

Past and Present of the European External Action in Historical Perspective

By Juan Prat , Ambassador.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Leo Tindemans, the then Prime Minister of Belgium, once said:

“The fact that our countries have a common destiny is not enough. This fact must also be seen.”

I am not an academic nor a historian, not even a specialised journalist. I am just a diplomat who has devoted quite a number of years of his career to the construction of a unified Europe, that strange “Unidentified Political Object” as Jacques Delors once defined it.

The institutional complexity of our Union explains many of the difficulties we find when trying to speak with a single voice and also explains why in some instances it can work as a unit and in others not.

Already in the Fifties our Founding Fathers with all their enthusiasm had difficulties in distinguishing between what was a Community affaire and what had to be treated as an intergovernmental political cooperation.

In 1986, when I joined the Commission, there was not yet any clear *concept about “an external action of the European Communities as*

such". There were just external activities of the Commission within the framework of its own competences (mainly Development Aid and Trade). And I must say that these external activities were not at the top of the agenda since we were all concentrating on the White Book that Sir Leon Brittan had been asked by President Delors to present in order to achieve the internal market by 1992. The Treaty of Rome foresaw the creation of an internal market but there was no date and President Delors decided that without a date it would never be accomplished.

During these years, the legend of a "Fortress Europe" appeared in the press since we were only paying attention to our internal matters to the detriment of our external projection.

It was only at the end of the first Delors Commission and especially during the second one that a great push was given to the external side of our activities, especially after the fall of the Berlin wall, the subsequent "Drang nach Ost" and the development of an innovative policy towards the Mediterranean and the other Arab countries together with the re-discovery of the Latin American Continent by the EC.

In those years the relations with Latin American both at regional, sub-regional and bilateral level flourished as they had never had before and in the Mediterranean zone the Conference of Barcelona of November 1995, was the starting point of the Euromed Partnership.

It was one of the most visible events that the EU had put together and it made us a real protagonist in a region whose progress, stability and security were essential for our own progress, as was agreed by the Council of 1990 following a communication from the Commission. These were the times when the Peace Process between Israel and the Arabs was progressing with a clear protagonist: the United States but where the European Union was also clearly present in the Multilateral Track.

The EU Continued being present and active in regional affairs in the near abroad, conscious as it was of the big changes taking place in our region and the enlargement negotiations were then considered one of the great successes of our external action and a clear proof of the enthusiasm to join the club. It was the “Demande d’Europe” as Delors used to put it.

But we had to wait until 2003 for the European Council to decide that it was time to define a “European Security Strategy”, that is a conceptual framework for the newly born CFSP, including what would later become the CSDP and finally the ESDP. Indeed, the US-led invasion of Iraq that year had provoked a serious split among the EU Member States that highlighted the pressing need for a common strategic vision that could contribute to enhancing the internal cohesion at EU-level. The result was the document “a secure Europe in a better world”, known as the “Solana Document”, our first High Representative who, assisted as he was by just a bunch of extremely dedicated “fonctionnaires” of the Commission, demonstrated that with a reduced but highly competent staff, you could achieve a lot

both in conceptual and practical terms. To me that document represented a very important step forward in the positioning of the EU in the new global world order and presented the EU as an important soft power actor who knew what it wanted its position in the international scene to be.

The document that was made public in parallel with the new NATO “Strategic Concept” and the one the Russian Federation surprisingly presented to the world at a meeting with the Atlantic Alliance in Colorado Springs, recognised five key threats that the EU had to confront:

- Terrorism
- Proliferation of WMDs
- Regional conflicts
- Failed states
- Organised crime

To face them it called for preventative engagement, multilateralism and the search for security through development aid and cooperation.

That novel European Security Strategy was confirmed in 2008 practically in the same terms as it had been presented and adopted by the Council five years before.

This was already at the time of the Lisbon Treaty and just before the proposal for today’s EEAS was put forward in 2010, to “help

strengthen the EU on the global stage, give it more profile and project the interests and values of the EU more efficiently”.

These were very nice expressions of good will and, as we have been unfortunately used to hear in the EU declarations of intent, quite rhetorical.

We must admit that since then, as especially during the recent systemic crisis which we have gone through and from which we are still struggling to recover, Foreign Affairs have not been at the top of the EU's agenda, except for a few regional crises such as in Libya, Syria or Mali, none of them handled with the same enthusiasm by everyone of the Member States.

Intergovernmentalism is still at the core of our EU Foreign Policy and the domestic impact of the EEAS in our member countries is still very limited. There is not yet a sense of ownership towards this new and overdimensional tool, although the smaller Member States seem to be more supportive of it than the large ones, who prefer very often to go their own way.

In fact the EEAS brings together the traditional external relations of the Commission and the decisions of the Departments of the Council dealing with Foreign Affairs, but neither the Commissioners nor the Directors-General have been very keen to be coordinated by the EEAS.

Lady Ashton was never given the scope to coordinate the Commissioners who have responsibilities on matters related to Foreign Policy and this, in fact, eroded many of the Commission's prerogatives.

The Commission should be brought back to the table and this is precisely what President Juncker is doing.

With the complete renewal that has taken place lately in all the institutions in Brussels, could we be facing a new beginning for our EEA?

In the institutional field there are a number of positive signs that may lead us to a cautious, positive answer.

I am referring to the new structure and working methods of the Juncker Commission that can, if successful, give it a more relevant role in the shaping of the external action of the EU, which would undoubtedly reinforce its European identity.

The new H.R., Vice-President Mogherini is asked by the President to play a more integrated role within the Commission. The intention is that Ms Mogherini will not be as absorbed by the intergovernmental aspect of her work as Lady Ashton was and that she will "steer and coordinate the work of all Commissioners with regard to external relations."

This should enable her to play her role as Commission V.P. to the full and “help ensure a more effective external action of the Union.”

Let’s not forget that in our “Soft power EU” the most important instruments of our external action are in the hands of the Commission through the EU budget, which she manages.

Inasmuch as the Commission is more deeply involved in the external policy actions, these are bound to be more efficient and realistic.

The new H.R. will have to coordinate herself with all the other six Commission V.Ps and, more specifically, with those dealing with:

- ENP and Enlargement negotiations
- Trade
- International Cooperation and Development
- Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management

She will also be able to draw on the Commission policy instruments and expertise in many areas of utmost importance for the EU such as:

- Climate Action and Energy
- Transport
- Migrations and Home Affairs

In addition to that, she will chair the newly created “Commission’s Group on External Action”, to develop a joint approach. This group

will meet at least once a month in varying thematic and/or geographical formats.

The V.P., H.R. will regularly report back to the President and to the whole College about geopolitical developments.

Finally, to liaise more effectively with the rest of the College, she will have her headquarters in the Berlaymont, a very symbolic move that shows the will of the Commission to play a more central role in the External Affairs of the EU. She will also have a Cabinet “of an appropriate size with about half of its members being Commission officials.”

In addition, it is worth noting that the H.R. will be explicitly entitled to deputise to certain other Commissioners in areas related to Commission competence.

It is to be seen how much of all this will be allowed to happen in practice by the Member States, but we must admit that we have gone a long way from the days when Commission attendance was grudgingly accepted at EPC meetings which, since the beginning had been scrupulously kept separate from Community affairs.

As an anecdote, Luuk van Middelaar refers, in the “Passage to Europe” to a meeting that took place in 1973 in Copenhagen, under Danish Presidency, to discuss matters related to the EPC in the morning and where all the participants were transferred by plane to Brussels in the afternoon to hold their regular Council of Ministers

meeting, the Danish government providing the aircraft so that the principle would be maintained that the EPC was outside the orbit of the EC.

Now if all these new initiatives of the Commission, supported by the EP were to come true, it would be very good news, but I am afraid that they come at a moment of increasing difficulties in achieving our European political model that should transcend the classical Nation State.

In the course of European history we have seen the rise and fall of many empires, and now that history is accelerating at an increasing speed, some are already predicting that we may, during our lifetime, witness the rise and fall of our European dream.

I am not one of those, and I am convinced that for any of our countries and for its citizens, the only solution is more Europe not less, if we want to keep playing a leading role in the world.

I am saying all this because it does not make sense to talk about a strong External Action Service, about a strong Diplomatic Service if do not accept the fact that we have to strengthen internally this "Unidentified Political Object", and if we do not all agree to recognise that it has its own singular identity. (Just think about the difficulties we had in Lisbon to have a flag and an anthem accepted by all....).

Conclusion

- We are living in a world of complexity and multi-polarity but also a world of increasingly contradictory realities.
- The EU must rise to the challenge that a major change of power relations is going to confront us with.
- At a moment when the nature of the State itself is subject to a multitude of pressures, both from outside and within, the EU has set out to transcend the State, principally on soft power and humanitarian values (as Henry Kissinger puts it in his new book "World Order").
- But it is difficult that claims to legitimacy without any concept of strategy can contribute to creating or sustaining a new world order.
- Our EEA is lacking for the moment this concept of strategy, the "Solana Document" in 2003 was a first and unique attempt to define a European Strategic concept, but today I am afraid, we are still far from being able to influence the events in the world.
- At most, we manage to play some role here and there but we do not seem to be in a position to globally shape any new order in the international arena because the misconception of National Sovereignty does not allow us to appear as a single actor.

- The renaissance of nationalism amongst our Member States and within many of them endangers our future evolution both by disintegration and implosion.
- In our multi-polar world order, all our countries have become too small to play a leading role by themselves but the problem is that some of them have not realised it yet!