

REVIEW OF COMPETENCES: FOREIGN POLICY

Since the end of the Cold War foreign policy has been an area of growing activity by the EU which has extended its external reach from trade and aid to more political areas. The lessons learned from Europe's collective failure in the Balkans brought changes in both machinery and activity.

Britain has been an active contributor. In a world of a growing number of powers, some on a continental scale, countries such as the UK are often most effective in combination with others. The UK has a strong record in persuading the EU to follow its lead in a range of policy areas. This is a result of the quality of its input in European policy making¹, both in analysis of developments abroad and engagement with the EU machinery.

Working with others it has mobilized EU support over the years for common approaches on the Balkans, in the Middle East and towards Russia. Recently the UK, with others, has pushed through tough sanctions against Iran in connection with its nuclear programme, against Syria over its attacks on opponents and has achieved a consensus for a strong line on settlements in the occupied territories.

The UK has also been able to attract support in cases of bilateral difficulties; again Iran provides an illustration - when members of the British Embassy staff were arrested, or naval personnel were detained. It has also succeeded in mobilizing EU support in cases of particular interest to the UK when it was in a numerical minority - for example Burma and Zimbabwe.

At its best the EU can bring together a range of resources: a recent example is Somalia where, *inter alia*, the EU:

- Helps finance AMISOM, the AU peacekeeping force;
- Trains Somali forces to provide security for the Transitional Federal Government;

¹ I once asked a non-British colleague who had worked much of her life in this area to rank the performance of EU Member States in the getting their way in EU foreign policy. She placed the UK second after France, explaining that while the UK was more successful, the French deserved credit for their defence of unreasonable positions.

- Undertakes counter piracy navel operations, including one attack on pirate shore facilities;
- Negotiates agreements with littoral states for trial and detention of suspected pirates;
- Is beginning to build up indigenous coast guard capability;
- Places this within an active, long term political strategy for the region.

This case is unusual for the range of activities. A more typical example of what the EU can offer is Burma where the EU is in the process of switching from a policy of targeted sanctions to one of supporting change through development assistance and trade preferences. As this illustrates, access, or denial of access, to the EU market represents important leverage. In a more limited number of cases – as with Serbia - the big carrot has been the possibility of opening negotiations for membership.

In all cases it matters that the EU's trade and economic policies should be pursued in a politically intelligent fashion. The proposal for a Free Trade Agreement with the USA has a political as well as an economic meaning – as is also the case with the agreement negotiated recently with South Korea. In the case of Russia there is a political dimension to DG Competition's investigation of Gazprom; and to the policy of developing energy interconnections in Central Europe.

One of the faults of the EU in the past has been the separation of the political and the (supposedly) technical in the EU's external relations. If it is successful the EEAS will improve this. An external service that contains members of national diplomatic services is likely to be more politically aware as well as more transparent and accessible to member states. There is some way yet to go in building the new service but some of these benefits are already visible in posts such as Sarajevo and Pristina.

The above is a brief account of some of the benefits to the UK of EU foreign policy; a word should also be said about costs. In this case costs do not include ceding competence to the EU, since foreign policy, while an area of EU competence, is not one of exclusive competence². An EU foreign policy in a particular area does not

² See Article 3 of Treaty and also separate submission on the small arms case

prevent the UK from pursuing its own policy in parallel (assuming the two are consistent). An illustration of this is the recent case of Mali where the EU has been preparing a long term policy – primarily at French instigation. An urgent situation has obliged France to intervene with military support for the government there. Not only does this create no problems; but the fact that France has generated work on Mali within the EU has probably meant that the reactions of member states have been better informed and more supportive.

EU foreign policy also has costs in terms of the time and effort of persuading others; and in the case of CSDP operations there are costs associated with UK contributions, for example the provision of Northwood as the Headquarters for the naval operation off Somalia. Such contributions, however, have a pay-off in terms of influence on the execution of policy. Above all there are the costs of give and take. The UK is not the only country that seeks solidarity from partners. (For years, for example, EU policy on East Timor was governed – for the better as it turns out - by the importance of this issue to Portugal). There are gains from trade in politics as there are in economics, and in the end all concerned probably benefit.

On occasions, bilateral rather than EU action will be the right approach. The EU is not a state: it depends on a consensus among its members and cannot act with the same speed that they can. Though the use of force should remain a weapon in the EU's armoury, it is unlikely to be able to mobilize it quickly. But the EU can be a useful vehicle for the pursuit of policy over the long term – as has been the case, for example, with the two state solution in Palestine where the EU has been a consistent supporter both in word and deed. In Mali it possible to imagine an EU effort continuing after national forces have left.

In other cases bilateral efforts can be critical to collective EU policy – for example UK lobbying in favour of agreements on trial and custody of pirates in Africa. Or with Serbia, UK cooperation with Germany has been effective. This level of bilateral collaboration is facilitated by the background of work in the EU framework.

The UK and other EU members have a choice of means by which to implement their policies. Sometimes the right route will be bilateral, sometimes multilateral. In the latter case the choice is wide: the UN, NATO, OSCE, the Commonwealth as well as the EU. Each has its

strengths and weaknesses; and each has a its own brand image. The EU is not as equipped as NATO for military action but there are times when its softer image can be an advantage (as may also be the case with NATO's tougher image). Some third countries for example find the idea of collaborating with an EU military operation easier to accept than would be the case for NATO. In a complex world a choice of identities is a plus not a minus.

The EU machinery has improved with the Lisbon Treaty but it can improve further. One of the things that does not need to change is consensus decision making. This consumes time and energy but it is remarkable how much can be achieved³. It is notable that even where majority voting is theoretically available, for example on appointments, it has never been used. On the other hand internal procedures could be improved, particularly if the Financial Regulation were revised to take better account of the need to act quickly in crisis. Over time the balance of staffing needs to shift from Brussels to overseas. There are many ways in which bureaucracy could be reduced. And a more sensible relationship between the Commission and the EEAS is needed.

A final remark. A hundred years ago – and for centuries before that – the main preoccupation of British foreign policy was the balance of power on the continent of Europe, and the risk of conflict with one or other of the countries there. Someone from those times would be astonished at a discussion on British foreign policy in which our continental neighbours featured as partners rather than as threats. The transformation of Europe through multilateral institutions, of which the EU and NATO are the most important, is one of the most remarkable changes of the last century. An evaluation of European policy on the basis of costs and benefits in particular cases misses something important.

³ For example the EU has run a constructive policy on Kosovo although five of its member states do not recognize it as a state.