

Traveling at the “speed of light”?

Challenges for the European Common Foreign and Security Policy

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In 2000, then High Representative, Javier Solana, spoke of a European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that was progressing at the “speed of light”. What caused him to say so, was the newly established “European Security and Defence Policy” (ESDP), that in his opinion, would boost the EU’s capacity for dealing successfully with conflicts and threats inside and outside Europe.

Judged against the ever more problematic global environment, in which the EU finds itself more than ten years later and the structural shortcomings it is still facing, his assessment was “slightly” over-optimistic. Solana himself seemed to have been blinded by the rays of the light speed-EU, he was talking about. Even more so as a physicist by training, a more realistic view would have been appropriate.

The promises of the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003 of a more “active”, “capable” and “coherent” EU have hardly turned into practice. This is not because of a lack of strategic documents, of CSDP missions and operations or of sophisticated technical and financial instruments. The fact, that the EU can still not live up to its weight has more to do with perceptions of itself and as a consequence of how it is perceived by others. This is something that Solana’s second successor, Federica Mogherini, must take into account while fulfilling her double-hatted task as External Relations Commissioner of the Juncker Commission

and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The very choice of Mogherini, a rather dark horse with little experience in foreign and security affairs, is reflective of the EU’s perceptions problem. Member states continue to take painstaking care that they are in the drivers seat in this policy field and always chose an apparently weak personality for the EU job. In a newly developing multi-polar world order with a globalized threat spectrum, however, the EU can only exert influence if it acts as more than the sum of its 28 parts. The hot and frozen, old and new wars and conflicts around the world, especially in the wider periphery of the EU, show that the pressure for unity of action has never been higher.

Against this background, the new European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, in his political guidelines for “Europe as a Global Actor” prompts all involved actors to follow “the same logic”. As he does not explain what this “logic” is exactly all about, it is reasonable to ask how can a stronger European Foreign and Security Policy under the condition of the unanimity rule be formed? At the same time, however, the degree of abstraction in his words also offers room to manoeuvre for Federica Mogherini. Three areas can be mentioned, where improvement seems necessary but also feasible:

1. One of the most serious shortcomings of European Foreign Policy is the lack of streamlined

internal and external communication. Mogherini should first draft a communication strategy that puts herself at the center of European foreign policy, be it by agreeing on only one press conference headed by her after the Foreign Affairs Council meeting, by binding the other Commissioners in the sphere of external relations closer to her leadership (the structure of the Juncker Commission encourages this) or finally by suggesting to national ministers to sell their foreign policy instruments (financial, technical etc.) more visibly as part of a common EU framework. She should also initiate a Europe-wide debate using multiple platforms in order to connect societies closer with a *European* common foreign policy.

2. The EU has a wide portfolio of instruments at its disposal. However, some of them, especially in the field of conflict management lead a miserable existence as paper tigers. It is up to Federica Mogherini to convince member states to make mechanisms like the “Battlegroups” work, when conflicts in the context of the so-called Petersberg-Tasks arise. Article 44 of the Lisbon Treaty, where the “Council may entrust the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task” might be another flexible option to facilitate joint action under the EU label.

3. Rather than permanently putting forward moral arguments, one way to reinforce the EU’s legitimacy could be to conceptualize deeper “partnerships of exchange” on all thinkable levels, especially also in less polarized fields like education etc. While the European economic model

has lost much of its attraction, societal and educational exchange are also success stories of European integration, which could be used in a more sophisticated way as foreign policy tools. They reflect an openness that particularly the neighbors of the EU have been missing so far.

Re-shaping its perception of itself and of how the EU is perceived by others remains key to the success of European foreign policy. It will not be easy for Mogherini to convince member states to overcome fears of losing importance and to show self-restraint in order to encourage “real” European solutions. The truth will certainly lay somewhere between “speed of light” and “snail’s pace”. These “real” European solutions are however the only way to balance threats and gain legitimacy at the same time.

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