



Major Powers in Shared Neighbourhoods – Lessons for the EU

Conference report, 22 September 2016

On 22 September 2016, the College of Europe's Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies in cooperation with the UN University-Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies organized an international conference on "Between Cooperation and Competition: Major Powers in Shared Neighbourhoods – Lessons for the EU". The well-attended conference provided the opportunity for some interesting exchanges about four types of 'shared neighbourhood' constellations involving the EU and Russia, the EU and the Middle Eastern powers, China and India, and Brazil and the United States.

Luk VAN LANGENHOVE and **Sieglinde GSTÖHL** welcomed the participants and opened the conference by explaining the key concepts and questions to be addressed by the conference.

The first panel tackled the often tense relationship between the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood, and the implications for the stability of the region. **Laure DELCOUR** started by highlighting the fact that the launching of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) reflected an 'unprecedented attempt' of the EU to influence and shape the post-Soviet space. However, the EU is not alone in trying to shape its 'Eastern neighbourhood'. Russia has always been the other major player in this region. Incompatible policies and divergent interests between the EU and Russia have turned their shared neighbourhood into a contested one. She went on to expound why this had happened. The first explanation of this phenomenon revolves around the international identity of both the EU and Russia. Since their identities are so different, the interaction between these actors is 'unlikely to change'. However, this explanation overlooks the role played by the domestic elites of the ENP countries. The second reason has to do with the objectives of Russia and the EU. Although they see the stabilization and security of the region as their key objective, the way they understand stability differs greatly: for the EU, stability means socio-economic change, for Russia, it means preservation of the *status quo*. The EU and Russia also diverge in the instruments they use to exercise influence in the region. The EU tends to opt for 'sector-specific cooperation', while Russia tries to 'influence the broader integration choices' instead. Lastly, the poor interaction between the EU and Russia that is due to the former's inability to take into account the interdependences between Russia and the ENP countries and the latter's aversion to implicate other external actors in its relations with the EU, has contributed to further turning the shared neighbourhood into a 'contested' one. In conclusion, Laure Delcour stated that although the recent ENP review shows a step in the right direction, the EU still needs to 'decentre its own experience and adjust to regional realities'.

Vsevolod SAMOKHALOV reminded the audience that history matters. In the eyes of Russian officials, Europe does not understand how important this history is, and it does not understand the history of Russia's 'Near Abroad'. If it did, it would know that over 70 per cent of the key events of Russian historiography have taken place in the Black Sea region, and in Crimea in particular. As the speaker put it, "no other region ... has been given as much importance, as well as a sacred



identity, as the Black Sea". Moreover, this region is seen as the 'European' component of the Russian identity. Bearing in mind this importance attached to the Black Sea, the way events unfolded in Ukraine after the Maidan protests of 2013 and the way Moscow dealt with them should come as no surprise. Vsevolod Samokhalov emphasized that the 'revolution' in Ukraine was not about the EU, but about Europe. In his opinion, the fact that the EU had agreed to negotiate with Yanukovich was seen in Russia as a proof that Europe 'did not care about democracy', as a testimony to Europe's malice. This in turn fuelled Russian conspiracy theories. He concluded his intervention by underlining that Europe's normative superiority has reached an end. Russia does not believe that the EU is 'better'. For that reason, he suggested that the EU take this perception into account and recommended that informal practices and dialogue should be further explored in the two parties' bilateral relations.

Timofei BORDACHEV opened the discussion by pointing out how both the EU and Russia wanted their shared neighbourhood to be prosperous and secure, although, as the situation in Ukraine has shown, the EU and Russia offer different tools to achieve those goals. To mitigate the impact of these differences and to appease the tensions, he proposed focusing on cooperation and integration. The discussion drew to an end with a short commentary on Sino-Russian relations, relations that are fundamentally different to those the EU offered to its neighbours, namely based on mere investments.

The second panel focused on the relationships and the balance of power in the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), between the EU, Turkey and the Gulf states. **Tobias SCHUMACHER** indicated how the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are increasing their presence in the region and influencing the domestic policies in several sub-regions. The EU is equally expanding its presence in the MENA region, especially after 2011. So far, the lack of dialogue between the Gulf countries and the EU has, however, resulted in a mutual ignorance, essentially due to different perspectives and approaches: the GCC countries are guided by realist zero-sum considerations and short- to mid-term considerations, prioritizing their own regime survival. On the contrary, the EU, at least in its declaratory policy, has transcended geopolitical concerns, pursuing a normative agenda with a liberalist approach. According to Tobias Schumacher, it is therefore not very likely that both parties have the capabilities and willingness to cooperate in the shared Mediterranean neighbourhood.

Louise FAWCETT focused on understanding the current balance of power and the leverage of the EU in the MENA region. First, for the EU to engage with emerging regional powers is crucial, but who should it engage with? Not all regions have obvious regional hegemony. In the MENA region there is no clear dominant power. Second, how should the neighbourhood be defined? Which criteria of continuity should be applied to define who is in and who is not? The region is characterized by a strong security interdependence, but a fragmented collective identity. The EU tried to enhance the regional collective identity but with modest results. Third, what is the projection of power of the EU? The idea of a single European policy is misleading: the EU's presence in the region is fragmented. Cooperating on the regional level is difficult due to the amount of relevant regional actors and the lack of a clear regional leadership on one side, and the fragmentation of the EU's policies due to the diversity the member states' national interests on the other. Against this backdrop, the EU has to rethink its regional relations in a much more pragmatic and realistic way.



Discussing the two speakers' presentation, **Özlem TERZI** argued that an ideological game within Islam was taking place in the MENA region. If the EU wants to take part in this game it has to do so through ideological lenses, not by letting itself be drawn into interest and power games. However, as long as the values that the EU tries to promote are perceived as European rather than universal, they will not be acceptable or appealing to the Arab world.

The third panel focused on the relationship between China and India in their shared neighbourhood(s). **Carla FREEMAN** discussed how the dominant context in Sino-Indian relations had been clouded by bitterness and mutual suspicions, both legacies of the Sino-Indian Border Conflict of 1962. While China has resolved most of its 14 territorial disputes, the one with India appears to be intractable, even after 19 rounds of negotiation. However, the purpose of her presentation was to look beyond the dispute for signs of cooperation in the region, which clearly exist, but are hostage to a security dilemma and great power competition between China and the US.

Rahul ROY-CHAUDHURY gave an overview of the respective positions of the two neighbours in two of arenas of their shared neighbourhoods, namely in the framework of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), where China enjoys observer status, and in the Indian Ocean. In the former, he argued India is clearly the hegemon, although a potential challenger is Pakistan, who enjoys good relations with China. In the latter, India has an even stronger position, largely for geographical reasons, because the Indian Ocean represents its immediate and extended neighbourhood. As a result, the 2015 Indian Ocean Policy demonstrates great ambitions, and highlights a reinforced relationship with the US and a new set of relationships with Japan and Vietnam, which includes naval exercises in the South China Sea. The potential lessons for the EU include the importance of dialogue in managing disputes, and an acknowledgement that problem resolutions should not always be the immediate objective, because a more pragmatic approach is sometimes necessary. In the case of the Sino-Indian relationship, it is much more important for China and India to learn to manage their disputes, rather than focus too sharply on resolving them.

Jing MEN opened the discussion by arguing that both papers dealt with the same challenges from different angles. While the first paper focused on institutional arrangements in the region aiming at finding solutions for the Chinese and Indian governments to improve their relationships, the effects of all these new institutions is yet to be seen. The presentation by Rahul Roy-Chaudhury addressed the Sino-Indian relationship through a more competitive dimension and adopted a more neo-realist point of view. Economic cooperation does not necessarily lead to progress, because the memory of the Border Conflict of 1962 is still very vivid in Indian minds. So while on the one hand one can observe the development of institutions based on common interests, on the other hand there is a tendency for competition, and India is trying to balance the rising power of China by reinforcing its relations with Japan and the US.

The fourth panel focused on Brazilian and US interactions in their shared neighbourhood. Through a historical perspective of Brazil-US relations, **Any FREITAS** offered an explanation of the different cycles of cooperation and competition that characterize the two powers' relationships. She highlighted that whilst cooperation between Brazil and the US tends to be fostered when mutual gains are identified, competitive dynamics emerge in times of mismatched perceptions and lead



to the resurgence of leadership ambitions. At the foreign policy level, these different cycles have been translated into pragmatic neighbourhood strategies aimed at avoiding conflict between the two powers. On the basis of her analysis, she concluded that such strategic approaches reflect that neither Brazil nor the US appear as being leaders in the region, especially in a context marked by the emergence of new powers.

Tom LONG took a more theoretical approach by introducing the concept of 'triangular asymmetry' to assess the relationships between the US, Brazil and their shared neighbourhood. These asymmetrical relationships vary depending on the degree of capabilities created by disparities and interests between actors. Whilst friendly relations are observed when each side of the triangle reflects positive relationships fostered by common interests and proximity (e.g. Brazil-US-Uruguay), relations between the three actors tend to be more complex when one or more sides of the triangle reflect a negative relationship with competing interests (e.g. Brazil-US-Venezuela). Such concepts help understanding Brazil's current strategy to engage with neighbours having distant relationships with the US in order to gain space and exert influence in its shared neighbourhood. In his conclusion, Tom Long highlighted that asymmetry is fundamental and must therefore be managed, even though asymmetrical relationships tend to be softer because of the emergence of new actors in the region.

In his discussion, **Alfredo VALLADAO** concluded that there is no real competition between the US and Brazil in their shared neighbourhood. With the US being rather a local power in Latin America and with Brazil appearing as an inward-looking power, regional cooperation between the two American giants must be understood as a 'win-win situation'. He further highlighted that the lack of willingness to foster regional integration reveals that Latin American countries should not be perceived as protagonists *per se* in the relationships between the US, Brazil and their shared neighbourhood. Efforts towards regional integration have proven that regional leadership ambitions on the continent tend to be sabotaged, which reflects countries' desire to avoid an hegemonic power to emerge in the region.

In his conclusions of the academic part of the conference, **Simon SCHUNZ** highlighted some of the key lessons the EU could draw from the study of shared neighbourhood constellations. Such constellations call, in the first place, for more complex strategies of engagement with both other 'major powers' and the neighbouring countries. The EU has to empower itself to manage multiple bilateral relations at the same time. This, in turn, requires more effective channels of communication with other powers, a greater effort at understanding other's concerns, interests and values, and, if a resolution of conflicts proves difficult, a better management of competing relations that takes the 'principled pragmatism' highlighted in the EU's new Global Strategy seriously.

In his keynote address, **Michael REITERER**, Principal Advisor at the Asia and Pacific Department, European External Action Service, discussed the EU's new Global Strategy "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy", published in June 2016. According to Michael Reiterer, the new strategy represents a concrete step towards a comprehensive management of the challenges the EU is currently facing. The strategy was published soon after the UK referendum on Brexit, upon explicit insistence of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy



Federica Mogherini, who deemed it very important to reaffirm Europe's commitment to uphold its values and interests. An innovative feature is the renouncing of the so-called 'good governance', understood as the promotion and extension of EU norms and rules beyond the borders of the Union. The strategy adopts a rather functional approach aimed at identifying what the EU does best, and in which part of the world. Michael Reiterer highlighted that the document insists on the concept of 'resilience-building', which is the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal or external crises. A new and important concept introduced by the new Global Strategy is 'strategic autonomy'. This implies independence from the US and other actors in the field of decision-making and the implementation of decisions. For this purpose, the document also defends the idea of establishing an autonomous EU military structure which could act independently from NATO. Moreover, two new forms of diplomacy are explicitly mentioned in the document: economic and cultural diplomacy. Michael Reiterer argued that the EU Global Strategy succeeded at outlining how the European Union intends to defend its interests and values, through a reasoned combination of idealism and realism. The choice to 'do less in order to do more' is reflected in the explicit preference for differentiation and tailor-made action.

