

The Neighbours of the EU's Neighbours: Diplomatic and Geopolitical Dimensions beyond the ENP

Conference Summary, College of Europe, Bruges, 15-16 November 2012

This international conference, organised by the Department of **EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies** together with its **TOTAL Chair of EU Foreign Policy**, gathered scholars and practitioners from the EU and beyond to reflect on the European Union's wider neighbourhood. This conference was organised with the financial support of the European Commission and TOTAL.

The concept of the 'neighbours of the EU's neighbours' was introduced by the European Commission in 2006 in a Communication on 'strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy' (ENP), in which it considered in particular the possibility to develop regional cooperation activities between partner countries (to be) included in the ENP framework on the one hand and Central Asia, the Arabian Gulf and Africa on the other.¹

Keynote speaker **David O'Sullivan**, Chief Operating Officer of the European External Action Service, first pointed out the difficulty to define the countries to be considered as 'neighbours of the EU's neighbours'. Regions such as the Middle East, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa as well as the Central Asian republics represent poles of strategic interest for the EU. Meanwhile, these regions face crucial challenges such as the uncertain spill-over of the 'Arab Spring', regional conflicts, state failures, food crises, terrorism, trafficking and organised crime. Mr O'Sullivan particularly emphasised the need to reconsider the 'one-size-fits-all' approach, upon which the European Union has, to a large extent, relied upon in the past within the framework of the ENP. He stressed the need to consider tailor-made approaches, differentiation, local ownership and partnership with civil society as core components of a reviewed ENP.



The conference participants then discussed the geopolitical dimensions beyond the ENP in panels dedicated to the different regions as well as a number of diplomatic aspects such as the role of other global players and the perspectives from the countries at hand.

With regard to the southern 'arc of instability', particular emphasis was put on the **Sahel region and the Horn of Africa**, where the lack of state authority stands in stark contrast to the wealth in natural resources. The potential impact of instability in this region on the EU's immediate neighbourhood, and vice versa, was insisted upon. Indeed, examples of these developments include the effects of Libya's implosion on Mali or

¹ COM(2006)726, p. 11.

of the piracy off the coast of Somalia on Europe, North Africa and the Gulf. The EU has, in fact, developed two regional strategies and several EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions in response to the problems in the Sahel and in the Horn of Africa.

In its interaction with the **Arab world**, the EU has so far maintained rather fragmented relations: in addition to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the ENP and the Union for the Mediterranean, as well as the multilateral Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries (including Sudan, Somalia and Mauritania), the EU has maintained a region-to-region relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and bilateral relations with Yemen and Iraq – as well as with Iran whose nuclear activities have put any further cooperation on hold. While the Gulf countries have acquired an increasingly important role in the Arab Mediterranean countries, EU-GCC relations have remained limited by deadlocked negotiations over a free trade agreement.



Looking towards the East, the EU's relation with the **Central Asian** countries are dominated by concerns for energy security and the future of Afghanistan. A regional strategy complements the EU's bilateral approach. However, in comparison to Russia, China or the United States, the European Union is still a rather marginal player and is not perceived as a geopolitical stakeholder in the region. Important infrastructure networks in the field of oil, gas, transport or water (could) connect Central Asia with the partner countries belonging to the Eastern Partnership and the EU.

Finally, from a **cross-regional perspective**, possible advantages of concepts brought about in the framework of the ENP discourse, such as a *more for more* – and possibly *less for less* – approach have also been discussed. At the same time, it has been made clear that lessons have to be learned from the EU's previous ENP experience. In particular, less importance should be attached to the 'process' and more to the 'substance' of co-operation, that is, to the content of relations the EU intends to build with the 'neighbours of the EU's neighbours', while at the same time respecting and coming to grips with the undeniable diversity which characterises these countries.

A major conclusion of the conference was that the European Union might want to consider drafting a **Strategy on the Neighbours of the EU's Neighbours**. This strategy could focus on building bridges across the different (sub-) regions by drawing on and further developing the interfaces between them, such as funding for common projects, linking trade agreements and creating synergies between the different co-operation frameworks and instruments. It would provide a comprehensive strategic framework that would help define a more coherent and efficient approach towards the neighbours of the EU's neighbours.