

CSDP after Lisbon: forging a global grand bargain?

Written by Jolyon Howorth

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JOLYON HOWORTH, DEC 21 2009

Like it or not, the European Union, in the wake of Lisbon, has become an international actor. It now faces two major external challenges. The first is to develop strategic vision for a potentially tumultuous emerging multi-polar world. The European Council's December 2008 "Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy" recognized that, over the last five years, the threats facing the EU had become "increasingly complex", that "we must be ready to shape events [by] becoming more strategic in our thinking", and that this will involve being "more effective and visible around the world". The second challenge is to help nudge the other major actors towards a multilateral global grand bargain. Such a bargain will be the necessary outcome of the transition from a US-dominated post-1945 liberal world order, towards a new twenty-first century order accommodating the rising powers and sensitive to the needs of the global South. Without such a comprehensive and cooperative bargain, the emerging multi-polar world will be rife with tensions and highly conflict-prone.

In order to play a constructive role in forging that grand bargain, the EU must begin to think strategically. To date, its actions in the wider world – both CFSP and especially ESDP – have been reactive, ad hoc and tactical. This has to change. Henceforth, the Union must be clear about its common values and interests. It must be clear about its medium to long-term global objectives. And it must be clear about the means required to achieve those objectives.

There are three main reasons why a strategic approach is imperative. First, the EU suffers from serious long-term disadvantages: demographic decline, energy dependency, territorial exiguity, penury of natural resources and the absence of a unitary political centre. Developing a strategic approach will be difficult. But without it, the EU will have little chance of influencing the course of the 21st century. Second, such an approach is even more necessary because *all* the other major players are proving to be highly strategic in their own approach to the evolving global system. *They* are playing chess. The EU is playing ping pong. Third, in the post-Cold War world, the EU can no longer simply rely on the US to provide a security guarantee. President Obama, in Strasbourg last spring, practically implored the EU to assume its responsibilities on the global stage and become a true strategic partner for the US. Europe's future attractiveness to Washington will be a function of its ability to bring something substantial to the transatlantic table.

But developing strategic vision is not an end in itself. It must be applied to the great challenges thrown up by the coming transition to a new global order. Power transitions, as Organski and Gilpin have argued, normally involve violent overthrow of the existing order by the rising hegemon. There are good reasons to believe that such an outcome can be avoided in the 21st century. For the first time in human history, the post-1945 world has benefited from global institutions, increasingly effective multilateralism, a growing corpus of international law and complex interdependence – leading to what Giovanni Grevi has termed "inter-polarity" (the combination of interdependence and multipolarity). Moreover, the lessons of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, together with the end of Empire, have demonstrated the futility of territorial aggrandisement. Military power in its traditional sense has been shown to have

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limited political usefulness. Failed states have become more dangerous than powerful ones, soft power the necessary companion to hard power, human rights the mirror image of states rights, humanitarian intervention the new normative underpinning of international crisis management.

In this brave new emerging world, what are the available options for the major players? It is unlikely – though not impossible – that they will revert to the zero-sum jostling, the militarised power-balancing of the old Westphalian system. All players recognise the advantages of cooperation over conflict in a world where climate change, environmental degradation, migratory flows, regional instabilities and commercial and investment interdependence have significantly reduced the scope – and even the meaning – of national sovereignty.

The choice, then, boils down to two scenarios. Either the rising powers will be persuaded, as some American liberals believe is possible, to embrace the existing international liberal order essentially in its current form (with some minor adjustments). Or the major players will agree to devise – collectively and cooperatively – a new global order which better manages and harmonises the multiplicity of preferences, the diversity of cultural realities and governance systems, the asymmetries and imbalances which still persist between East and West, North and South, rising and declining powers, rich and poor. Robert Hutchings has termed such an agreement a “global grand bargain”.

Those who believe in Europe as a “normative power” will be tempted to make common cause with US liberals in holding out for a Western-anchored global order posing as the champion of “universal values”. It is unlikely that such an approach will succeed. In the past twelve months alone, we have witnessed the humiliation of the deregulated market system, growing pressures for meaningful reform of the Bretton Woods institutions, of the United Nations, the dominance of the G-20 over the increasingly irrelevant G-8, the imperative of global cooperation over climate change, the return of Russia as a strategic actor, and above all the omni-presence of China as a power-broker. In a post-colonial, post-imperial world, the very concept of universal values is deeply problematic. The EU should avoid trying to project itself as a normative model. The “brand EU” is not for export. Other actors may wish to emulate it, but that must be their choice. Rather, what the EU should seek as a basic strategic objective is a world of cultural and political diversity in which, nevertheless, stability, security, prosperity, development, environmental sustainability, solidarity and self-determination are considered in holistic terms as key elements of global interdependence – of inter-polarity.

The global grand bargain will involve a necessary series of trade-offs, some bilateral, some multilateral, between the rising and the declining powers. These trade-offs will be necessary in all major policy areas – governance, security, finance, trade, agriculture, energy, climate, development, proliferation, cultural exchanges and intellectual property. This will not involve selling off the family silver or succumbing to foreclosure on the estate. It will involve bartering some elements of that silver in order to create an even larger and more all-embracing domain.

In that process, the EU will need to be crystal clear about its deepest values and interests and about its strategic bottom line. Grand strategic clarity is essential if we are to arrive at a global grand bargain. The EU has many assets in this process. The price of failure will be a return to the jungle – a jungle in which European assets will count for very little.

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