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The European Foreign Policy: Providing a ‘Structural’ Alternative in a Unipolar World?

The fifteen years that followed the end of the Cold War have celebrated the success of the European Union (EU) and underlined its capacity to unite the old, new and future European member-states around a common project of democratic peace and economic growth. With this success came new responsibilities and the need to define a common foreign policy that responds to the international trend towards aid conditionality and to the War on Terror launched by the United States (US) in September 2001.

This paper will examine the current European foreign policy, taking S. Keukeleire’s (2003) theory of a European ‘structural’ foreign policy as a point of departure. I would however add an ideological component to this theoretical framework: The political structure the EU is promoting in other regions of the world can indeed be interpreted as a European structure of values, one that has proven successful inside the EU. The European foreign policy agenda, increasingly put forward as a soft alternative to the US unilateral and dominant ideological framework, therefore emphasises multilateralisation – taking into account every state’s voice in any decision taken by the international community - and promotes a three-fold recipe in the form of regionalisation, democratisation and economic liberalisation in order to reach this level of concertation. Examples taken from the EU’s foreign policy in Africa will illustrate these points and will help in underlining the paradoxes of the EU’s foreign policy.

I. A ‘Structural’ European Foreign Policy?

The European Community has long been a uniquely economic organisation and although the project of presenting a united face in the foreign policy is an old dream, the European foreign policy is a young 13-year-old teenager, born in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, that is therefore described as hesitant and hampered by an obvious lack of communication between its institutions and a lack of cooperation between member-states who cling to their sovereign rights. S. Keukeleire (2003) however notes that, especially after the German reunification, the CFSP acquired a symbolic importance among member-states that may explain its lack of coherence if considered from an external point of view: The interrelational goals may at times be more important than the policy goals. Whereas in the eyes of an external observer the EU may have failed as a diplomatic actor in a particular matter, for its member-states the EU may have performed for example, because an individual member-state could be persuaded not to act on its own. Keukeleire (2003) further underlines that towards the end of 1994 the focus of attention of the member-states and EU institutions shifted from firming up the CFSP to outlining general EU strategies and partnerships towards other regions in the world.

The author defines this new trend under the term ‘structural foreign policy’, a foreign policy that structures both the European integration process and the relations between the EU and third

countries. This foreign policy promotes ‘a more favourable international environment by pursuing structural changes, both in the internal situation of the countries concerned and in the inter-state relations and general situation of these regions’ (Keukeleire, 2003, p. 47). The policy aims at ‘the transferral of various ideological and governing principles that characterize the political, social, economic and inter-state system of the EU such as democracy and good government, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, regional political and economic cooperation and integration or free market principles, and so on’ (Keukeleire, 2003, p. 47). This is therefore an all-encompassing policy that could entail deep changes in the states and regions that are concerned.

II. An Ideological Contents? The Production of ‘European Values’

What the EU therefore seeks to promote is its own model of regional political stability and economic development, a structure that is successful in Europe. Many observers claim a specific European model, based on political dialogue and soft power instruments. The EU, according to these Europhiles, has achieved a huge challenge since the birth of the European Community in 1957: It has slowly extended democratic peace and economic development first among its member-states, then to and beyond its Eastern and Southern borders. The regional organisation is therefore considered an obvious proof of successful regional integration and a model for other regional organisations, and many underline the EU’s specific experience in economic development and conflict prevention and resolution.

There is moreover an increasing number of calls – from European citizens, politicians, political observers – for the definition of common European values on the international scene and some see the current unilateral American foreign policy as an opportunity for Europe to unify (Robert, 2002). This renewed debate on the perception of Europe on the international scene is closely linked both to the war in Iraq and the debates on what the EU should be, borne from the drafting of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe. European officials clearly perceived the growing consensus, among European citizens – especially among those who demonstrated together against the intervention in Iraq – in favour of a more coherent and unified European foreign policy. The emphasis on a necessary commitment to more ‘multilateralism’ and on Europe’s ‘civilian power’ status in many European officials’ speeches (Burghardt, 2003) is doubtless linked to this evolution.

The European foreign policy, however, still gathers consensus on only very limited issues and progress towards common instruments is slow. The treaties of Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2000) both insist above all on the humanitarian and peacekeeping objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy¹. Let’s have a quick look here at the EU’s development and peacekeeping programmes in Africa and see how they fit the definition of a ‘structural’ foreign policy.

Many observers have underlined the uniqueness of the link between Europe and the former colonies of Africa, Caribbean and the Pacific, the so-called ACP: The association treaties between the European Community (EC) and the ACP are nearly as old as the EC itself². The first Lomé Convention was hailed as a new departure in North-South relations: It was put forward as a path-breaking ‘partnership of equals’. African governments held the Lomé arrangements in high esteem: EC aid was, under the first three Lomé conventions, ‘softer’, both in financial terms and in

¹ The Petersberg missions, adopted in 1992, concern above all crisis management and humanitarian assistance capacities.

² France insisted that a special relationship be established, under Part IV of the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Community in 1957. The first Yaoundé Convention associating the EC with Madagascar and 17 African states was signed in 1963. The first Lomé Convention, signed in 1975, made provision for Britain’s former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

general conditions, than that of the other donors or of the international financial institutions. The EC was beginning to define its ‘civilian power’ identity, mainly based on economic instruments. Lomé, however, failed to fulfil its promises: The reality of the Convention has been that both aid and trade provisions have acted to confine ACP countries to the export of certain primary commodities. At the end of the 1980s, the EC’s hardliners – the British and the Dutch – insisted that the Lomé convention be implemented in close coordination with the World Bank and the IMF (Hewitt, 1989). Moreover, an unprecedented political element was introduced in Lomé IV (1990), which acknowledged that a democratic environment was favourable to economic development (Lomé IV, article 35b), while respect for human rights became conditionality in Lomé IV bis (1995). At the end of the 1990s, the Lomé Conventions had failed to adapt to the international economic situation. The Cotonou Agreement, signed in 2000, therefore introduces an important degree of ‘normalisation’ by subjecting the EU-ACP trade arrangements to WTO rules and democracy, good governance and respect for human rights conditionality (all elements cited by Keukeleire in his definition of a structural foreign policy) (Cotonou Partnership Agreement, articles 8 to 13). The Agreement, that runs over 20 years – a long term commitment compared to many short-term development programmes-, should also lead to Regional Economic Partnership Agreements (RPAs) between the EU and ACP regional organisations.

The EU peace-building³ strategy, that is increasingly developed and put forward by the EU, also clearly draws from the European experience and model. The EU strongly promotes regional conflict prevention and resolution strategies. In spite of the successful Artemis Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2003, the EU is increasingly reluctant to intervene directly in conflicts (Keane, 2004). The EU therefore encourages the development of African intervention capabilities and mediations (Landgraf, 1999) – the principle of ‘African ownership’ – and is developing what could be called ‘multilateral subsidiarity’: The African Union and regional organisations such as ECOWAS should intervene as soon as they can. When this is not possible, however, or when rapid intervention or financial support is needed, the European Union will be ready to lend its support. The project of European rapid reaction battle groups and the African Peace Facility are part of this new policy. The EU member-states recently agreed on creating EU battlegroups ready to intervene rapidly and many agree that these battlegroups will be formed with the African conflicts in mind (Gow, 2004). The African Peace Facility is designed to support African Union peacekeeping, conflict prevention and peace support efforts (Keane, 2004).

III. The European ‘Structure’: Specific or Universal?

By increasing its involvement in African political and security matters, the EU in fact follows the international trend that draws a clear link between security and political issues, on the one hand, and economic development on the other. The intervention agenda has certainly shifted, since the end of the Cold War, from a secret, clearly interested, even neo-colonial involvement to a broader, normative and moral type of intervention: Western powers intervene in the name of human rights, political stability and international security. Concepts such as ‘good governance’ and ‘human security’ give a new legitimacy to the broadened development policies (Châtaigner, 2004). Here, therefore, the EU follows the global trend and furthers an essentially liberal ‘transformative’ agenda that aims at deep and all-encompassing reforms in the political systems of the states concerned. A trend that S. Keukeleire (2004) encourages, especially in his more recent publications. I’m not sure I quite agree with this wide spread enthusiasm.

Liberal democracy has emerged as the only model of legitimate government that can guarantee stability and peace, while certain more creative and maybe more appropriate

³ Peace-building is here understood as the national and international efforts at economic development and institution building to make states viable and peaceful including pre and post-conflict aspects (Crisis Group, 2005).

peacekeeping strategies – such as new types of non-state political structures recommended by J. Herbst (2000) – are viewed as normatively unacceptable (Paris, 2003). Some authors find the merging of development and security programmes preoccupying since it might lead to short-term interventions with the use of ‘hard instruments’ – emergency policing and military measures – to the detriment of long term cooperation that would address the root causes of political crises (Bayne, 2003). The EU has not yet shown that it intends to stand back from these trends.

Moreover, the EU’s determination to strengthen its place on the international scene may be achieved by less generous means than is usually admitted. R. Gibb (2000) gives a very critical account of the new Cotonou Agreement associating the EU and the ACP and depicts the EU as a tough liberal actor most of all concerned with promoting its own interests and less and less able to protect developing countries from the liberal rule⁴. He underlines how WTO rules and the promotion of regionalisation – in the form of the RPAs concluded between the EU and groups of ACP countries – are used to legitimise the enhanced access EU exporters will be given to ACP markets, while observers note that Africa has little to gain from a regionalism based on the wholesale liberalisation of internal trade⁵. These critical interpretations cast doubt on the EU’s motives in its relationship to Africa and clearly show the limits of the EU’s support to multilateralism: Inside the WTO, the EU is increasingly eager to promote its own interests.

The EU development and peace-building agenda in Africa thus wavers between international aid and foreign policy trends and its determination to depart from these trends and offer an alternative, soft-power alternative based on the promotion of multilateralism and its own experience. The originality of the EU ‘structural’ foreign policy is therefore questionable. Even the regionalisation part of this project is not EU specific, especially in the form under which it is promoted in the Third World. Moreover, there is a paradox in the EU wanting to offer an alternative to the US unilateral and military strategy, while it desperately tries to impose its own model in other regions of the world.

Conclusion: Understanding the Hesitations

The EU is the first regional organisation that actively tries to design a common foreign policy. It seems obvious that the task is huge and Africa, the case study I chose here, is not the least in the list of fields where a European consensus is hard to find. Most European initiatives remain profoundly bilateral – between the former colonial power and its former colonies – and isolated and come into conflict with many European politicians’ call for a necessary common multilateral European policy and with Keukeleire’s (2003) conviction that a ‘structural foreign policy’ needs to be complemented by a traditional foreign policy. In the EU, however, the latter still needs to be invented.

Keukeleire’s theoretical model casts an interesting light on the EU’s current foreign policy trends and rightly underlines the importance of a European ‘structural’ policy at the European domestic levels as well as in the intra and extra-European relations. It is, also, a very useful framework for anyone who studies European foreign policy in the Third World, and in Africa in

⁴ The same critiques could be addressed to the EU’s agreements with the Central and East European states or with the Mediterranean states (Robert, 2002).

⁵ A structurally sophisticated approach to regionalism that promotes regional complementarities and strengthens regional productive capacity has considerably more potential. Meagher (2001) adds that, despite recent neo-liberal arguments that Africans have nothing to trade to each other, persuasive cases for trade-based integration have been made in both West and Southern Africa. M. Boas (2001) supports this point and notes that ‘it is in Africa’s second economy that we find endless imagination, innovation and entrepreneurship’ (p. 35). Methodologically, this entails that the study of regional organisation in Africa must sweep aside its leading narratives built on the European experience and start to dig into new and unknown ground.

particular (such theories are still rare). By underlining the normative – and, possibly, transformative – features of the European foreign policy, it also helps in grasping the many paradoxes that still characterise the EU's foreign policy agenda. But the danger, here, is to think that because the EU is promoting a 'structural' foreign policy, the latter will automatically be original and represent an alternative to other actors' foreign policies. During the last decade, however, the EU has tended to adapt its agenda to international fashions and it is highly questionable, I think, whether this tendency to follow others into a very ambitious and all-encompassing external relations and development agenda is a positive evolution.

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