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Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy  
A Foreign Policy in Search of a Polity

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**ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE**

**Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy  
A Foreign Policy in Search of a Polity**

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The inability of the European Union to deal effectively with the Yugoslav crisis has had a lasting impact on the image of Europe and on the confidence of Europeans in European institutions. The supporters of Europe usually answer those critics by pointing to the fact that the Yugoslav crisis broke out before effective institutions were in place; for them, it is a crisis that came too early in the history of the European Union. The sceptics are not convinced by this institutional argument, and underline the resilience of national interest which remains, in their view, the only solid foundation for foreign policy. According to them, it is indeed naive to expect institutions to overcome national rivalries, and the absence of breakthroughs during the intergovernmental conference apparently confirms that cautious view: the so-called 'realist school' of international relations seems to be vindicated by the vitality of national identities, and the weakness of the present 'common foreign and security policy' of the European Union. However, the assumptions on which this 'realist' understanding of foreign policy is based deserve a closer examination, and another hypothesis needs to be explored: the present difficulties of the European Union may reflect, not the resilience of its Member States, but a crisis of body politics, a crisis of democracy: the weakness of the European polity is no proof of the strength of national polities.

### **National interests reconsidered**

Most modern European states are the heirs of monarchs and princes, and our understanding of international relations is very much coloured by this historical origin. We have an almost anthropomorphic view of nations, and we often describe them as though they were living people, with a particular character. This may be a remnant of a time when the foreign policy of a nation was a reflection of the character of the prince who ruled it. Indeed, concentration of power is an essential assumption of the realist school of international relations. Nations are expected to act as unified single actors, and democratic thinking has rarely questioned that assumption. The first challenge of democracy was not to build power and to create a polity, but to control power. Power and the willingness to use it have been considered as a given, a starting point, which did not have to be patiently nurtured and developed.

This genealogy of power has very important implications for foreign policy. It has been assumed that princes pursue their own personal interests, and foreign policy has been defined as an extension of this approach; just as princes worked hard to extend their estates and increase their wealth, often at the expense of their neighbours, modern nations are expected to pursue collectively, and maybe with more sophistication, the same aims. This psychological

definition of interest has rarely been questioned, and is generally considered to be self-evident.

The concept of 'national interest' transfers to the nation the personal interests of the monarch, and serves a very useful purpose: at once, it legitimises the democratic control of power and the use of that power. The assumption that each nation has a national interest is still the working hypothesis of most analysts, because it seems to have obvious operational value. The hypothesis creates a common analytical ground, on which 'interests' can be assessed and balanced. As a consequence, the objectives of foreign policy can be easily defined as the pursuit of national interests, and the art of diplomacy is the art of accommodating various and often conflicting national interests.

The concept of 'balance of power' is a direct application of that analysis, and can be conceived as the foreign policy equivalent of Adam Smith's invisible hand. Henry Kissinger, in his book *Diplomacy*, rightly notes:

Intellectually, the concept of balance of power reflected the convictions of all the major political thinkers of the Enlightenment. In their view, the Universe, including the political sphere, operated according to rational principles which balanced each other. Seemingly random acts by reasonable men would, in their totality, tend toward the common good, though the proof of this proposition was elusive in the century of constant conflict that followed the Thirty Years' War.<sup>1</sup>

This realistic, and very Kissingerian, qualification of the beauty of the concept of balance of power reflects the pessimism of an historian whose vision of history parallels his vision of human nature. Diplomacy is the art of postponing problems, of averting disasters, it has no metaphysical ambition of suppressing evil, or even of building institutions that would overcome the solitary pursuit of national interest. Actually, national interests remain the cornerstone of a good understanding of international relations, and the starting point of any diplomatic endeavour. There is a striking similarity between the nineteenth century British definition of foreign policy, as quoted by Kissinger from Palmerston, and the American definition of diplomacy, when Kissinger was in a position to influence, and sometimes shape it. Palmerston, in 1856, said: 'When people ask me for what is called a policy, the only answer is that we mean to do what may seem to be the best, upon each occasion as it arises, making the Interests of Our Country one's guiding principle.' The same Palmerston uttered the famous sentence: 'we have no eternal allies, and no permanent enemies . . . our interests are eternal, and those interests it is our duty to follow.'<sup>2</sup> These British definitions seem to have inspired the foreign policy reports drafted by Kissinger during the Nixon presidency:

Our objective, in the first instance, is to support our *interests* over the long run with a sound foreign policy. The more that policy is based on a realistic assessment of our and others' interests, the more effective our role in the world can be . . . our interests must shape our commitments, rather than the other way round.<sup>3</sup>

The common theme of all these quotations is that there is a pre-existing, underlying interest that has to be uncovered, deciphered, through analytical and diplomatic skill. The good diplomat is like an archaeologist, digging through the foundations of his nation, to reveal that precious hidden beauty, the true national interest. The only real debate is whether one can entertain an optimistic view of the international system and of human nature; in which case, the invisible hand of reason would bring peace and harmony, because all nations would have identified their true national interests, which would not conflict with each other. After World War I, the promoters of the Société des Nations, who (for the most part) did not question the concept of nation, had such expectations and hoped that democracy (understood as the triumph of reason) would lay the foundations for eternal peace between separate national entities. In a more pessimistic vision shared by Kissinger, peace will always remain a very precarious affair, either because human beings are incapable of consistently identifying their rational interests or because there are irreconcilable interests, and diplomats can consider themselves successful when - like their great ancestors of the nineteenth century so admired by Kissinger - they postpone war for almost a century.

The present difficulties of European integration are therefore seen by many Kissingerians as a confirmation that the whole effort was flawed from the beginning, and that the failure of Europeans to develop a true foreign policy is a consequence of a basic mistake: national interests are the foundation of a foreign policy, and any effort to circumvent them is bound to fail. It is important to determine whether they are right. European integration after World War II is an attempt to create an alternative to both Wilsonian idealism and Kissingerian 'realism' by questioning the assumptions on which they are based. Has it succeeded?

### **European interests reconsidered**

European integration is based on the assumption that national interests can be changed, that they are not permanent or 'eternal,' as Palmerston asserted. Two world wars and three Franco-German conflicts in less than a century have convinced the French and the Germans that there has to be more to European diplomacy than permanent rivalry dictated by geography and history. In the context of the tabula rasa of 1945, several European leaders took what they

thought was a realistic look at European history, and found that the 'permanence' of interests and conflicts depended on the time scale chosen, and that what could appear permanent on a scale of two or three centuries had actually changed quite substantially, if one took a longer view. They also took a realistic look at the progress made in destructive capabilities by modern armies and at the shifting position of European nations vis à vis the rest of the world. They realistically concluded that political will, diplomacy, and institutions could have an impact and change the interplay of interests and that it was a matter of self interest - and maybe survival - to change the perception of their interests by European nations. There was more to diplomacy than analytical skill in making it possible to decipher one's own interest.

By and large, they have been successful, and European integration has substantially changed the perceptions of national interests. Partly through institutions, partly through a process of globalisation that is not specifically European, the economic circumstances of nations have indeed been changing and with them the perception of national interest. The combination of interdependence and transnational contacts weakens purely national perceptions, and it becomes more difficult to consider national interest as the *ultima ratio* of foreign policy. For instance, when one looks at the way German people and French people now define their 'interests' and how they define their relations, it is obvious that some fundamental changes have occurred.

However, the founders of the European Community did not question the link between foreign policy and interests. They expected European countries to overcome their old rivalries because they would share permanent common interests. A new European interest would replace the old national interests as the basis of foreign policy. Actually, the fundamental assumption that foreign policy is linked to interests remained unquestioned, and the promoters of European integration believed, in a somewhat Marxist way, that growing economic integration would create a common 'European interest' that would lay the foundation for a common foreign and security policy.

This assumption has led to many rather ineffective efforts to draw up lists of common European interests, the first of which was the famous 'Asolo list.' In a very rational manner, European diplomats have been trying to identify those interests that precede policy, and on the basis of which a foreign policy could be built. We assumed that we only had to make visible what was invisible, explicit what was implicit. Today, one has to reckon that this approach has created no momentum, and that the elusive common European interest has yet to produce an effective common foreign policy. If this failure is not the consequence of the resilience of conflicting national interests, we have to ask whether there is a

deeper flaw in our assumptions, and if we have misinterpreted the complex links between interests, polity, and foreign policy.

To transform the perception of national interests is not enough to create a European interest, as we have learned from the Yugoslav crisis: while there were different perceptions and sympathies in Germany and France at the beginning of the crisis, perceptions merged as the crisis developed, and at no time was there a clash of national interests. What was actually striking was the absence, on both sides, of any strong national interest. The only strong interest, which was common to the two nations, was to prevent the crisis from jeopardising the quality of Franco-German relations. This is actually the exact opposite of the Palmerstonian view of national interest. One could say that in today's Europe, there are no permanent interests, there are only permanent allies. Such a proposition is quite different from the assumptions of the founders of Europe, and raises new issues.

First, can we assume, as they implicitly did, that there is already a self-evident European polity? This was never the case in the past, and it is even less true after the end of the Cold War. In its first 30 years, the European Community did not have to define its borders, except when it declined to include - temporarily - Britain and - more durably - Turkey. Borders were imposed by geography (the Atlantic Ocean) on the western side and by history (the iron curtain) on the eastern side. The relevance of the Atlantic divide was always a question, but the answer could be postponed so long as there was a fundamental threat on the eastern side. European integration was about organising and strengthening the democratic exception at the western tip of Eurasia. Resisting the existential threat on the eastern front was the only serious issue of foreign policy. And while there could be differences, and sometimes quite unpleasant bickering between Americans and Europeans, nobody - not even De Gaulle, in spite of the rhetoric - could seriously question US leadership whenever there was a real crisis.

Today's situation is quite different and questions that were always there but could be conveniently forgotten need to be answered. When an American policy maker<sup>4</sup> describes the United States as a 'European power,' Europeans cannot dismiss the statement easily. Europeans can protest by pointing to geography, but they instinctively understand the limit of such an argument in an era when geography is becoming less relevant. They are then led to stress the differences between a supposedly 'European model' and an 'American model,' but this argument also has its limitations. There are notable differences between European countries and while it is true that the share of GNP that is redistributed through public institutions is much higher in Europe than in the

United States, both 'models' are in crisis and most Europeans, while rejecting the 'American model,' would agree that their 'model' needs some very substantial reform. Both 'models' need to be adapted, and they might do well to meet halfway. Another fashionable view is that economic competition for wealth has replaced the traditional political competition for space and security. It is indeed true that the interests of Airbus clash with those of Boeing, but competition between companies is not enough to define competition between countries or groups of countries, and in many sectors of the economy, the transnational diffusion of shareholding, research, production, and marketing may well blur the national identities of companies.

Moreover, to assert that the primary purpose of a nation is to promote the wealth of its citizens just postpones the answer to the question of identity, rather than answers it. How does one define the limits of a particular group collectively pursuing greater wealth? The inhabitants of Turkey and Maghreb, countries that have been linked by geography to the history of Europe, pointedly ask the question and would happily join the European Union. But Europeans do not want to consider the prospect. And while it is easy for them to point to differences in wealth that make such a project impractical, or to human rights violations in some of the countries concerned, nobody doubts that the real reason is religion: although there are several millions Muslims within the European Union, Europeans cannot accept the idea that overwhelmingly Muslim countries could join the Union. But Europeans do not care to admit that fact and would probably find no agreement between them if they tried to give a positive definition of Europe as a Christian or Judeo-Christian entity (they would actually be embarrassed because they would still want to exclude Orthodox Russia from that entity).

This raises a major question on the strategy that is expected eventually to produce a common foreign and security policy. If we reject the utilitarian view that political entities are born when a given community becomes aware of the common interests it has to protect or promote, then the expectation that the consolidation of some - very elusive as we have seen - European common interests will be sufficient to create a European political entity is flawed, and some very different assumptions should be made. Political entities are not born because of a functional logic; the real process may actually be the opposite. Instead of being shaped by common interests, political communities create those common interests and perceptions and a political community becomes strong by providing an answer both to functional and identity needs. If there is to be a European foreign policy, it is not enough to overcome the national interests of the Member States. Common European interests are as much political constructs as the national interests they are expected to supersede:

national interests were produced by national polities therefore a European foreign policy requires a European polity, which will produce European interests.

### **How do political communities emerge?**

Today we face a new situation in European history. Europeans have been used to inheriting the community in which they live. They are now expected to form a community of choice and, unlike the United States, this new community has to define its territorial scope. It does not have to identify the interests of a particular territorial community, but rather to identify the territory that will fit particular interests, which themselves must be selected with a view to shaping a particular community. This is a complete reversal of the process through which we usually interpret the shaping of foreign policy and it differs substantially from the American experience. At the time of the Federalist Papers, what was discussed was whether Americans should form a single nation or several, but nobody contested the proposition that the United States was indeed different from 'foreign nations,' i.e., European nations. The outer limits of the American community were considered to be self-evident: even in a continent as free from traditions as the 'new world,' the political problem that confronted Americans was in a way traditional; they did not have to decide how to define their community, but simply how to manage it.

Europeans have no such luxury: they have to collectively decide how specific and different they are from the rest of the world, on what basis they will define that specificity, and for which Europe. These questions present Europeans with some of their oldest and most enduring contradictions: the continent of monotheism prides itself on its universalism, and it is the birthplace of metaphysics; nowhere more than in Europe do we find this ambition to provide an all-encompassing unified answer that would bring us 'Truth.' Intellectually, Europe can have no borders, and that is why Holbrooke's statement that the United States is a European power may trouble the Europeans more than its author intended.

And yet the universalist ambition of Europe has clashed consistently with the reality of religious and political diversity. Religious wars, in which conflicting views of the 'truth' were in conflict, were more bitter and cruel than elsewhere and the plurality of states in Christian Europe is a reminder of the problematic and contingent character of human institutions. The recognition of the distance between Caesar's world and God's is actually an important component of the European tradition, embodied in the multi-secular rivalry

between the pope and the emperor. Historically, European integration, promoted by Christian democrats like Adenauer, Schuman, or De Gasperi, can be seen as an ultimate attempt to bridge that gap, and to achieve a secular universalism, but what kind of universalism is it that has to stop at the hypothetical geographic border of Europe? The founding fathers of the European community did not have to answer that question. Nor did the United States, which could reconcile its universalism with the contingent fact of being a particular country by becoming a model.

But today, we have to recognise the great difference between the existing American polity and the yet-to-be-born European polity. History has created very different emotions on either side of the Atlantic. Every nation has to find a balance between two definitions of itself: between its relation to the past and its common memories, and its ambitions for the future and a common project. In the case of the United States, the balance has clearly been tipped toward the future, and the American nation can be defined as a contract with the future: its founding myth is to provide a second chance to all immigrants who have been let down by their own countries. In the case of Europe, the balance is clearly tipped toward the past and the European contract with the future does not match the strength of national memories, even if national memories do not clash with each other any more.

That difference is crucial because there can be no polity without a sense of belonging, without common feelings, or 'fellow feelings' as Adam Smith would have said. The American polity is still self-evident, and the European polity still is not. Does that mean that if interests are not permanent, emotions are? Or that they change more slowly than interests? Has European integration entered a phase in which it has to engineer common emotions in the same way it engineered common interests? Is it the case that, after having provided for the solid foundations of common interests and cleared the deck of conflicting national emotions, politicians who are responsible for the future of Europe can now build the superstructure of common emotions? In France the importance given to the ultimate goal of a common defence sometimes seems to reflect the French national experience of a country that consolidated its identity when the volunteers of a revolutionary army shouted 'Vive la Nation' at Valmy. In that sense, German and French troops parading together on the Champs-Élysées could be seen as a nascent European army that would spur the imaginations of the European people. Likewise, it is interesting to note that in Germany as well as in France, the supporters of EMU now use political rather than economic arguments. The introduction of a common currency is expected to restart the dynamics of Europe, and move the European Union into a new phase of political integration. The strong symbolism of a single currency - an expression

of sovereignty for many centuries and a fixture of our daily lives - is supposed to provide the bridge between the Europe of technocrats and the Europe of citizens. Moreover, identification through economic criteria of the group of countries that will participate in the EMU conveniently recreates a core group, and may establish a polity that will not need to define its borders because, instead of inheriting them from history, it will have inherited them from economics. What a relief for Europeans not to have to make a decision on the limits of their polity!

However, the growing reluctance of the people of Europe to follow the path that is prepared for them raises questions about the method that has been chosen. The manipulation of Europeans contradicts the ideal on which European integration is based. Once again, it seems that European integration is expected to result from the decisions of an enlightened elite that knows better, and will create a 'fait accompli' that will change people's perceptions. This very undemocratic approach for achieving European democracy, while apparently bringing us closer to the emergence of a European foreign policy, may actually make it more difficult to achieve this goal. It assumes a pre-existing 'European interest,' and reduces the issue of democracy to an issue of accountability and democratic control.

### **Democracy and foreign policy**

However, democracy is not necessary just to control the policy-making process. It is part and parcel of the substance of foreign policy. In the absence of a clearly defined European polity and of self-evident 'European interests' which could be deciphered by an enlightened elite, the policy-making process which would create a European foreign policy becomes an essential component of a European foreign policy, and an integral part of its substance. The process actually creates the polity and the 'interests.' It is only through the tensions and conflicts of a public debate that we can expect to forge first a European polity, then European interests with which European people can identify, and eventually a European foreign policy. Without a Europe-wide public debate on how Europeans want to define their relations with the rest of the world, the support of the Europeans for 'European interests' will remain as weak as the European polity itself, and it will be practically impossible to develop a sustainable European foreign policy, that is to say a European foreign policy that enjoys the support of the European people.

If this analysis is correct, the institutional steps that are now being taken are quite insufficient. A European foreign policy will not be produced by

incremental additions to political cooperation, and CFSP as it now exists, stands no chance because it remains a bureaucratic process with little relevance for the majority of the people. That does not mean that the combination of a stronger policy-making unit (which would be capable of structuring the issues rather than just compromising between the various positions) and more majority voting would not be a major improvement. But it is not enough, and the present discussion on the balance to be found between intergovernmental and supranational procedures remains too technical, and cannot create the needed political momentum: it ignores how important the process is in building the democratic consensus without which no sustainable foreign policy can be developed.

At this stage of European integration, it is crucial to enlist the participation of the European people. But this participation is not a matter of propaganda and communication skills; it must be rooted in the democratic process. It has often been argued, especially in Germany, that this goal can be achieved by enlarging the powers of the European Parliament. The point can indeed be made that the credibility of the European Union would be enhanced if its positions were produced not only by precarious diplomatic compromises, which can be undermined by playing on bilateral relations and 'national' interests, but also reflected the constraints of a democratic debate. For instance, in the case of Turkey, it is clear that the European Parliament indeed plays a role that lends some credibility to the requirements of the European Union vis à vis Turkey. However, those nostalgic for a more traditional and less public diplomacy will recall that the European Parliament has often fallen victim to powerful lobbies, or has taken rhetorical and sometimes irresponsible positions that have done little to improve the quality of a virtual European foreign policy.

A greater role for the European Parliament can provide only part of the answer. A parliament can help create a polity, but it is also a reflection of the dynamism and strength of a particular polity. The quality of parliamentary debate is a reflection of the quality and coherence of the civil society for which it is a political expression. Lobbies are not inherently bad if they take part in a vibrant and balanced debate. The problem with today's Europe is that the very uneven development of a European civil society does not create the conditions for a sound parliamentary debate: some issues are taken up by a powerful lobby, while other issues, which may ultimately be of greater importance, do not trigger any debate. And while the relevance of parliamentary debates will grow as the Parliament acquires more power, it may not be enough to consolidate a polity. It has to find the support, not only of professional politicians, but more importantly of a dynamic civil society. In a world characterised by the diffusion

of power, it is an illusion to expect a traditional political institution such as a parliament to provide the foundations for a European polity.

Institutions do not by themselves produce a polity. But some initiatives are the responsibility of governments and European institutions. For instance, at a time of high unemployment and growing doubts about the usefulness of compulsory military service, the creation of a European 'peace corps' could help cement new grassroots solidarity and a sense of commitment to Europe. But more will depend on the initiatives of the civil society itself: the development, on a Europe-wide basis, of non-governmental organisations may achieve more in transforming public spirit and eventually contributing to the creation of a European foreign policy than countless diplomatic meetings.

These steps, combined with real institutional reform, should help build the foundations for a European foreign policy. But the European polity, and subsequently the European foreign policy that may eventually emerge, will be quite different from our historical experience. The difficulty to define the western as well as the eastern borders of Europe, the fact that the search for power has historically created division within Europe rather than fostering unity will change the nature of 'European power.' If it means that the Europeans can regain control over decisions that affect their lives, it will be seen as a legitimate democratic goal, and it will find support. But if European power is perceived to be a goal in itself, it will be rejected by the majority of Europeans, who do not want to replace their old nationalism with a new 'euro-nationalism' that they consider to be as dangerous as older nation-based nationalisms. A European foreign policy will indeed reflect the emergence of a European power. But that power will be sustainable only if it attempts to redefine the role of power in international relations, and aim at European interdependence rather than European independence. At the time of the Renaissance, Italian cities invented the modern model of national interest and international relations which still inspires contemporary diplomacy. Europe will keep up with its best traditions if it can now invent the new paradigm that will fit our transnational world.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994): 21.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 711-712.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Holbrooke, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April (1995).

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