

The European Union in the Crisis: between National Imperatives and European Interest

The European Union and Crises the Albatross Syndrome

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It is good form to say that in the international arena the European Union does not enjoy the influence it should given its economic and social successes which position it amongst the world leaders in terms of wealth, living standards and its major contribution to international trade. The Union is not a Power in the traditional sense of the term. There is still no consensus over the concept of “a powerful Europe” within its ranks. Generally we also rashly conclude that it does not contribute in the settlement of world crises and its relative absence is the focus of a great deal of frustration and regret. What is a crisis from Europe’s point of view?

Whilst less than a century ago a “crisis” in Europe would almost certainly have led to armed conflict between some of the continent’s States, a “European crisis” now implies a difference in opinion between Member States. With this we forget that European integration was based on the idea of settling differences around a table by means of procedures; these were part of a treaty signed formally by the States which had created common institutions to settle their disputes in a peaceful manner. Since 1950’s the so-called “European crises” have all been settled thanks to agreements between governments. This is one of the main successes of European unification. This is not the focus of this article which looks into the Union’s reactions to external crises which now comprise a real challenge.

An external crisis is an international event that is serious enough to lead to disruption in the status quo. Therefore it demands of a State or a group of States which intend to exercise global responsibilities, a political, financial or military response. Crises can be diplomatic, military, economic but also humanitarian, related to food supplies and sanitary conditions.

The Union, a power which is not yet finished and constantly growing intends to respect the identity of its Member States and at the same time progressively bring about the unification of the continent. It finds itself dangerously drawn into international crises which call for a response that involves its Member States. The Union’s exposure to international crises is therefore quite specific. The responses it gives are no less specific and show that it is still learning to be a great power.

The Union's Basic Limits

Because of its origins the Union is restricted in terms of the responses it can give to crises which privilege peaceful means. Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union stipulates: *"In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizens. It shall contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter."* If the Union's goals are evidently peaceful, the means given to uphold that peace are too. The Union prides itself on being a "power via the rule of law"¹, cooperation and multilateralism. Embracing the planet's interests to establish stable, confident international relations, it has integrated the United Nations Charter into its vision of the world. By nature it bans all dreams of imperialism, any type of aggressive stance and *a priori* the use of force which is limited to exceptional circumstances by the UN.

The legal rule matches European reality. Stable and safe since the end of the Second World War thanks to its alliance with the USA and since the Soviet threat no longer exists, Europe has no enemies. Faced with global threats and even the violence of crisis situations the Union prefers multilateralism and even its bilateral relationship with America – as in the Balkans in the 1990's. Europeans, who have converted to peace and are protected from immediate threats, have developed an extremely Kantian view of international relations. "Eternal peace" must be possible since it finally came to be on the continent which holds the absolute record in terms of numbers of battles ever fought. Some believe that the rejection of war which goes hand in hand with an "aversion to danger"², is a real constraint and explains why European Defence has made so little progress except via the so-called "Petersberg" missions i.e. maintaining, or re-establishing peace, reconstructing or intervention³.

At the same time the Union shows that it is a world power, present across the world; that it has developed its tools to prevent conflict, its civilian missions and its development aid. In this area it is quick to commit to significant financial contributions. The Member States devote nearly 50 billion € yearly to this – i.e. more than half of total worldwide public aid; the European Commission and the European Development Fund spend 12 billion € directly⁴. In this way it is present the world over from the Cook Islands to Belize, from Nepal, Iraq, to Afghanistan and also in India and China! The Union is a world giant which privileges Soft Power.

Aware of its world obligations the Union is the most important participant in the effort to achieve the Millenium Goals and in the international community's work to prevent crises via aid to States or in the fight to counter major epidemics. It is now systematically amongst the first to grant financial assistance whatever the crisis. Present in Banda Aceh after the tsunami in 2006, it provided humanitarian aid to Haitians in 2009 and it stands by the Philippines every year when the typhoons pass; it is trying to stabilise Yemen and avoid the collapse of Somalia. Unfailingly in any situation which might develop into a crisis the Union develops programmes to fund infrastructures, to support local industry; it gives aid for food, administrative requirements and budgetary

1. Zaki Laidi, *La norme sans la force. L'énigme de la puissance européenne*, Presses de Sciences Po 2008, 2nd edition, 268 p.

2. Zaki Laidi, *Europe as a Risk Averse Power. A hypothesis*, Garnet Policy Brief, n°11, February 2011, pp.1-16

3. Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty on European Union

4. Annual Report 2010 by the European Commission on the EU's development and external aid policies and their implementation in 2009.

support to struggling States and populations, as well as to NGO's. This is a reality of which Europeans are often unaware – that we are appreciated by our allies and highly present in the field. Emergency and reconstruction aid represents 1.61 billion € i.e. 13.7% of all of its development aid. Recently this has been the focus of reform and as a result services and instruments have been grouped together⁵. Kristalina Georgieva, Commissioner for “international cooperation, humanitarian aid and response to crises” is now responsible for ECHO programmes at the European Commission, whilst Andris Piebalgs supervises development aid via EuropeAid.

All of these tools are obviously implemented in an increasing number of external interventions – civilian, military, or a combination of the two and this means that the Union is involved in the management of global crises.

European Response to Crises or Learning how to be a World Power

The Union is now aware that it is involved in every world crisis. In South Korea for example European companies are now the most important investors whilst the country's security is mainly guaranteed by the presence of over 30,000 American soldiers. Threats from North Korea are of concern to Europe, therefore after the signature of the free-trade agreement⁶ and a strategic partnership, and it showed its solidarity with the Korean Republic in the spring of 2010 when the latter was attacked by the dictator Kim Jong Il⁷. From now on there are no longer any crises in which the Union cannot become involved even if this simply means taking a stance.

It might be added that the Union is often upbraided because of the declaratory nature of its common diplomacy, the slowness of its decision making processes and the nature of its responses. No less that 62 declarations “on behalf of the European Union” were addressed to the press in 2010 by Catherine Ashton, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy; then there were 164 “declarations by the High Representative”, 77 from her spokesperson and 43 “local” declarations were made by her services. Hence in 2010 Ms Ashton dispatched 346 declarations i.e. nearly one a day, Sundays and holidays included! To this we might add the political stances adopted by the European Council that met six times in 2010. Declarations of crisis are therefore somewhat drowned in this flow of communication. The positions expressed by the Union in them are not all decisive; they are rather more the result of a permanent technical consultation procedure between European diplomacies⁸ than the result of any real desire to influence a situation – however they do show increasing collective involvement in world affairs. The experience of the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire is a positive example from this point of view since we might say that the Union together with the UN and the US clearly expressed their position which was coupled with severe sanctions against those who did not respect the results of the democratic election⁹.

The Heads of State and government's decision-making process also explains why the Union is poorly equipped in terms of responding rapidly to world events¹⁰.

5. Press release by the DG Development and Cooperation (DEVCO) – EuropeAid 3rd January 2011.

6. 15th October 2009

7. Council press release 18233/10 PRESSE 358, 22nd December 2010

8. A written procedure that is often backed by the ‘silent procedure’, which comprises declaring that a decision that has been put forward is accepted if there is no written response within 15 days on the part of a Member State that states that it is opposed to it.

9. Council press release 18261/10 31st December 2010

10. Cf infra the article by T. Chopin, “Europe and the Need to Decide : Is European Political Leadership Possible?” p. 35

Finally the nature of European response to crisis is particularly important. Although it has undertaken 23 external missions since 1999 and taken part in over ten others under the UN¹¹, the Union seems increasingly reluctant to do so. It has deployed nearly 70,000 men abroad but to date the entry into force of the Lisbon institutions seems to be impeding progress in European Defence. Just as the Council and then the new European External Action Service were setting up a crisis management unit and the tools that went with that¹², a lack of taste on the part of the High Representative, or a lack of experience, and maybe also her “British” view of matters, led to a halt in any further initiatives in this direction which might in fact have helped to assert the Union’s existence.

The type of military or civilian/military intervention which was so impressive in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2005 or in Chad in 2008 has also been limited over the last few months to the management of ongoing operations such as Atalanta, an anti-piracy mission off the coasts of Somalia. There has not been any new initiative even though the issue was raised with regard to Darfur, Ivory Coast and Somalia. It is true that the States are not very enthusiastic about launching into new adventures which they have to fund¹³, at a time when they are increasingly involved in the war in Afghanistan. However the European Council of 16th September 2010 laid down its strategy and the means to implement these as part of a global vision of international relations; this new approach seems to indicate a better appreciation of the Union’s place and role in the world¹⁴.

The High Representative has also been criticised for a lack of know-how in response to certain humanitarian crises such as in Haiti. This is such that since there are no common diplomacy or defence tools it is firmly believed that only the Member States, i.e. the European Council¹⁵ or some of its members are capable of taking the initiative in terms of significant European intervention.

Nicolas Sarkozy’s mediation in the summer of 2008 in the Russo-Georgian war is the only example of successful intervention on behalf of the Union to bring fighting to a halt.

The same applies to the economic and financial crisis. The bankruptcy of the American business bank, Lehman Brothers, on 15th September 2008 endangered the financial system of the entire world. With hindsight we might clearly say that the meeting at the Elysée, the following day with the French Presidency, the Heads of State and government of the euro area, the British Prime Minister and the President of the European Central Bank saved the system from embolism; it will go down in history that the euro area saved world finance from total paralysis.

Moreover the decisions taken and implemented by these players on 7th May 2010 in response to the Greek financial crisis with the extremely positive help of the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy¹⁶, provided adequate answers to the financial problems of some euro area Member States¹⁷. It is true that in this area the Union has at its disposal one of the only real federal institutions, the European Central Bank – which has been exceptionally effective since the summer of 2007 in protecting Europe from the turbulence raging on the financial markets.

11. Cf infra the map « Security in the World : European Union Intervention and Participation », p. 98 and also the summary table « EU, NATO and UN External Operations with the participation of EU Member States (2009-2010) », p. 170.

12. Situation Centre. Council Press Release, A 265/10, 7th December 2010

13. Report by Arnaud Danjean, 2nd March 2010, on the implementation of the European Security Strategy and the Common Security and Defence Policy – Foreign Affairs Committee – European Parliament – A7-0026/2010

14. Conclusions of the European Council - EUCO 21/10 – CO EUR 16 – CONCL 3

15. Council press release 24th January 2010 – 5699/10 – Presse 14

16. Press releases of 22nd and 28th October 2010 – 239/10 and 294/10 – 16th and 17th December 2010 – PCE 314/10 and 315/10

17. Conclusions of the European Council of 16th and 17th December 2010 – CO EUR 30/10 CONCL 5

Hence it is political leadership and also diplomatic, military, economic and financial integration which the Union is lacking if it is to rise effectively to counter international crises – to give greater value, in terms of influence to its work in the world and thereby enjoy greater authority in the settlement of crises.

The incomplete nature of European integration is the Union's main enemy. But its fear of being drawn into global crises is its permanent handicap. This damages its credibility, for example in the US; it substantiates the idea of detrimental pacifism since Europe cannot be the only region to disarm when military spending is increasing all over the world; this goes with its deficit in defence capabilities; above all it reveals a strategic state of mind that is incompatible with the unpredictable future of international relations. The comparison of the European security strategy "*for a safe Europe in a better world*" adopted in 2003, revised in 2008, with the National Security Strategy that was published in May 2010 by Barack Obama summarizes Europe's crisis response problem quite succinctly. Whilst the goals to contribute to peace, stability and democratization of the world are almost identical, the means to do this and the vision are totally different. The second paragraph of the American document states: "*we shall maintain our military superiority which has guaranteed our country's security and supported world security for decades.*"

The Union is now facing the only realistic question worth asking: can it transform into a real power by stepping up integration in sovereign areas represented by economic, financial and defence policies? If the answer is yes it will be able to provide effective, original, specific answers to crises and contribute to international stability and to its own security. If not it will be reduced to the state of the albatross described by Charles Baudelaire in *Les fleurs du mal*, "*those vast sea birds ... which frequent the tempest and laugh at the bowman;*"... forced to limp on the ship's bridge although it was created to fly on high: "*... His giant wings prevent him from walking.*"