The EU in a multiplex world

by Antonio Missiroli

More than a decade has passed since the release of the European Security Strategy (ESS). As the world we Europeans live in has changed dramatically, the call – and the need – for a comprehensive reassessment of the analysis underpinning that text, and possibly also its scope and direction, has grown in intensity.

Back then, the EU and the West were still enjoying arguably their best moment in recent history:

- both the EU and NATO were completing their 'big bang' enlargement, taking in countries that had previously been part of the Warsaw Pact;

- the Union had just approved its ambitious draft Constitutional Treaty, and was launching its no less ambitious European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), as well as its first Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions;

- the US was at the peak of its 'unipolar moment', having just toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

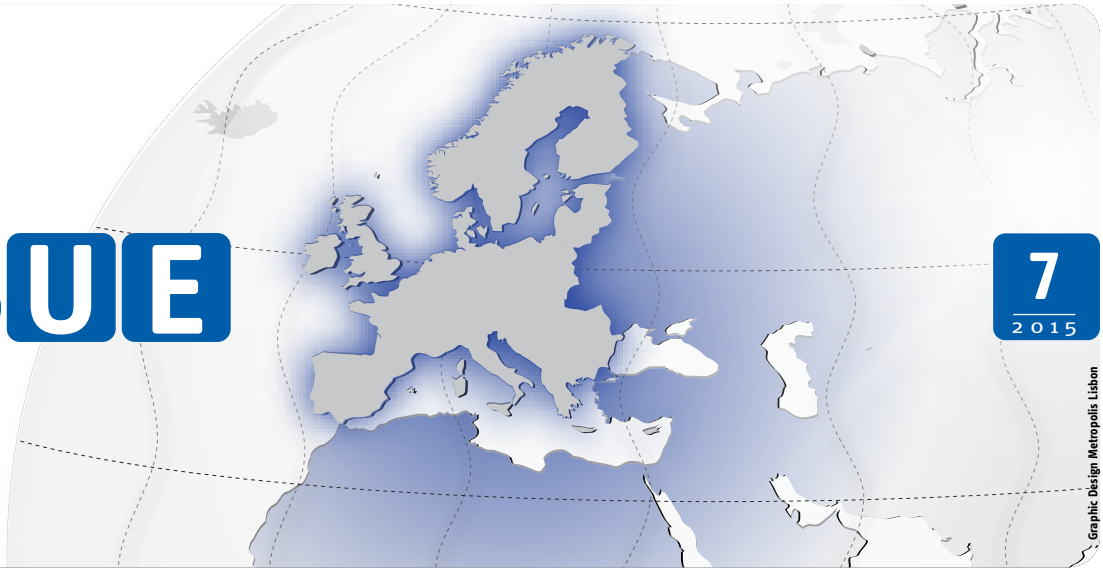
The title (*A secure Europe in a better world*) and the opening line of the 2003 ESS – 'Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free' – were thus fully justified: we had never had it so good.

Since then, both the real world and our perception of it have undergone significant transformations – and this process is far from over. The 'Report on the implementation of the ESS' – released five years later in December 2008 – confirmed the main tenets of the analysis and the core ambitions formulated in 2003. But it also highlighted the emergence of new challenges.

The world we are now confronted with may require a much more radical reappraisal. The end of the US unipolar moment, the rise of China (and others), the outbreak of the financial crisis and its impact on the West, the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, and the still unfolding crisis over Ukraine – all suggest that a fundamental review of our approach to the outside world as we know it is needed. Moreover, dramatic changes within the EU itself – the sovereign debt crisis and its economic and political consequences – are having profound implications for the Union's role in the world. Even if a new ESS had been released in December 2013 (as demanded by some, in line with the customary five year cycle), it would probably have already been overtaken by subsequent developments – both outside and inside Europe.

In line with the mandate conferred to the HR/VP at the December 2013 European Council meeting,

BRIEF ISSUE
7
2015



The EU in a multiplex world

by Antonio Missiroli

More than a decade has passed since the release of the European Security Strategy (ESS). As the world we Europeans live in has changed dramatically, the call – and the need – for a comprehensive reassessment of the analysis underpinning that text, and possibly also its scope and direction, has grown in intensity.

Back then, the EU and the West were still enjoying arguably their best moment in recent history:

- both the EU and NATO were completing their 'big bang' enlargement, taking in countries that had previously been part of the Warsaw Pact;

- the Union had just approved its ambitious draft Constitutional Treaty, and was launching its no less ambitious European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), as well as its first Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions;

- the US was at the peak of its 'unipolar moment', having just toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

The title (*A secure Europe in a better world*) and the opening line of the 2003 ESS – 'Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free' – were thus fully justified: we had never had it so good.

Since then, both the real world and our perception of it have undergone significant transformations – and this process is far from over. The 'Report on the implementation of the ESS' – released five years later in December 2008 – confirmed the main tenets of the analysis and the core ambitions formulated in 2003. But it also highlighted the emergence of new challenges.

The world we are now confronted with may require a much more radical reappraisal. The end of the US unipolar moment, the rise of China (and others), the outbreak of the financial crisis and its impact on the West, the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, and the still unfolding crisis over Ukraine – all suggest that a fundamental review of our approach to the outside world as we know it is needed. Moreover, dramatic changes within the EU itself – the sovereign debt crisis and its economic and political consequences – are having profound implications for the Union's role in the world. Even if a new ESS had been released in December 2013 (as demanded by some, in line with the customary five year cycle), it would probably have already been overtaken by subsequent developments – both outside and inside Europe.

In line with the mandate conferred to the HR/VP at the December 2013 European Council meeting,

Federica Mogherini's confirmation that she will deliver a report at the June 2015 EU summit assessing the 'changes in the global environment' and 'the challenges and opportunities arising for the Union', with a view to subsequently review the strategy, seems to therefore tick all the right boxes.

The EUISS has already provided an initial background analysis of the various 'environments' within which the EU operates (*Chaillot Paper* 133) and is now helping with the preparation of the HR/VP's assessment. What follows here is a first overview of some of the themes the June report may include.

Multiple narratives

Today's world is characterised by increasing uncertainty and unpredictability – at both the domestic and international level. A growing number of players are now engaged in influencing processes and shaping outcomes worldwide.

For roughly two decades this has mostly been the business of the West, driven by its values, as well as its interests (sometimes also through military means). But now others have emerged, too: these include fellow liberal democracies like Brazil, India, Turkey, Indonesia (all with strong emphasis on the respect of 'national sovereignty' and distrust for alleged Western 'double standards') but also more authoritarian actors endowed with sizeable means – like China, the Gulf states and, of course, Russia. The latter group are also the countries which have increased defence spending the most over the past few years.

> 'Today's world is *complex*, in other words: it is more connected but also more contested; more integrated but also more fragmented. It is indeed a *multi-plex* world...'

In parallel, a combination of diverse factors has prompted the spectacular rise of civil society and autonomous non-state actors: for good, as it has led to the long overdue empowerment of individuals, groups and communities in traditional and oppressed societies (as witnessed in Tahrir and Maidan); and for ill, as it has opened up new opportunities for organised crime and terrorism.

One of the unexpected consequences of all this is the changing nature of political conflict: long centred on the right/left divide, it is now based on elite vs mass cleavages, regional vs unitary identities, or along ethnic and religious lines. What is referred to as 'identity politics' is now the apparent main driver of political conflict both domestically and internationally – prompting an unprecedented rise in populist discourse and feeding xenophobia, racism, and sectarian strife.

Contrary to 10 or 20 years ago, there are now many competing narratives at work – in the wider world, in our neighbourhoods, and even inside the EU itself. The post-Cold War liberal international order is being increasingly challenged: it is often seen and presented as a Western construct primarily serving Western interests. And equally contested is the success story of our 'ever closer Union'.

All this contributes to the sense of uncertainty and even fragmentation which seems to define our time. Maybe 2003 was an exceptional moment, and this is the 'new normal'. At any rate, the 21st century is likely to be characterised by this blurring of the divide between internal and external dynamics – at both state and non-state level.

Multiple spheres

The world system is no longer bipolar, unipolar or even multipolar. The very notion of 'polarity' – implying a self-reliant and relatively autonomous bloc with a balanced mix of core power resources – is being called into question.

Despite its recent difficulties, only the US has a truly global reach that allows it to play a significant role in all regions, thanks to a rich spectrum of capabilities and a wide set of allies and partners. The liberal trade order it has shaped since the Second World War is still alive and reasonably well (so much so that it is exploited also by its detractors). But this does not mean that Washington can still shape the international system as it used to.

Today's world is rather *multi-clustered*, with different clusters of relevant players shaping different areas. Many currencies of 'power' compete and coexist – be it in the military, diplomatic, financial and energy domains or in the Asia-Pacific, the wider Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. To some extent, this is the case also inside the EU itself, where varying coalitions of relevant players shape different areas of common policy – creating a Union of overlapping ovals, rather than concentric circles.

Today's world is also *multi-layered*, with a growing number of 'middle' powers coming together to claim more influence in world affairs, including within international bodies and institutions. Even multilateralism, in fact, is no longer what it used to be: despite growing membership, traditional multilateral bodies appear less able to deliver results – at least compared with the 1990s – and less representative of the big global picture.

In parallel, 'mini-lateralism' has gained ground, mostly through largely informal (issue- or interest-driven) coalitions of countries – from the G7/G20 to the G77, from the Cairns Group to the BRICS. Yet again, mini-lateralism has become a recurrent feature also inside the Union, with more or less formal groups of neighbouring or like-minded member states articulating policy positions or deepening cooperation at (or outside) the EU level.

Today's world is *multi-level*, too, as individuals, groups and societies increasingly operate across borders, often independently of state controls. New technologies have boosted mobility and connectivity worldwide. Nowhere, once again, is such phenomenon more visible than inside Europe, where even political campaigns and grassroots-level initiatives now tend to cross old national and cultural boundaries and inspire each other. Global as well as regional interdependence – at both state and non-state level – has thus fostered both empowerment and vulnerability, as shown by such parallel and diverse developments as the Arab awakening and global jihadism, internet banking and cybercrime, or social mobility, human trafficking and pandemics.

All this is apparent even in the changing nature of conflict itself. Since the mid-1990s, in fact, instances of open and strictly inter-state wars have decreased. Today's conflicts are almost entirely intra-state (though sometimes internationalised), local (though sometimes cross-border), less intense but more recurrent and often lack the state as a participant. The simultaneous increase of proxy civil wars and revisionist claims makes today's world more contested rather than more conflictual. And the nation state itself – as a historical construct – is under enormous strain from all these processes: it may just collapse, suffer fragmentation, or rely more and more on nationalism to hold itself together.

Today's world is *complex*, in other words: it is more connected but also more contested; more integrated but also more fragmented. It is indeed a *multiplex* world (as Amitav Acharya recently pointed out), with multiple players bound across multiple layers by multiple links. Just like in a real multiplex, in fact, there are many theatres with different screenings going on at the same time – in different rooms and with different publics, but also with shared spaces and intersecting paths.

The EUropean environment

In this new global environment, the EU is also more connected and integrated than 10 or 20 years ago, but also more contested and fragmented. After welcoming 13 new partners and almost doubling its membership in less than a decade, the Union is now seeing its 'benign' narrative increasingly challenged – both inside and outside its borders.

The financial and economic downturn and the ensuing sovereign debt crisis have exposed internal weaknesses and divisions. For its part, the Union's enlargement capacity – long its most successful security policy (albeit carried out, *à la* Clausewitz, 'by other means') – has reached a critical juncture, confronted as it is with both internal 'fatigue' and a set of particularly complicated candidates for accession. As a result, the Union's 'soft power' has suffered a net loss.

On top of all this, the Union is also confronted with a significant worsening of its immediate security environment. Within Europe, the post-Cold War architecture is being openly challenged: Russia's annexation of Crimea has probably marked a turning point, and combined with the on-going crisis over Ukraine, it is likely to reshape the political landscape of the continent – and possibly beyond.

Across the Mediterranean, to the south and the southeast, an entire regional order is unravelling, with tangible spill-over effects for Europe in terms of refugees and returnees (the so-called foreign fighters), triggering both humanitarian and security emergencies and exacerbating the political, social and economic factors which unleashed the Arab uprisings in the first place.

Such a hardened environment is calling into question some of the core assumptions (and possibly instruments) of the external policies implemented so far by the Union – including the ENP and CSDP. 'Hybrid' tactics and clandestine actors – to both the east and south – are creating new risks and vulnerabilities. At the same time, while the need for active engagement in defence of universal rights and human dignity has increased, the Union's ability to implement its transformative agenda has diminished.

Our vision (and record) of an open society based on national self-determination is now challenged by a vision of the world based on spheres of influence. The unity and common resolve of NATO allies is being tested by an ever more assertive Russia defying what it perceives to be the 'decadent' West.

Of the six countries originally included in the EU's Eastern Partnership, three have distanced themselves from the EU, also following external pressure, while the three that have come closer have all suffered territorial losses and are bogged down by on-going or 'frozen' conflicts. This, in turn, is threatening the overall ability of these states to operate as sovereign, functioning and sustainable entities.

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings has triggered new conflicts fuelled by structural economic and social problems, sectarianism and religious grievances, influential external players and state fragility. The combination of these factors has allowed large ungoverned spaces to emerge in which various franchises of violent extremism thrive. Now, conventional warfare coexists with barbaric symbolic violence, a criminal business model based on ransom with open source proselitism, and elements of statelessness with instruments of statehood.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) seems to be the leading 'brand' for now, but the jihadist universe remains in a state of flux, with evidence of cross-fertilisation and resilience which – due also to the youth bulge across the Islamic world – will make it a major collective challenge for at least a generation. Al-Qaeda has long carried out terrorist actions through well-trained commandos; ISIL, by contrast, mainly through 'lone wolves' – yet in Paris, last January, the two terrorist cells operated as a loosely coordinated team.

A multiplex Europe

Our neighbourhood does not end in the Libyan desert, at Suez or across the Black Sea. It does not even begin there, as it is now also part of our own *internal* fabric through various groups including immigrants, foreign investors, and home-grown terrorists. As a result, also the ENP – conceived and implemented since 2003 as enlargement 'lite' – needs to be fundamentally rethought. Back then, a confident EU was determined to export stability; now, an uncertain EU is afraid of importing instability.

The 'thorough re-examination' of the ENP recently launched by HR/VP Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn with their Joint Consultation Paper indicates the need for a substantial overhaul. The ENP could arguably better serve our neighbours, as well as our own interests, by combining a realistic long-term vision with customised 'proximity packages' to address specific sub-regional issues (such as transport, energy or mobility) – rather than a single one-size-fits-all template geared towards normative convergence across the board.

The implementation of CSDP since 2003 has proved that the Union can carry out quite successful 'niche' peacebuilding operations – at least so long as these are low in intensity and member states can muster the required resources. But CSDP's specific value-added – also in comparison and coordination with NATO, the OSCE, and the UN – could be better highlighted and acted upon.

From targeted economic sanctions to intelligence cooperation (also with social media giants like Facebook and Twitter), and from tailored approaches towards trade and aid to a competitive defence industrial and technological base, tackling today's security risks requires a broad range of instruments and actors. Americans call this approach 'whole of government' – 'joined-up governance' in European jargon.

Complex challenges require complex responses, but an increasingly insecure European public is being bombarded by simplistic messages and unrealistic slogans. All external policies begin at home. They need to be supported by a public opinion which is better informed of the nature of the risks the EU is confronting and of the responses that may be necessary to maintain the achievements of the past decades and defend both our interests and our values. To have, in other words, 'a better Europe in a less secure world'.

The Union is now called upon to reassess its objectives and its tools in order to turn these multiple and multi-faceted challenges into possible opportunities. It can do so by addressing its weaknesses and playing to its strengths – starting with its own long experience of dealing with internal 'multi-plexity'.

Antonio Missiroli is the Director of the EUISS.

 | QN-AK-15-007-2A-N | ISBN 978-92-9198-263-9 | ISSN 2315-1110 | DOI 10.2815/14999