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THE BROKER

CONNECTING WORLDS OF KNOWLEDGE

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What next after the Lisbon Treaty?

Europe's moment of truth

Nationalist tendencies make one fear that the supposedly progressive influence of the European Union internationally will come to nothing. We asked Otto Homan to reflect on The Broker's recent blogs on Europe's future.

November 30, 2009 [Otto Holman](#)

After reading the opinion piece, 'Shaping Europe's international role', by Paul Engel *et al* (*The Broker* 16), and reactions to it on the website, it occurred to me that writing about the European Union's (EU) international role is no easy task. Every blogger concentrated on European development policy. Some were critical, a few managed to reason beyond the institutional implications of the Lisbon Treaty and even fewer (if any) referred to previous contributions. The debate fell on deaf ears.

The bloggers were bold and forthright in their comments, despite these omissions. The EU as a 'progressive force' was never substantiated, however, and calls for a strong commissioner were unconvincing. The optimism over the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was unfounded. For instance, bloggers mentioned the European External Action Service (which will serve as a foreign ministry for the EU) as an institutional novelty that could have positive effects on integrating the different components of the EU's external relations, suggesting, in the process, 'good news' for the developing world.

'Who are we kidding', to borrow Judith Sargentini's words? Sargentini is European member of parliament for GroenLinks, the Dutch Green party. In my view, praise for the Lisbon Treaty is rather premature, particularly in terms of shaping Europe's international role. The suggestion that people outside the EU will have a clearer idea who to call if they want to talk to Europe is misleading, if not wrong.

The European Council is arguably the most powerful European institution and Herman Van Rompuy, its new president, is from Belgium. An Indian diplomat has warned that if the new President came from a smaller member state, diplomats would glance at their diaries and say we cannot find time to meet.

In addition, the 'organizational mess in the area of development policy' (I fully agree here with Dieter Frisch, former director general for development at the European Commission) will not go away after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, unless development is subordinated to other areas of the EU's external relations, notably security and trade. Rob van Drimmelen, general secretary of the Association of World Council of Churches-related Development Organisations in Europe, seems to imply this, if I have understood correctly, when he refers to a possible paradigm shift.

The new mantra of the Commission consists of three buzzwords: knowledge, security and leadership. An

outward strategy that actively promotes the EU's role in global governance is currently at the top of the Commission's agenda. The focus is no longer on making the EU the world's most competitive economy (the knowledge economy) but on trying to enhance its leading role by attacking all kinds of new external security threats – real and imagined – from global warming and energy security to global food crises.

A new role for Europe?

The Commission suggests, for example, a role for Europe in line with the civilian or 'soft' power capabilities attributed to it: 'The EU is in a unique position to respond to the impacts of climate change on international security, given its leading role in development, global climate policy and the wide array of tools and instruments at its disposal. Moreover, the security challenge plays to Europe's strengths, with its comprehensive approach to conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction, and as a key proponent of effective multilateralism'.¹



ANP/ Dirk Waem

One way to interpret such sweeping statements is to assess the EU's possible role as a global actor. The EU possesses the necessary political and economic ingredients to lead the world in tackling these so-called security problems. Another way to look at it would be to start with the current governance crisis in the EU itself. This would suggest a new meaning for the EU's alleged 'expectations–capabilities' gap.

Simple statistics illustrate the reassertion of national governments *vis-à-vis* transnational and supranational governance. Governments bailed out their banks at the national level primarily to protect national interests. National governments then spent their way out of the financial crisis. The result? Skyrocketing public finance deficits, which could reach 7.5% of gross domestic product in 2010 for the EU as a whole. Unemployment will probably increase from 9.1% in 2009 to 10.3% in 2010, despite government demand steering.² The combination of these forecasts is explosive. The return of governance as usual – back to competitive austerity – will not be possible without heavy social costs. The alternative solution – postponing measures in accordance with the level playing field of the single market or in line with the stability and growth pact – will tear down some of the key building blocks of the European economic and monetary union.

The soft power expectations illustrated above are no longer in line with the EU's capability to uphold a degree of internal social cohesion. It is not clear whether the Commission has taken on board this new reality. In a recent address to the French senate, enlargement commissioner Olli Rehn argued that the EU should build on its internal strength to gain external power. But this internal strength is seen in terms of the new institutional architecture of the Lisbon Treaty rather than in terms of cohesion.³ The underlying assumption that this treaty will strengthen the EU's external performance is doubtful, as we have seen.

How diverse can a 'union in diversity' become before it lacks credible power, soft or otherwise, to the outside world?

Wake-up call

Even more embarrassing to read are the EU commissioner José Manuel Barroso's guidelines for the next commission.⁴ He bluntly states that for Europe, 'this is a moment of truth. Europe has to answer a decisive question. Do we want to lead, shaping globalization on the basis of our values and our interests, or will we leave the initiative to others and accept an outcome shaped by them? The alternatives are clear. A stark choice has to be made. Either Europeans accept to face this challenge together – or else we slide towards irrelevance'.

We should not rule out, however, the possibility that the idea of transcending European governance in order to play a leadership role in global governance has, in fact, entered the belief system of European elites. Even some academics in European integration studies have considered this possibility, albeit in a less normative way. But it would be dangerously wrong to think – or hope, as some of the bloggers do – that this leadership role would be beneficial to the developing world, that a new 'policy coherence' would correct the 'most blatant incoherencies' between EU development policies and other policy areas (notably agriculture and trade).

If coherence is to be the future outcome of today's deliberations (and we should remember there has been much talk about integrated approaches, at least since the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999), it will be in the form of a self-interested subordination of development to security. In any case, the EU, coherent or not, will not be taking on a leading role due to its own internal crisis. The Lisbon Treaty will not change anything in this respect.

To contribute to the blog on Europe visit <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu>

Footnotes

- [1.](#)

European Commission (2009) *European Economic Forecast: Autumn 2009*, European Economy Brussels. [View PDF](#)

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- [2.](#)

Rehn, Olli (2009) 'La politique d'élargissement de l'UE au service d'une nouvelle politique étrangère européenne', Address to the *Commissions des Affaires Européennes du Sénat*, Paris, 3 November.

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- [3.](#)

Barroso, José Manuel (2009) *Political Guidelines for the Next Commission*. [View PDF](#)

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Readers' Comments

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