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Wider Neighbourhood as the EU's "Zone of Responsibility"

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While academia and think tanks are busy discussing the aims and possible outlines of a "global EU strategy", it is suggested here to focus on what is often called the EU's "own geography", where the EU is expected to – or determined to – take on "responsibilities". While talk about areas or zones of responsibility might sound overly paternalistic and presumptuous, it is important to think about the role and tasks of the EU outside its borders, namely in its wider neighbourhood. The EU, still an economic and trade giant and a regional player with global interests, should have a clearer picture of its foreign policy interests and priorities. Documents such as the European Security Strategy (ESS) and the report of the European Parliament on the CFSP, the so-called Brok report, draw a map of concentric circles of responsibility around the EU that starts with the Western Balkans and continues up to the Americas and Asia. In the end, almost every country or region is covered, which does not help in setting priorities and explaining responsibility. Identifying a European zone of responsibility thus touches upon the capability of the EU to actually respond to and shape the international environment.

Different understandings exist of what responsibility means for the EU. On the one hand, the EU – according to European Council President Herman Van Rompuy – claims a global responsibility to "shape the world of tomorrow". It also declares the ambition to "organize itself in such a way as to be an effective global player, able to share responsibility for global security and take the lead in defining common responses to common challenges" (Brok report). So the EU finds itself responsible for global security and multilateral order through engagement in the UN and other multilateral forums and international organisations.

Turning to the wider neighbourhood, the EU claims to carry "greater" responsibilities than at any time in its history (RI-ESS). It considers itself an anchor of stability, as enlargement has consolidated democracy and prosperity across the continent. Namely, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is understood as a strong framework for relations with southern and eastern partners. The key reasoning in the political rhetoric of EU actors is about stability, extending the

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zone of peace and prosperity, and engaging in (selective) crisis management. EU actors speak more often of "commitment", "engagement" or an "active role" in their political declarations than of "responsibility". It goes without saying that below the level of military intervention, the EU claims or shows responsibility by exerting active diplomacy or referring, for example, to restrictive measures and other instruments of coercion in crisis management. Given the fuzziness of the term "responsibility", theoretical approaches to international relations can help us catch its different dimensions, namely, interests, identity and agency.

Interests

Within a realist paradigm, a state or other collective actor is primarily responsible for the security of its citizens and territory and defines its interests with regard to the power relationship in its international environment or vis-à-vis specific third parties. To safeguard and pursue its interests, the actor can join a security organisation that would define its purpose and probably also zones and limits of its responsibility. A member state might even subscribe to a set of rights and obligations. At times, membership also demands taking decisions and actions. However, EU member states – 21 of which are also NATO members – are often divided on the question of out-of-area interventions, as was the case in Libya (10 participated in the Unified Protector mission). Even if interests and goals are shared, disputes arise on the appropriate actions and instruments.

Interests are at stake in crisis situations and need to be considered strategically. Within a realist discourse, it is not only legitimate but sometimes recommended to name zones of interest and red lines in a geo-strategic manner, because in this reading, grey zones of responsibility are fertile ground for conflicts over influence and power. For instance, with regard to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, we can debate which potential ex ante or ex post effect an explicit statement of a Thessaloniki type ("future of Georgia, Ukraine etc. lies with the EU") would have had on the course of events. However, the EU does not play according to zero-sum games in its neighbourhood policy (as is preferred and established by Russia) but declares a norms-led policy that is based on conditionality and aims to promote deep democracy and human rights, for instance.

As a matter of principle, the EU shies away from defining the boundaries of its enlargement in a realist manner. Unlike NATO, the EU does not speak of expansion as a proactive approach (on invitation) to extend its membership. On the contrary, EU enlargement has been a reactive policy by default rather than by design. While article 49 TEU allows all European countries to apply for EU membership, it neither means that the applicant has a right to join nor that the EU has a responsibility or obligation to take in specific members. However, "article 49-countries" can expect the EU to pay special attention to them within a privileged relationship, yet its substance varies greatly. Take, for instance, the EU's renewed consensus on enlargement (2006), in which the EU consolidates, i.e. restricts, its political commitment to potential candidates from the Western Balkans, plus Turkey and EFTA countries, thus remaining silent about Eastern European countries as well as Russia. In this respect the EU only vaguely speaks of a "ring of friends" (Romano Prodi) or "well governed countries" (ESS) in its neighbourhood, which amounts to a weaker commitment, i.e. responsibility. The EU is also less inclined to talk about "zones" and "spheres" or to frame matters of responsibility in clearly geographic terms. Instead the EU prefers to construct areas and spaces around policies like the four common spaces with Russia, the Schengen or the European Economic Area. These observations indicate that the EU is uneasy with some of the realist assumptions, and that dimensions other than interest and power are relevant in shaping the EU's approach to responsibility.

Identity

Within a liberal or constructivist paradigm, sources that define responsibility are mostly norms that are agreed upon in legally binding documents and accords or in political declarations. Beliefs, norms and historical experience that over time make up the political identity and the foreign policy role model (e.g. regional power; normative power; civilian power) are relevant for constructing responsibility vis-à-vis other regions or countries, or more generally individuals or communities (e.g. minorities). In a constructivist discourse, the logic of appropriateness of behaviour, in line with its regulative (cf. article 2 TEU) and constitutive norms, is an important factor to explain why and for which issues EU actors take on responsibility. It also includes showing responsiveness to expectations of others. Political rhetoric speaks of moral or normative obligation. This kind of rhetoric action and also strategic use of moral arguments played a big role in the decision-making on Eastern enlargement in 2004. Typically, the identity-based understanding of responsibility tends to enlarge the objective/zone of responsibility beyond its own citizens and thus also claims responsibility for citizens in third countries. The norm of responsibility to protect (R2P) and the vivid debate on it among EU actors is a case in point. In other words, depending on the school of thought, different arguments can be applied to justify (non-)action, to clarify commitments, to set out priorities and to assume responsibility.

Agency

However, irrespective of different understandings of responsibility, it generally includes the idea to respond to a certain situation or other circumstances. In short this can mean a responsibility to prevent, to intervene, to protect, to re-build or at the very least to take a position. Agency, defined as the performance of action that is directed at achieving specific goals, can be considered a litmus test for responsibility. It is often third parties that hold, for example, the EU responsible for solving problems or conflicts. All ingredients of actorness – i.e. willingness and capacity to act (instruments, resources, competence) but also the responsiveness of (local) actors towards EU actions and goals – are part of the agency concept. Responsibility, then, does not necessarily mean to exert leadership. More often actors like the EU are confronted with situations that ask for some kind of "co-responsibility" and hence co-operation and partnerships. For the EU, this seems to be both the preferred and the most frequent approach. This means, however, that the EU is very much dependent on (other) leaders and effective partnerships, e.g. with the US or NATO. It restricts its own capacity to assume responsibility.

Whenever a power constellation changes, as is the case with the Asia-Pacific pivot of the Barack Obama administration, the EU's "cooperative responsibility scheme" is affected. In a realist view the changing balance of power, including the idea of a power vacuum, needs to be addressed. This could, for example, mean more responsibility for the EU in North Africa or Eastern Europe and result in the need to try to fill the gaps that may arise from waning US commitments. In light of the constructivist argument of "identity", the EU is expected to act and take responsibility where and whenever it can make a difference towards a "secure Europe in a better world" (ESS). In light of the agency concept, the EU is stuck between the two, as it is prone to live up to the expectations of other actors and their will to respond to EU actions.

EU's Zones of Responsibility – A Matter of Debate and Degree

Having illustrated that responsibility means different things to different actors in different situations, we come back to the question: What is the European zone of responsibility?

Looking at the comprehensive list of (regional) priorities set out by the EU itself, the overarching interest seems to be security, followed by energy concerns (Russia, Eastern Partnership countries, Central Asia, Gulf countries), and then economic (Turkey, Gulf countries, Asia) and political reasoning (Western Balkans, Turkey, Russia, Eastern neighbourhood, Israel). In terms of identity, the closest ties can be discerned with the Western Balkans and Israel, whereas they are less pronounced with Turkey, Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood. Agency – notably in light of leverage and influence – is most visible in the Western Balkans, also in Turkey, whereas it can be questioned in Russia and Israel and considered weak in the other regions.

While such a classification is debatable and has little explanatory power on its own, it indicates the need to think about gaps, inconsistencies and tensions between the three dimensions.

Interests cutting across the countries or regions, such as questions of energy security and transport routes, would lead to different geographic patterns and probably zones of responsibility (e.g. Black Sea region, southern energy corridor etc. Also, CFSP/CSDP operations in the wider neighbourhood, as in the cases of the Horn of Africa or South Sudan might constitute path dependency for future engagement.

For all countries and regions identified, the EU has developed strategies or broader political and legal frameworks for cooperation, like enlargement policy, the ENP and the Central Asia strategy. That alone indicates the EU's interest and ex-ante responsibility, which mainly lie in building a political and economic order in the neighbourhood through traditional means of political association, free trade, economic integration and assistance. But it tells us little as far as agency and identity are concerned. Identifying gaps between interest/identity and agency would thus be something that should be taken into consideration as a policy recommendation for CFSP development and priority setting.

What complicates things is that the EU is still a fragmented actor. With regard to the dimensions of interests and identity, the views held by specific member states and their power to build advocacy coalitions are drivers of assuming or denying responsibility. Mali is a recent example that tells us something about the internal EU mechanisms for translating the key interests of one member state into a shared interest of the EU with active participation of some member states. However, in cases when the collective identity of the EU is challenged and key material interests are at stake, the EU is highly likely to consider it irresponsible not to act.

Outlook

These considerations have shown that the EU cannot, and should not, pin down a clear-cut geographical zone of responsibility. In line with its foreign policy identity, the EU goes for universal values and has global interests – indicated also by declaring "strategic partnerships" – that do not correspond with specific geographic zones. This is also true for the "wider neighbourhood" where the EU's stance on all three dimensions – interest, identity and agency – varies greatly from country to country and across issues like energy, human rights and security. Conflicting goals and slow responses to imminent challenges are likely to undermine the EU's foreign policy in the wider neighbourhood also in the future. However, being dependent on and favouring comprehensive and cooperative approaches – together with other actors – as well as multilateralism, the EU should set out its foreign policy priorities and capabilities in a transparent way. Thus, the EU could address these issues in a conceptual way in the discourse on a new ESS or global EU strategy, and in a practical way when reforming the European External Action Service so that resources and administrative structures better reflect the foreign policy priorities and responsibilities.

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