

## Conference Report

### What Role for the European Union in Foreign and Security Policy?

**Wilton Park, 23-26 March 2006**

After the end of the Cold War, the single most important strategic task of the European Union was to deal with the geopolitical consequences of the demise of the Soviet Union and reach out to the countries of Eastern Europe. Enlargement turned out to be a very successful foreign policy tool, with the EU projecting peace and stability to the East while at the same time gaining more collective expertise and skills with every new member that joined. Yet, as the objective of reunifying Europe is almost accomplished and the key threats to European security stem from many different parts of the world today, the question arises whether the EU can deliver in foreign and security policy beyond enlargement. This was the topic addressed by Wilton Park conference no. 811 that was attended by more than 70 participants and took place between 23 and 26 March 2006. The purpose of this report is to summarise the key points of debate and add some personal impressions about the conference.

There were ten panels covering a wide panoply of issues. Concerning the instruments the EU has built up over the past years to improve its ability to speak with one voice and defend European interests, there was wide agreement among the participants that the balance sheet so far has been mixed. On the one hand, the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) has become a success story, constituting the indispensable hard shell to the soft egg of diplomacy as conducted in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Having started in the late 1990s with a narrow focus on the military side and on the European continent only, ESDP has evolved with breathtaking speed lately. Its particular strength is its ability to combine civilian and military tools in a broad approach to peacebuilding, which is essential to effectively deal with the complex conflicts today and gives it an advantage over other actors like NATO. While the EU is no alliance yet, it is more than a short-term coalition, and a common EU strategic culture is gradually emerging. Numerous challenges remain, of course. For instance, CFSP and ESDP are severely under-funded, getting only about 1 percent of the resources reserved for the external relations of the first pillar. Also, the build-up of military capacities has proven more difficult than expected, and the problem of unity of command in an intergovernmental body with 25 member states is hard to resolve. Furthermore, the EU is struggling to agree on an integrated market for the defence industry, as this affects core issues of sovereignty and national security. Still, within its short period of existence, ESDP has already accomplished much. Running more than ten operations in areas ranging from Africa to the Middle East to East Asia, it has adopted a distinctly global perspective, and the fact that the demand for EU peace missions is rapidly rising is in itself an indication for the success of ESDP.

On the other hand, the current institutional structure of the EU poses a severe handicap for Europe to act as a unitary and effective actor in the international community. In particular, participants criticised the troika system according to which the EU is being jointly represented by the Commissioner for External Relations, the EU presidency, and the High Representative (for CFSP). The fact that the EU presidency is rotating on a six-monthly basis was identified as an obstacle too. Some participants also warned that the indefatigable personal efforts of the current High Representative to keep the system running cannot make up for the deficits of the institutions, which urgently need to be strengthened. There was agreement that the Constitution would have meant a significant step forward in the efforts to improve the effectiveness of the EU as a foreign policy actor. While opinions were divided as to how to proceed with the Constitution, there was

consensus that it would be desirable to implement certain specific provisions concerning Europe's common foreign policy, notably the creation of a European foreign minister and a European diplomatic service. There was a related discussion as to whether there should be more self-selecting groups, such as the EU-3 that have been dealing with Iran. Again, there was a wide range of views, the majority arguing that such pragmatic instruments should be more widely used as long as they are ad-hoc solutions to specific problems rather than permanent bodies that would effectively represent a core Europe.

With regard to specific foreign policy fields, two main issues that were addressed concerned EU counter-terrorism policy and the question of an EU energy policy. Concerning the former, an assessment of EU activities revealed that the European countries perceive the terrorist threat predominately as an internal security challenge, whereas the US approaches it as a global war on terror. Although the EU has taken important measures, it should move away from its one-sided emphasis on tackling the problem within the Justice and Home Affairs pillar and embed its activities into a broader foreign policy context. Intelligence sharing will remain a key challenge for the EU, where the big powers have little incentive to share their findings with smaller partners, not least because of the heightened risk of leaks.

As for energy, the debates concentrated on the growing European dependence on Russian gas. Although Russia is the biggest gas exporter and the EU the biggest gas importer, defining a common partnership has turned out difficult so far. This is largely because of profound asymmetries between Europe and Russia in terms of political systems and energy-specific policies. The Russian government views energy as a key geopolitical assets and controls companies like Gazprom. By contrast, energy in Europe so far has been essentially a commercial issues, with companies rather than the state making strategic decisions and conducting the respective negotiations. Finding a long-term agreement with Moscow might be difficult for the EU, which accordingly should pay more attention to energy conservation and diversification and should evaluate ways of changing its patterns of import.

Several panels covered EU relations with specific other actors. There were extensive discussions on the state of the transatlantic relationship and the future of EU-US relations. While the assumption that NATO was in deep crisis remained largely unchallenged, several participants pointed out possibilities for a new EU-US bilateralism. Most analysts agreed that the scope for cooperation has improved lately, as President Bush has gradually moved from the Neoconservative camp that distrusts Europe to the Realists who accept the need for some re-engagement. However, opinions differed widely as to the possible extent of a reunion. Some argued that only a very limited rapprochement is feasible based on an eclectic agenda and functional cooperation in flexible frameworks such as the Quartet or the Contact Group. Others were hopeful that an Atlantic community could be re-forged, as both the EU and the US had to realise that unilateralism produced no sustainable results. The Europeans had to take note that their quest for international order required US power, while Washington became aware that the US quest for legitimacy required European support.

Discussions on European relations with great powers like China and Russia were marked by the observation that the EU has still some way to go to define the kind of strategic partnerships that are commensurate with the significance of these countries for European security and prosperity. The CFSP instrument of Common Strategies proved to be a false start, not least because several member states remained sceptical about majority decision-making in foreign policy. There is a need for new approaches and more political will to jointly engage with these powers. Relations with Russia are much more advanced than with China, but the EU still lacks a clear vision of how to structure its cooperation with Moscow in the long run and make sure that this key neighbour does not adopt authoritarian forms of governance again.

Finally, the issue of an EU role in the Middle East was intensively discussed too. The Middle East constitutes the epicentre of the major strategic questions of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Key threats to European security, such as international terrorism, fundamentalist ideologies, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, are intimately linked with developments in this region. Yet, Europe is having great difficulty in developing a common policy and becoming a respected actor in this region. The “post-modern” nature of the EU corresponds poorly with the Hobbesian world of the Middle East, where war remains a policy option, inter-state relations are highly militarised, and few states are happy with the geopolitical status quo. There are also numerous intra-European differences about priorities and approaches, and the fact that this region has become a primary theatre of US security policy raises particular problems for the EU to come up with its own distinct position. A majority of the discussants made the case for the EU to focus primarily on democracy promotion in the Middle East, but there were also those who argued that Europe should try and develop a much broader strategy to cope with the many threats emanating from this region.

Overall, the conference debates made clear that forging and implementing a common foreign policy is a much more complex task for the EU if the issues at stake concern areas beyond Europe. Not only is it more difficult in this case for the member states to agree on common positions. Another challenge is that the EU so far has not been very successful of shaping the preferences of other powers if it cannot offer the perspective of accession. Without the bait of membership, the EU has limited leverage in diplomacy. At the same time, the Europeans tend to shy away from negative measures such as pressure and economic sanctions to achieve their objectives, which often makes their policy efforts appear toothless. Whether ESDP will render the EU the necessary hard power remains to be seen. Most participants agreed that its further evolution will be a decisive factor in whether the EU will as yet emerge as an international actor with a credible and effective foreign and security policy.

The conference has been very valuable in providing a broad overview of the state of play in the European efforts at building a common foreign policy. The speakers invited were competent, the issues addressed relevant, and the debates frank and fruitful. Wiston House provided the perfect venue for this kind of conference, providing an atmosphere that stimulated informal debates among participants long after the ending of the panels. A key asset was the wide range of different nationalities that came together for the conference. Perhaps the only deficit was the fact that an overwhelming majority of participants were diplomats and government officials, with other groups such as academics, journalists, and NGO representatives being underrepresented. Nevertheless, important contacts within Europe could be established, and the conference generally proved to be a good opportunity to link with those who work in similar fields and ponder upon the same kinds of questions. Participating at a Wilton Park conference has been a unique experience, and I am very grateful for the generous grant awarded by the Swiss Foreign Policy Association.

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