FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN

POLICY PAPER

European issues
n°404
27th September 2016

The Strategic Interests of the European Union

Pierre VIMONT

Logically the analysis of the European Union's interests should not be a problem. Due to Europe's position in the world, its action in terms of the major challenges facing our societies (environment, energy, information society, terrorism, etc…) and its profile within major international organisations, it is quite easy to establish a strategic agenda for the Union without this causing any controversy. Frequently then in the past this exercise has been successfully undertaken. But the reality of the matter is that beyond such descriptions, which are often for academic use, European players -Member States and institutions- have hardly felt concerned by such agendas, since the feeling of common European interest is still weakly shared, if not contested, by those who primarily look to their own interests. In other words, European strategic interests exist and are visible to all, but their impact on world affairs remains singularly limited in contrast to the theoretic influence of Europe in the international arena. In order to be operational and concrete Europe's common interests have to be perceived and accepted as such by the Europeans themselves. The problem is that they often seem to be the last ones to be able or wanting to do so.[1]

A STRATEGIC AGENDA FOR EUROPE

The mention of major challenges faced today by the international community logically provides a framework for Europe's strategic agenda. There is not one single crisis or global issue that does not concern the European Union in one way or another. In short, the list of the Union's strategic interests can be laid out as follows:

In the economic field

In the economic field Europe faces increasingly strong competition on the part of the emerging countries and also traditional partners. For the Union this new situation implies both a more offensive trade policy, greater innovative and research capabilities, and more generally, renewed commitment to the modernisation of the economic and social model on which the nations of Europe have relied for over fifty years. To underpin on-going work (the Juncker Plan for the revival of investments, trade negotiations with the USA over the TTIP, realignment of government finances under the Economic and Monetary Union, Energy Union, etc…) European leaders should be looking for a new balance between social protection and economic competitiveness. The task is obviously being made harder in a context of weak growth and given the political and social resistance that this vital renewal is encountering. But the strategic issue at stake is there, and it is in the common interest of all Europeans.

In the diplomatic field

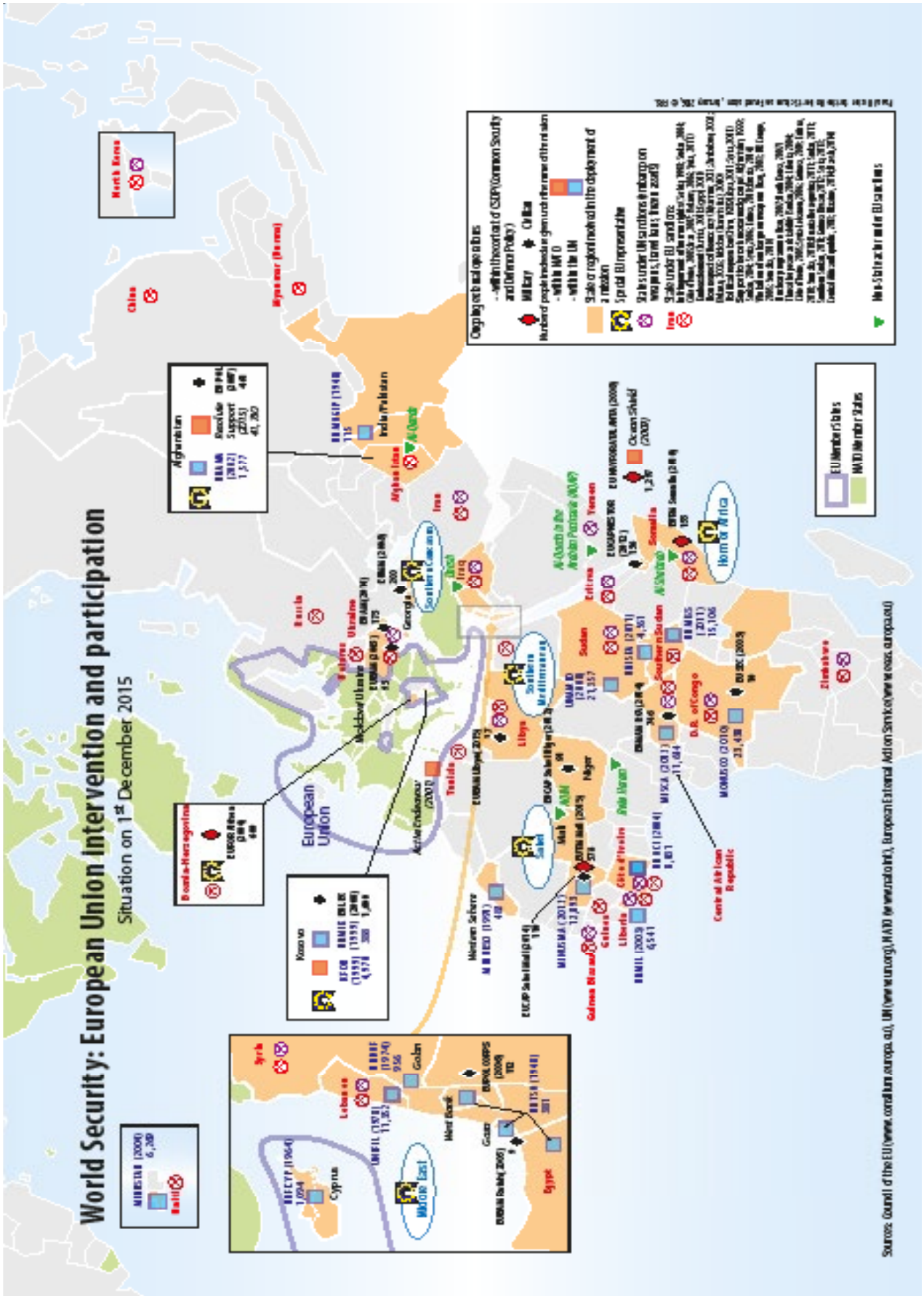
In the diplomatic field Europe has to take on board, in the drafting of its strategy, the regional and local crises that we see on a daily basis around the world. Not that it absolutely has to be involved in each of these, but each of these crises in their own way impacts the Union and obliges it to

1. This text was originally published in 'Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2016", Lignes de Reperes editions, March 2016

take into account these situations of rupture and upheaval. First and foremost there is the European Union's neighbourhood: firstly the countries of Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus) and the Southern Caucasus (Georgie, Armenia, Azerbaijan), not forgetting those of Central Asia, whose growing links with the Union should lead to more thinking about the type of relationship we want to have with them in the future. Then there are our partners in the Southern Mediterranean (Maghreb and Middle East) which have been subject to great change over the last five years, in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring" and which range from political instability to civil war. To this first circle we must add the countries of the Gulf and also probably the African States of the Sahel and other regions of Africa Gulf of Guinea, Horn of Africa) which we all know are facing the same challenge of instability and insecurity, and for whom aid remains in a natural way with Europe, when it comes to asking for political support and financial or technical assistance. This neighbourhood, in the "wide" sense of the term, represents a priority for Europe due to its geographic proximity and also due to the pressure of events that have turned these regions into the most exposed to the greatest amount of conflict and danger. Opposite these imbalances, the other challenges faced by Europeans are of a different nature: they lie in the various cooperation agreements that Europe would like to continue to develop with its main strategic partners: USA, Russia, China, Japan, India, South Africa, Brazil and many others, who are knocking on Brussels' door in order to strengthen their relations. It is a paradox however that this "demand for Europe" is constantly renewed in contrast to Europeans who have increasing doubts about themselves. Finally the need to consolidate relations with regional organisations comes under Europe's strategic diplomatic goals (African Union, League of Arab States, ASEM, etc.), including the UN and its various agencies, which constitute natural partners for Europe with whom they often share the same goals and vision of the world.

Europe and major global challenges

Finally regarding major global challenges Europe can also include amongst its strategic interests the themes that the international community has placed on its agenda over the last few months: terrorism, sustainable development, climate change, immigration, information society, etc… The Union has provided a significant and often appreciated contribution to all of these issues. But it is clear that the most difficult part remains to be done and Europeans are going to have to step up their action and ability in order to promote more effective response that can go to the root of the imbalances we are facing. In this regard the phenomenon of immigration which grew up to the level we all can see now at the end of 2015 is a major challenge for the Europeans due to its extent, its complexity and because it certainly is going to be a reality that Europe will have to face for a long time to come: beyond the Syrian or Iraqi problem, refugees and immigrants will continue to come due to the limits of economic development or the deregulation of the climate seen in South East Asia and Africa. In the new century this reality truly is a significant challenge to Europe. All of these challenges define the outline of a rather welcome European foreign policy strategy. At last this will have tangible content and should no longer be rejected since the European Union's interests seem clear in this context and result from an analysis shared by all. If we think about this further we might even be able to say that the common interest of all Europeans especially lies in the stability and security of the regions on the EU's periphery, both in the East and the South, and this neighbourhood, which is dominated by civil war (Libya and Syria), armed conflict (Ukraine), trafficking of all sorts (Sahel) and the presence of increasingly radical groups (Sinai, Nigeria), is clearly the most dangerous place for the Union and the rallying point for the defence of our common interests as well. In this context on-going work to provide a new shape to relations with vital partners like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia seem to illustrate this need for shared goals within the European Union.


World Security: European Union intervention and participation
Situation on 1st December 2015
European Union
Afghanistan
Kosovo
Bosnia-Herzegovina
Middle East
Horn of Africa
Sahel
Southern Caucasus
Southern Mediterranean
EU Member States
NATO Member States
Sources: Council of the EU (www.consilium.europa.eu), UN (www.un.org), NATO (www.nato.int), European External Action Service (www.eeas.europa.eu)

COMMON EUROPEAN INTERESTS: FRAGILE NEW AWARENESS

And so from where does this diffuse impression come that this is not the case, and that the awareness by the Union's Member States of common interests, shared by all and defining a line of action each one could engage on with determination, remains extremely fragile if not inexistent? The reasons for this are various:

Values and interests

From the way it has been constructed the European Union has always preferred to leave defence of what is usually called "interests" to its Member States and to concentrate on the promotion of "values": Human Rights of course but also humanitarian action, dialogue with civil society. According to Brussels' idea of diplomacy, interests, even the strategic ones, are the realm of "hard power" and of geopolitical reality; they are the prerogative of the States and that of traditional diplomacy and alliances between nations, a legacy of the Westphalian tradition. At best then it is business that will, out of preference, be left to the Member States, the apostles of «realpolitik». Values for their part, belong to the rule of law and humanitarian principles; in short they come under "soft power" and could be part of the base that might unite all of the Union's members whilst national interests are inherently antagonistic and divisive. This is mainly the Commission's reality. This binary manner of perceiving foreign policy in fact restricts the diplomacy of Europe's institutions to a limited albeit significant role: trade agreements, development aid, humanitarian aid, dialogue over Human Rights etc… It especially reduces it to the point that there is no geopolitical vision.

The absence of any geopolitical analysis on the part of the European Union

Hence a permanent weakness in most of the strategies developed by the European Union's institutions, lying precisely in the fact that they are not real strategies, since there is no significant geopolitical analysis. Therefore the Eastern Partnership carefully avoids the issue of relations with Russia; policy regarding our Mediterranean neighbours is void of any in-depth thought about the type of dialogue that should be developed with the region's main actors (Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, etc.). Procedures are put forward (association agreement monitoring), principles are delivered differentiation), instruments are developed (simplified action plans) but all of this provides the feeling of a political and strategic vacuum from which all power dynamics, antagonisms and lines of division between nations have been sucked out. There is no history to European strategies, they are smooth; procedures are rolled out in which security and stability goals are not really defined and the action provided for is distant from the reality of the field.

Differing national visions of the EU's role in the world

Finally the main weakness is that Europe still finds it hard to see itself as a fully-fledged actor in the international arena. The reasons for this lacuna are well-known: far from sharing a joint idea about what the role of the European Union is or might be in the world, the 28 Member States sustain completely opposite view on this, depending on their past or their respective political, diplomatic or economic influence in the world. If we simply look at the "largest" European countries, their positions on the idea of "European power" -because this is the issue in hand – are all extremely different: ranging from hostile (UK), often hesitant (Germany), and increasingly ambiguous from France's point of view, although it did champion this cause in the past. In the face of so many contradictions we should not be surprised that the European Union too often appears as an absent or vague actor. Even without pretending to substitute its members' national diplomacy, which would be unrealistic, Europe seems to struggle in setting out a complementary foreign policy to that of the States.

A STRATEGIC VISION FOR THE UNION AROUND COMMON INTERESTS: ON WHAT CONDITIONS?

Making a realistic definition of the goals and providing the necessary means to achieve them

Might we hope to provide meaning to the idea of common interest and strategic vision for the European Union? Is it possible to develop awareness amongst Europeans in support of a responsible, autonomous, active role within the community of nations? The exercise requested by the heads of State and government, at the European Council of June 2015, of Federica Mogherini, which aims to set out a foreign policy and security strategy for the European Union over the next few years provides us with an opportunity to do this at least. Twelve years after the strategy laid out by Javier Solana, which succeeded in providing the European Union with significant credibility, the High Representative/ Vice-President for European Foreign and Security Policy has submitted a new strategy firstly with the launch of a wide debate between Member States, research centres and civil society. The process deserves our attention; it might at least open up debate to force Europeans to look reality in the eye.

To this end it is essential to avoid certain pitfalls encountered in the past and establish some precise points of reference.

Firstly, realism: Europe cannot pretend to decisive influence over the entire international community. In a world of multiple centres of power of which we are all aware, Europeans have to sustain ambitions on a level with their means and joint will. The goals announced in the past of a European defence system provided with impressive capabilities (60,000 men) ready to be deployed simultaneously in three theatres of operation did not impress anyone for any length of time, since it did not become a reality; however it did weaken confidence placed in Europe and led to doubts about its ability to act. It would be better to be humble in the present stage of European integration rather than define a direction, which is clearly unattainable for the time being.

Then for priorities: Europe has to be able to define a limited number of goals that are in line with its most urgent interests. Because it has dispersed itself so much the Union's action is in danger of being inconsistent. At present Europe has to make choices and focus its effort there, where it is most necessary: bring stability back to a neighbourhood that is in flames, "review" a transatlantic partnership that requires a new dynamic as we are on the eve of a change at the White House, and find the kind of relationship (not naïve but realistic) to develop with Russia in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and other uncertainties in the future.

Finally means and regularity: in the vision that it aims to set out for its future, Europe can-not ignore the weaknesses it revealed in the past. Too often Europe has committed to decisions that have never been followed-up in effect, due to an inability to mobilise the necessary resources for their implementation and a lack of sustained effort in the projects and operations set in place: development programmes that are finalised too quickly, when in fact it would be better to be more patient, civil or military operations in the area of security which are slowly waning due to a lack of determination and commitment on the part of Member States.

The new European foreign and security policy strategy: a primordial deadline

But we must not be mistaken: the pitfalls are formidable. These are the same as those which shaped the European Union's often wanting international image when major international events called for it. At the same time, it is vital to recall that the responsibility of this kind of weakness lies as much with the Member States, which are not too concerned about providing the Union with the means for true diplomacy.

The adoption of the strategy submitted by Federica Mogherini must therefore be deemed primordial. It might indeed be seen as a "return to basics" for European diplomacy, because it succeeds in returning to the drawing board in the quest for answers to basic questions:

- which goals do we set for the Union's foreign policy in view of its common interests?
- which means will it be given to fulfil these goals?
- which methods will be applied to undertake this strategy? In particular should we encourage greater flexibility in the implementation of European diplomacy and allow some Member States to take the initiative?

Here we do not mean to lay out in detail the various themes, but simply to stress that without some methodical thought, it is highly unlikely that the Union will be able to develop its own strategy so that it can play its role to the full in the world arena. Lucidity obliges also to say that this wager is far from being won. Indeed experience has accustomed us to seeing Member States ducking out of difficult debates, preferring expedients to real, in-depth reform.

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Two final considerations might provide us with hope. The first is linked to the crises that Europe is facing: Ukraine, Syria, Libya, immigration, terrorism, etc… Overwhelmingly the list grows and each time the Union is placed in an uncomfortable position. These repeated tests are also starting to affect the very principles on which Europe has been built, if we consider the challenges made to principles as vital as that of solidarity and doubts expressed about the future of the Schengen system. Given these developments everyone within the European institutions and even amongst a growing number of Member States, are urging for a necessary awakening and for in-depth debate. The other reason for hope lies with public opinions itself. Paradoxically, at a time when there is growing scepticism about European integration, foreign policy is one of the rare areas of public action for which our fellow citizens say they support greater European integration, thereby seeming to admit the existence of European common interest. History has taught us that popular support is not always enough to take Europe forward; it has also taught us that the Union has sometimes progressed in spite of reticent public opinion. But it is preferable, when all is said and done, to feel that European diplomacy enjoys the support of the public at a time when commitment is being made in the quest of a foreign policy which could reflect a true progress.

Pierre VIMONT

Former Executive Secretary General of the European External Action Service, Senior Associate at Carnegie Europe.

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