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RETHINKING EUROPE'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Europeans discovered the suction effect of an unstable periphery during the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s but were convinced that such effect could be confined to the relatively manageable Balkans region. Little did they anticipate that state failure, social strife, economic collapse, new forms of terrorism and asymmetrical warfare would stretch in a long arc from Belarus and Ukraine through the Caucasus to the Middle East and from there to the African shores of the Mediterranean, Morocco and across the Sahara desert.

This has greater implications for Europeans than for Americans. Europe will thus have to work to ensure that Western policy is not shaped by the USA alone. In an ideal world, it would be best if Europeans took overall charge of their own backyard but that is scarcely a possibility in relation to the Middle East. US interests can however be volatile and change rapidly and Europeans should be in a position to take over from the American role in proposing solutions and developing the capacity to implement them. There is however little evidence of this happening today.

Europe has a vital interest in the stability of North Africa but it has not played its cards adroitly in recent years. It has done little to back the UN led mission which is trying to find a solution to the conflict over the Western Sahara. It has failed to help contain the fall out from the policy of toppling Muammar Gaddafi, which one of its leading members, France, promoted. This includes the near break up of Mali and the jihadi attack against the Algerian gas field of In Amenas in January 2013, the spread of terrorism in Tunisia and of weapons from the Libyan armouries, the broader loss of control by states in the region over their frontiers. Senior officials in NATO which backed the coalition against the erstwhile Libyan dictator accept that the policy was fatally flawed. Libya is falling into chaos. Thousand of African immigrants are drowning in the Mediterranean. Tunisia awaits really serious European economic support. Slowly but surely, Europe is engaging in a strategic dialogue with Algeria, a key player in the region.

Europe today faces an imperial challenge which includes exercising influence in its periphery in ways which have a greater affinity with the requirements of empire

than with those of an interstate system. In the words of an exceptionally prescient observer of international affairs, Herfried Münkler, in his book *Empires* (2007), "Europe's future will not be able to do without borrowing from the imperial mode". Europe's "imperial challenge" is made up of two distinct, and dissimilar, parts. "On the one hand, Europeans must keep up a two way relationship with the more powerful United States; they must take care that they do not simply provide resources for its operations and step in afterwards to handle the consequences, without having any say in the fundamental political-military decisions. Their task in this respect is to resist political marginalization." Europe's minor role on the Palestinian issue but its key role in bankrolling the Palestinian Authority illustrates this point.

On the other hand, Europe must concern itself with its unstable periphery in the East, the Southeast and South to prevent collapse and war there without being drawn into a spiral of expansion that would overtax the EU as it is presently constituted. "Hence the paradoxical danger is that it could suffer imperial overstretch without actually being an Empire." But is that not a good description of what is happening in Libya? Until recently, Europeans failed to see this two-fold challenge for what it was. There are two reasons for this failure which is costing Europe dear. The first was the literature of reassurance which had been the politically correct way of discussing Europe until the crisis of 2008 struck. Its authors emphasized Europe's economic strength and "noted a tendency to equilibrium between Europe and the United States". But, in so doing they overlooked or downplayed two points: the erosion or collapse of US would pose greater problems for Europe than it would solve; and the prospect of economic equilibrium with Europe could induce the United States to turn even more to the range of military solution. The same authors fatefully underestimated the globally stabilising functions of the US empire and overestimated the significance of economic factors for short term power relations..

The second reason for Europe's failure is explained by what is described as "the literature of identity" which looked at the progress of European integration within a purely internal perspective. Abstracting from the EU's significance in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, it focuses on the constitutional-political order and European cultural identity. During the Cold War, Europeans "could afford the luxury of a search for a common identity, but the acceleration tendencies since the early 1990s have removed that possibility." The Europeans confront many challenges on their limes today. Few of their leaders had any inkling of what was coming in Ukraine, Tunisia or Libya. They failed to draw the lessons of the Balkans wars and the Georgia crisis of 2008. They were warned of the Arab Spring if only by the [Arab Human Development Report](#) in 2002. The first Arab revolt occurred in Algeria in 1988-1992 **is all but forgotten** today. European leaders behave as if history starts the day they reach office.

Europeans suffered from the same delusion as those across the Atlantic who thought that the collapse of the Soviet Union spelt the end of history. As a result is this brake up, the remaining superpower lost interest in the Third World, at least for a time. But it quickly became clear that many of the new states created in the Middle East and Africa notably were "no more than facades which would collapse at the first upheaval." It is surprising that so few Europeans understood that the replacement of an imperial order with a pluri-verse of states had turned out to be beset with risks and difficulties. Yet none of the problems regarding the stabilization of post-imperial areas changed the view that the age of empires had come to an end.

Political correctness and blindness to the lessons of history – not least to the need to fund a serious defence policy, overblown rhetoric about Europe's foreign policy ambitions and too much reliance on soft power all point to the need for a fundamental conceptual reappraisal of how realistic foreign policy aims can be conceptualised. One is the aim of terrorists today.

It is not so much the strength of the attackers as the dramatic vulnerability of those they attack which ensures the effectiveness of the strategy.

The United Kingdom must also make up its mind whether it wants to be a junior partner of the US or a leading power in Europe. The European integration process will have to be organised in response to this British decision. Conversely, there will be no European capacity for joint external action without a stronger hierarchy among European states.

And finally, if the logic of European foreign policy is geared to its own economic prosperity, it may be rational to intervene militarily to safeguard and control the supply of oil, gas uranium or other minerals, but not to end civil wars or "build" nations outside the central zone of the empire.

Europeans are not short of financial means, even in these straightened times. Nor are they short of intellectual fire power. The real challenge they face can be summed up in one question: are they capable of thinking out of the box? In other words do they really want to play a role on the world stage or are they happy to become a larger Switzerland. Contrary to those who suffer from post-imperial fatigue and supporters of extreme right wing parties, such an option would not make Europe safer. It would be a delusion.