The EU’s International Ambitions and the Geopolitics of Proximity

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The EU Centre in Singapore organised a lecture by our visiting fellow Dr Spyros Economides (London School of Economics and Political Science) on 25 August 2015. This was hosted by the ESSEC Business School at their Grand Auditorium in the ESSEC Asia Pacific Campus. In the lecture on “The European Union’s International Ambitions and the Geopolitics of Proximity”, Dr Economides told the audience that the European Union (EU) has launched a process of rethinking its foreign policy and security strategy to determine where it stands and how to address a series of complex issues in a changing and more connected world.

Dr Economides emphasized that it is important to address three key issues:

1. **What is the Strategic Review of the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy and why did the EU launch this process of rethinking its strategic goals now?**

2. **What kind of actor is the EU? Which roles does it play and what are its ambitions? A lot has changed in the past twenty years and the EU is undergoing a deep existential crisis. Given the**
3. Finally, if the EU’s roles in the global arena are diminishing, should the EU be increasingly seen as a regional actor affected by the geopolitics of its neighborhood? If yes, will it be successful in managing the crises (e.g., Ukraine, migrant crisis, and western Balkans) as the geopolitics of the neighbourhood become far more complex?

On the first issue, Dr Economides opined that the foundation of how the EU would act on the international stage was provided by the previous security strategy from 2003 under which the EU has attained growing commercial success and bolstered its reputation as a diplomatic actor. The main reasons for this strategy were completely contextual. It was a reaction to the fact that the US drafted a new security strategy in the context of September 11 and the internal divisions within the EU over Iraq. The EU needed to overcome its internal divisions and come up with a unanimous policy addressing such topics as international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and regional conflicts. It was a broad set of guidelines of no more than 15 pages covering the major points of the EU’s international agenda. The 2003 strategy was reviewed in 2008 but not much was amended. However, since then the world and the outside perceptions of the EU have changed substantially, hence the need to redefine the international role of the EU and its foreign policy ambitions.

Since the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has had a Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) and the fundamental understanding has been that the EU was mostly a civilian actor with no military tools. The only instruments at its disposal were economic (e.g., imposing sanctions) and diplomatic. However, the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 introduced a Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) with a very small military capability depending on the will of the member states to provide units and materiel to be used in specific circumstances (e.g., humanitarian cases). According to Dr Economides, now that the EU has reached a cross-road about what it could and should do on the international stage, there should also be discussion on the need to have a more cohesive policy which links CFSP and CSDP. Additionally, it must also start to look at setting more clearly defined and achievable goals commitments instead of broad and vague undertakings. There is also a need for more joined-up thinking (e.g., between civilian and military instruments and between institutions and member states). Similarly, it is important to enhance the EU’s ability to see how certain issues on the international agenda are linked together, as for instance whether by the Ukraine crisis Russia seeks to challenge the international system and rewrite the rules as a revisionist power.

In order to deal with complex issues, rather than focusing on speaking with one voice, there is a need for a multitude of voices speaking in a unique direction. There is a desire within the EU to become more pragmatic and more realistic in terms of conducting foreign policy. Interests can be achieved through a coherent plan of actions bringing together all the member states. However, to reach achievable goals, a focus on a multitude of voices speaking in unison is a more feasible option than speaking with one voice.

Until quite recently, both academics and policy-makers likened the EU as a non-Westphalian actor, a new type of international actor more concerned with moral and ethical questions and crises its facing, can the EU still be seen as a global actor in the international system?
values underlying its initial integration project. Other academics argued that the EU took a normative path as a power and an institution founded on comprehensive values such as democracy, peace, stability, economic development and protecting human rights, values which were also to be exported. This sort of emulation has become part of the EU’s narrative at the forefront of its relationship with other states, especially those who seek to join the EU. Dr Economides argues that with the strategic rethink the EU and its member states have to define clearly the EU’s interest and integrate the interests dimensions with its value narratives in order to be taken seriously as international actor.

Dr Economides further explains that the EU is de facto a global actor in economic terms because it has a vast commercial presence and it is an important trading partner. It has overcome the temptation that comes from the member states to follow their own national interests by having one trade commissioner who represents the union as a whole and takes decisions on its behalf. Thus, the EU has become a very significant actor in commercial terms.

Concerning other areas, the EU is not a global actor at the military level. It has never intended to be and it will not change with the strategic rethink. There have been some missions deployed in the past such as in central Africa but they have not been significant in terms of global affairs. The EU has neither commitment nor capability to be a significant military actor as an institution even though there may be individual member states with international commitments in the terrain, primarily France and Britain. Diplomatically and politically, it is also a global actor. However, Singapore is representative of many countries who think that its diplomatic and political power has decreased over time. This is a reflection of how the EU’s commercial power has become divorced from the political dimension. According to Dr Economides, one of the reasons for this is the lack of clear definable goals which would bring the member states together to act in unison on a series of international issues. This is critical for the EU to act as a credible actor but it has become more difficult because of the Eurozone crisis which has damaged the image of the economic capacity of the EU and its image abroad. Divisions within the EU have strengthened the assumption that there might be something significantly wrong with the European project itself.

Finally, Dr Economides touched on the issue of the geopolitics of proximity. If the EU is re- treating as a global power, the logical conclusion is to look at what it has done in its regional capacity. There has always been a claim that beyond the global ambition focused primarily on commerce, there is a regional ambition dealing with a variety of different issues which made the EU a very powerful regional actor. The most successful part of EU foreign policy at the regional level has been enlargement. The states have wanted to join the EU for a variety of reasons and the EU has managed to transform them into modern European states based on the premise of liberal democracy and market economy. It was not only a commercial but also a political, legal and security success if we look for example at the countries of central and Eastern Europe who joined the EU in 2004. Lastly, it was also about identity and a return to Europe.

However, further enlargement is questionable as there are not many places to enlarge anymore and natural limits of the EU might have been reached. Those states in the western Balkans who are eligible are highly problematic, volatile or not ready to become members of the EU. Thus
there is no prospect for them to become members in the next ten years. The policy of enlargement failed with Ukraine because of destabilizing activity within Ukraine or from its neighbours (specifically Russia) which shows that there are limits to the policy of enlargement. A different case is that of Turkey, who started negotiating with the EU and launched a programme of reform but has since become more ambivalent as to whether accession was in the interest of Turkey. At the same time, EU member states were also divided on the issue of Turkey’s membership.

There has also been a European neighbourhood programme that touches on the geopolitics of proximity in the most obvious way as it has allowed the EU to engage with its neighbours without making any commitments. It stretched from Morocco, over the Mediterranean, through Caucasus and parts of central Asia. The programme was supposed to assist in creating peace and stability, creating standards of liberal democracy through conditionality and technical assistance. It has not been successful and must be rethought and be replaced by something much more pragmatic which can deliver specific promises. The best example would be the Arab spring where the programme has not done enough to promote freedoms, liberties and human rights in these countries such as Tunisia.

Last but not least, the question linked to the geopolitics of proximity is that of illegal migrants and refugees from Libya, Syria and beyond. How is the EU going to cope with an influx of people who are in need of assistance and whose majority is coming from countries who have not benefited in any way from the EU’s ability to be a regional power?

The conclusion is that the strategic rethink is about redefining Europe internationally, reassessing goals and becoming more pragmatic and realistic about what is achievable while interests are matched to the values the EU represents. It is also trying to figure out at what level the EU is a global actor and at what level it is a regional actor and what it is going to do to become a more significant regional actor.