

BALANCE OF COMPETENCES: FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW: ROUND TABLE AT ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD, CHAIRED BY PROF. TIMOTHY GARTON ASH, 18 FEBRUARY 2013

Summary record of key points raised

The FCO introduced the BoC Review and set the context for the Foreign Policy Report, encouraging participants to offer views in particular on how 3rd countries saw the EU and the UK within it; and to comment on any trends they saw developing.

The EU's relationships are affected by the views of third parties and external developments....

In respect of China, one speaker thought there was “deep puzzlement” about the balance between the roles of the EU and the member states. Another argued that Member States were protected in their dealings with China by virtue of their membership of a large trading bloc. Norway was still in the “diplomatic deep freeze” after awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese activist. The UK had suffered repercussions after the visit of the Dalai Lama but not to the same extent. Some countries, such as the US, were so important to China that China would keep talking to them come what may. The situation for “middle-ranking” countries such as the UK was different. China saw member states differently according to their weight and influence within the EU. Where the UK was seen to sit within the EU framework was very important and would help determine how much attention China paid the UK. The Eurozone crisis had had a very damaging impact on Chinese perceptions of the EU. Nevertheless, the Eurozone in particular mattered to China because it had so much investment tied up there.

On Africa, one speaker felt that African states' own development had changed the context for their relationships with the EU, making them much more complicated. They covered a wider range of issues and demanded more intensive management than the typically aid-based relationships of the past. The EU was becoming more influential in conflict resolution (viz Libya and Mali). The growing influence of African regional organisations might affect the relationships in different ways. African Union troops funded by the EU had become a viable model. For some larger African countries, e.g. Nigeria, the relationships would continue to be mainly bilateral with the EU. But for others, the EU relationships with AU, ECOWAS, SADCC, etc. would be increasingly important. In some cases it would be a combination of the two. EU involvement in the Horn of Africa offered a good example of this.

...and by Member States' differing priorities

Several speakers stressed the different perspectives of member states, deriving from their cultural backgrounds and their historical experience (including their experience of war); or from the priorities or concerns of their public. This was reflected in e.g.

their policy towards the former Yugoslavia in the 90s, and currently in the differing attitudes to European defence, where e.g. Eastern member states continued to focus on Russia but more Atlanticist member states were more concerned about balancing the US pivot to Asia-Pacific.

Is the EU increasingly ready to intervene in 3rd countries?

One speaker argued that it was remarkable how fast the European attitude to intervention in 3rd countries had changed over the last few years, since the start of the international interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. This partly reflected greater willingness on the part of regional powers in e.g. Africa to accept European intervention (e.g. in Libya or Mali). But arguably the EU was becoming more “belligerent” than the US in respect of Syria. Would this pattern, and the potential demand for such intervention, grow? If it did, would that make the EU more important?

How effective is EU external action?

Some speakers argued that, at least in the security sphere, the EU was best at complementing what NATO did or indeed that it was really only able to act when NATO or another party had done the “heavy lifting” (e.g. the civilian missions in Kosovo and Bosnia). That was because NATO was better at taking hard decisions quickly; and the EU was only really able to be effective when it was already pretty evident what needed to be done - though there were exceptions e.g. Mali. Another argued that the EU’s failure to broker a climate change deal at Copenhagen, despite it being an issue on which the EU had staked so much, called into question the EU’s clout relative to the US or China (who had opposed the deal).

Other speakers argued that EU action could be effective – for example in the Russia/Georgia conflict where EU soft power had helped prevent escalation, or on Iran; and that there were examples of the EU successfully combining its various external policy instruments – for example in the Balkans and in Turkey. There were differing views about the Southern Neighbourhood and Europe’s response to the Arab Spring. One speaker saw this as a good example of combining EU instruments; another argued that the EU was failing to address the concerns of the man/woman on the street in North Africa, in particular in relation to mobility (the possibility to come and work in the EU) and access to EU agricultural markets, because of strong Member State vested interests.

On the EEAS, it was argued that it was work in progress, and needed to do more to plan policy in a way that took account of member states’ interests; but that it was having some impact in improving co-ordination and changing cultures. Some EU delegations did a very good job, e.g. in Burma. One participant argued that the inclusion of one third of Member State diplomats in the EEAS would produce a cultural shift, both in terms of the functioning of the EEAS but also EU mainstreaming in Member States once diplomats returned to ministries, but this

would take time to bear fruit. In terms of policy delivery, the EU remained “a super-tanker rather than a dinghy”, but it could be turned into a more effective one.

A tentative **conclusion** was offered on behalf of the group to the effect that the EU was generally most effective in dealing with relatively small, weak countries where the member states have a clear and agreed policy; and demonstrably worst when dealing with large powers, where the major member states do not share common policy objectives. The US, China and Russia relationships would fall into that category.