). Europe's ultimate security does not lie in the European Union but in its Member States who still exist in the international arena as well as in the control

2

of their own defence systems.

However the 27 EU Member States, most of whom are NATO members (21), continue to consider their security via their relationship with the American ally, which holds almost total hegemony over the strategic world stage – at least from the point of view of going to war and deploying troops is concerned – because long stabilisation operations and nation building are exhausting the means available to America as a power, as we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course the European Union committed to collective defence in the Lisbon Treaty – mutual assistance in the event of armed attack - but its implementation was delegated to NATO in the very same treaty.

Although European Defence exists it does not guarantee the defence of Europe. As Zaki Laïdi [1] comments, the European Union is not really "a major power, the ultimate guarantee of its security.

2) If the world was still only in an anarchic, Westphalian or "Hobbesian" state, which predominated until the two world wars, the European Union would not be worth much

Although we cannot deny that the world is still Westphalian in part, with for example, the continuing role of military force and nuclear dissuasion and the increasing strategic rivalry between the US and China, it is also increasingly interdependent in terms of the economy, communications, and global issues such as the environment and even security: increasing interconnections between internal and external security: cyber-crime, piracy, illegal trafficking, terrorism and natural disasters etc ...

However in these areas globalisation is providing opportunities to Europe as a power. The value of openness, such as free trade, is of course sometimes considered negatively in France – "An open Europe means Europe given away" – is what we often hear – but this is the base of the European project and of peaceful globalisation.

In this world game the European Union has profile when it is united: by its trade policy, by its policy of competitiveness, by its standards, which it defines for the world's leading market – we speak of "power by standards" [2] or "structural power" [3]. It has to

defend its interests and its non-commercial preferences (social, environment, the non-commercial role played by farmers, financial regulation); it has to defend its values (Human Rights), to be generous (development aid), but also keep a closer eye on "reciprocity" in economic trade with its most important partners (this has become a real priority since 2010). Quite simply the European Union has a fundamental interest in strengthening multilateralism, the role played by law and world governance, so that globalisation is regulated better and is fairer (fair trade).

3) In the "multi-polar battle" the European Union's advantages are significant and often underestimated

Consider demography for example: the European population is stagnating and ageing. In 2050 the European Union will still have a bigger population than the US lying (as it does at present) third behind India and China. Moreover, the qualitative aspects of the organisation of European societies are significant advantages long term – the rule of law, the transparency of power and the civil service, education, the social model, etc. if the European Union is considered as a whole, from an economic point of view, it is both the world's leading economic and commercial power. It represents no less than half of the world's development aid and foreign investments flows. It is also a technological and military power, even though it ought to do more to catch up somewhat in these areas.

4) The diversity of its nations is certainly an obstacle to the federal concentration of political power and to the power of the European Union

This diversity has to be taken on board and turned into an advantage. After all, emulation and the spirit of competition have also taken European civilisation to the most advanced stage of development in the world, at least when this did not push it to suicidal confrontation. Every country has its own interests, priorities, and responds differently in the international arena. The "small" countries especially ensure that their vital interests are not endangered by European decisions. The "big" countries try to ensure that their world ambitions

1. *Zaki Laïdi, La norme sans la force. L'énigme de la puissance européenne, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.*

2. *Zaki Laïdi, ibid.*

3. Susan Strange, Le retrait de l'Etat. La dispersion du pouvoir dans l'économie mondiale, Ed. du temps présent, 2011.

and interests are conveyed via Europe. We have to make the most of any potential divergences and define what we mean by "European interests": the European Union Neighbourhood Policy for example reconciles orientations towards the east and those towards the south; "reciprocity" is a means of combining the most protectionist trends seen in the Latin countries with the more liberal, open positions of the Nordic countries.

Europe as a world power is primarily a question of political determination. Good coordination between Nation States and the Community institutions and policies is the prerequisite for the production of true "collective energy" and the defence of common interests, so that the Union can leverage true power. At present however there is a real problem in transmission between the main capitals and the "Brussels machine". France, the country that invented the idea of "Europe as a world power" in the 1970's with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Jean François-Poncet, has a vital role to play in re-injecting energy and ambition. It has to do this by cooperating intelligently with the authorities in Brussels and the other major European players, the first of these being Germany and the UK, without neglecting the contribution that can be made by other countries.

5) One important mainstay of European power lies in the common (community) policies and in the pooling of European resources

In the areas in which Europe stands united, when it pools its capabilities, it is strong vis-à-vis the outside world. Of course not everything can be communitarised, but some projects and some programmes have to be, such as for example the 5 billion € invested in the Galileo programme, that will enable the European system to break the monopoly held by the American GPS global positioning system as of the mid 2010's, which no State could have achieved alone. This is also true in the area of diplomacy and defence. The creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) aims to bring greater synergy to European diplomacy and national diplomacies. Since 2003 the European Union has introduced civilian and military crisis management tools that really do work. It has launched over 20 CSDP missions, of which six were military. Europe has developed a true capability in terms of crisis management, which was still unimaginable at the end of the Cold War – with a curse hanging over European Defence since the failure of the Eu-

ropean Defence Community (EDC) in 1954. Again Europe has taken its time, but finally it is emerging as an autonomous agent of security, even though its action may still seem modest.

Further progress is possible. The European Union still does not have a real HQ able to plan military operations, as is the case with NATO. Only the British, for fear of relativising the pre-eminence of the Atlantic Alliance, continues to prevent the European Union from taking this decisive step. So pressure will have to be kept up, and it will not be the first time that the British will have accepted an inevitable development [4].

Armaments Europe also has a great deal of progress to make. The means available to the European Defence Agency (30 million €) are still ridiculously low in comparison with NATO's military investments (600 million). Military spending by European States are both low (less than half of US military spending) and not very effective because of the dispersion of armament programmes. Again progress has to be made and awareness is growing about what is at stake, as shown by developments in the debate over the sharing and pooling of military capabilities, launched by Germany and Sweden in 2010, just as France committed to privileged intergovernmental military cooperation with the UK.

6) Often we believe that European power lies in soft power: seduction, attraction, influence

This soft power emerges most clearly in the enlargement policy that helps the Union to achieve radical change in the behaviour of countries that are negotiating their accession, and which is sometimes presented as the most successful of the European policies. But *soft power* also emerges in other areas such as in the negotiation of external agreements, the neighbourhood policy or when the EU steps in during diplomatic crises (Macedonia in 2001, Ukraine in 2004, Georgia in 2008).

However we would be wrong to consider the European Union uniquely from the angle of *soft power*. Europe is also successful in terms of coercion, whether this is in the context of its community policies or in the shape of trade retaliation measures (the sanction against Microsoft because of infringements to competition rules) or sanctions against governments that infringe human rights (Belarus, Myanmar, Libya, Syria, etc.) or that threaten international peace (Iran).

4. *cf. their entry into the common market*

FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN

4

The European Union is now able to implement military instruments. Of course it is still difficult to imagine the EU launching into real war as NATO did in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya or in armed operations as France does, alone, in Africa (Côte d'Ivoire in 2011). The European Union's military missions are still of low intensity (peacekeeping in Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, maritime police missions off the coasts of Somalia, occasional, limited deployment of troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo or in Chad).

However the use of force should not a priori be dismissed in the future. None of the European countries would deprive themselves of it and the European treaties themselves include provisions for the Union to be able to undertake "*crisis management combat missions, including operations to re-establish peace.*" Even authors who attribute the Union with the role of a "peaceful power", like Tzvetan Todorov [5], do not dismiss the use of armed force for humanitarian reasons in the event of genocide for example. We should also note the recent extension of the naval operation off the coasts of Somalia (Atalanta), which authorises European forces to pursue pirates right to the Somalian coasts.

Obviously the use of force will always be a difficult issue for the Europeans both because of the strategic restraint of some players (Germany and Sweden for example) and because it is easier to follow the political and military leadership of America than to come to an agreement between European states, especially with 27 members. It is also clear that the use of force, if it were to develop in the future, would probably be tightly controlled by the UN, requiring "acceptable" goals such as humanitarian reasons or the implementation of "the responsibility to protect". Even though it is far from reaching this stage it is not impossible for the Union to take more responsibility for its security and to develop a true "strategic culture".

In any event even within its present limits, European power is more than *soft power*. It is rather more *smart power*, a combination of soft and hard – a concept made popular by the Obama administration and which the European Union did in fact invent, as it promoted both civilian and military crisis management in its European Security Strategy in 2003. The European Union is an unrivalled regional player on a world scale: enjoying a budget that is far greater than either that of the UN or NATO, it enjoys a much softer image than NATO (of which American power is part; it is also not an armed machine designed for war), able to wield all types of foreign policy instruments - from trade policy to development aid, from diplomacy and defence, including support to the police, the legal system, customs, reconstruction and the reform of the State, to civil protection -, we might say that we would have to have invented it if it hadn't have existed. The management of the reconstruction and pacification

of the Balkans over the last fifteen years is undoubtedly the clearest example of in-depth European action; and the European Union could do much more in its neighbourhood in Africa or in the Middle East.

7) Beyond greater collective determination and greater sharing of means, a common vision of the Union's role and interests in the world has to be defined

Zaki Laïdi highlights the European Union's lack of "narrative power" [6], and it is true that since the end of the Second World War, all of the major theories about the world have originated in the USA (Fukuyama, Huntington, Kagan).

However the European Union does have a capability for "narrative". Its vision of the world might sometimes seem too candid or ethereal (values, law, Human Rights, multilateralism), it possibly plunges far too much into repentance and the "duty of remembrance", but it is also just as able to start looking into its security. The European Security Strategy defined in 2003, is more than a silly exercise designed to patch up European relations in the wake of divisions over the American war in Iraq, as one Franco-British political scientist puts it [7]. It is the first attempt made by Europeans to consider their strategic environment and to define some fundamental priorities in terms of their external policy: attachment to multilateralism – in contrast to the unilateralism of the Bush Administration – the Union's neighbourhood priority embodies a true geopolitical vision, and the will to invest in both civil and military crisis management (European smart power).

As a continuation to this text that now dates back nearly ten years – and which was only the focus of one interim report in 2008 – the Union might undertake a new exercise by updating the 2003 text or by extending European external action by confirming the creation of a more integrated External Action Service, combining the community's external policy and its military/diplomatic action or by adopting more specifically a Whitepaper on European Security and Defence (as France would like it), or by combining all of these different options.

It is clear in any case that vision and strategy are vital in lending credibility to the strategic European player and to strengthening coherence and confidence between Member States. As in 2003 the Union's three main players, (France, Germany, UK) should be involved in the main drafting process, even though other powers should also be involved (such as Poland, Italy and Spain), so that every Member State can comment and amend the text.

5. *Tzvetan Todorov, Le nouveau désordre mondial. Réflexions d'un Européen, Robert Laffont, 2003.*

6. *Zaki Laïdi, ibid.*

7. *Christopher Bickerton, European Union foreign policy from effectiveness to functionality, Palgrave, 2011*

8) Finally a last detail should also be tabled in considering European power: the issue of the Union's identity and its borders which obviously is linked to further enlargement prospects: Balkans?Turkey? Eastern Europe?

The French view has always contrasted enlargement and greater integration and has tried to reconcile the two. It cannot be denied that on strategic issues the more stake-holders there are, the more difficult it is to assert the will to act, in that the unanimous decision making process appears difficult to overcome. Can a 40 strong European Union become a truly strategic player? It is difficult with 27 members and is usually achieved thanks to the impetus provided by the "big" countries. It is not so easy to dismiss the "European concert", which has marked the continent's history.

There remains the issue of dissociating "Europe as a world power" from "Europe as wider area" This might be achieved either via "permanent structured cooperation" as planned in the European treaties (that should in principle involve the British, who took part in its design in 2003), or via a euro zone that is moving towards greater economic and budge-tary, as well as political and military federalism (with the problem in this case of doing without the UK and its diplo-matic and military influence). This question is not easy to answer but it deserves to be raised and looked into.

CONCLUSION

If we think of "Europe as a world power" in terms of it being a "Westphalian power" that is able to influence diplomatic and military issues, acting in the same league as the USA, we are mistaken. "Europe as a world power" fits rather more between the gaps in political/strategic power relations; it endeavours to influence globalisation and to develop smart power combining influence and attractiveness on the one hand, coercion on the other. Above all it has to find support in its Member States, in their desire to act together, in the common tools they are prepared to introduce and in the solidarity that exists between them.

Beyond the differences, the things that unite countries are much stronger: the heritage of a wealthy civilisation, common values, geographical proximity, a European society model and common policies that have constantly grown stronger as time has passed. We have to re-discover a joint project that undoubtedly cannot just be reduced to the fi-nality of a European Union sublimating the Nation-States, but one which makes complete sense once the forces of union, solidarity and accepted interdependence supplant those which divide. What is true for the euro crisis must also be true in the future to enable the Union to have grea-ter influence in the world, to defend interests and values together, and to help towards making the world a better and safer place.

Maxime Lefebvre

Diplomat and Director of International Relations at the ENA, he also lectures on international issues at Sciences Po. He has just published " *L'Union européenne peut-elle devenir une grande puissance?[8] (Can the European Union become a major power?)*

8. *Documentation française, Débats / Réflexeeurope, 2012.*

You can read all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN