The EU's Fading 'Moral Power' in the Neighborhood: Progress with Unity, Regress in Magnanimity

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Since the New Cold War the EU's foreign policy in its neighbourhood has been marked by increase in unity but decrease in magnanimity. Its 'moral power' has waned, with the Union faring as an 'actual' 'power' only on the 'moral' parameter of coherence.

Depuis la nouvelle guerre froide, la politique étrangère de l'UE à l'égard de son voisinage a été marquée par un renforcement de l'unité mais une diminution de la magnanimité. L'Union a décliné comme «pouvoir moral», n'étant un « pouvoir » « actuel » que sur le paramètre « moral » de la cohérence.

Introduction

As the EU has incrementally boosted its external relations into a foreign policy accompanied by a more unified voice, since the onset of the New Cold War in 2014 set by the crisis and then conflict in Ukraine it has, paradoxically, become less of an idiosyncratic and more of a conventional actor.

Since the end of World War II faring as a geographically expanding model of 'democratic peace' to be emulated, EU's foreign policy was to be crafted decades later. The delineation of a pillar on Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1993 through the Maastricht Treaty, the creation of the post of the High Representative for CFSP through the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, the establishment of the Political and Security Committee by the Treaty of Nice in 2003, the launch of the European External Action Service within the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 were steps aimed at making the EU a salient foreign policy actor.

Launched in 2004 to promote 'prosperity, stability and security' in the sixteen neighboring countries (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia in the east and Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, the Palestinian Authority in the south), the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) as the Union's 'main external priority' pursued a benign ambition. However, as the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, Gaza, etc. unfolded, the idealist reasoning lost traction. Instead, given the increasing role of EU member states on matters relating security and energy, recourse to (neo-)realism became unavoidable.

This op-ed will rely on the conceptual framework of 'moral power', which adjoins the two and comprises seven parameters of 'morality', namely, consequentialism, coherence, consistency, balance between values and interests, normative steadiness, inclusiveness and external legitimacy, and three types of power, namely, 'potential', 'actual' and 'actualized'.

'Moral Power' Parameters

As consequentialism denotes a policy with the intent of generating benevolent outcomes, the ENP has incorporated strategic upgrade through the Union for the Mediterranean and Eastern Partnership and tactical update with augmented bilateral and regional funding. Yet, the eruption of conflicts, political disarray and economic downslide in several neighboring countries have not led to a homogeneous 'good' policy outcome.

EU's coherence, which is tied to laws and rules enshrined in the Treaties, has been ensured through cooperation and coordination between/among institutions and member states. With respect to the ENP, the European Council and the Council of Ministers provided general policy guidance; the Commission secured technocratic compromise; the European Parliament voiced the political challenges facing the neighborhood. As for the EU's member states, despite earlier divergence, after the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Donbas for the first time they spoke in unison.

As the EU entered into a power struggle with Russia implicating the neighboring countries, disparity between discourse and practice transpired affecting consistency between the rhetoric of consolidation of democracy, economic upheaval, social mobility, on the one hand, and implementation of the latter, on the other. 'Realpolitik' came to prevail over the quest for transformation of the neighborhood.

With the EU being the harbinger of multilateralism, in the aftermath of the New Cold War the OSCE Minsk Group charged with resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and the Middle East Quartet handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became defunct; the supply of weaponry by EU member states to Ukraine has damaged the Union's stature as a proponent of peace; instead, the interests pertaining to power, energy, trade, etc. became vivid during the second wave of the Arab Spring unleashed in Lebanon and Algeria in 2019 when the EU was silent, and the wars over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016 and 2020 when the Union merely expressed concern. Provided energy deals with Azerbaijan as a source of diversification from Russia in the east, wary of migration, terrorism and militarism in the south, the EU overlooked values to the advantage of interests.

The conflicts led to undulations in normative steadiness: while the EU has been a major advocate of human rights, during the exodus and ethnic cleansing of Karabakh Armenians by Azerbaijan in 2023 it cheered democracy in Armenia; during the siege of Gaza the EU addressed the kidnapping of Israeli citizens, killings of Palestinian children and women underlining democracy of Israel. Switching from one norm to another surfaced as a face-saving exercise. Moreover, if relying on the OSCE Helsinki Final Act and the UN Charter the EU had stressed both 'territorial integrity' and 'the right of people to self-determination' in the case of Karabakh, and 'a permanent two-state solution' in the case of Israel and 'a Palestinian state', these principles got consigned to oblivion.

The Union's inclusiveness via engaging public, private, civil society stakeholders gave way to a preference for collaboration with an 'exclusive club' of anti-Russia propagators in the east; in the south the categorization of Hamas controlling a part of West Bank and Gaza and Hezbollah forming a part of the governing coalition in Lebanon as terrorist entities drew the boundaries of 'political dialogue'.

The recesses on the afore-mentioned parameters have caused harm to the EU's external legitimacy in the neighboring countries; the Union's programs, projects, grants, etc. are skeptically viewed through the lenses of pragmatic self-interest. Deterioration of security leveled off the differences in the public perception between the EU and its member states historically viewed through a colonial 'prism' in the south or on a par with the US as a Cold War adversary against Russia in the east.

Flowing along the parameters of 'moral power', the op-ed demonstrated that except for 'actual' 'coherence', the EU has been a 'potential' 'moral power', thus, going amiss on its credo as a 'force for good'. The 'return' to geopolitics has taken place in tune with EU's progress with unity, alas, at the expense of its magnanimity.