

By Ambassador Guido Lenzi

In the history of Europe, "golden ages" have been few and far between, but always momentous in their ripple effects: the peak of the Roman empire, the Renaissance comes to mind, to which the integration process of the last fifty years can confidently be added. Most of the time, human cohabitation in our very crowded "tiny peninsula of Asia" was a fragile thing. On a world-wide scale, present transitional times should in any case be viewed as a unique opportunity to impress the European experiment on the system of international relations.

Yet, the protracted string of negative referenda on institutional reform; the low turnout in recent elections for the European Parliament, and the patchy response to the financial crisis, have all cast fresh doubts about the scope and sustainability of the federative project. Irish doubts however did not dissuade Iceland from lining up with Turkey and Balkan states in seeking its economic and political shelter within it.

With a world transformed and in flux, it's been a very long time since Brussels has told the European citizenry what the achievements have been and the common intentions still are. No wonder the electorate does not respond readily, and recurrently rejects what it does not understand. Pampered for more than half a century by the protection of NATO and fattened by the generous solidarity of the European community, it is as if the Union was still reluctant to assert what it wants to do when it finally grows out of its protracted adolescence.

The European Security Strategy published in 2003 and recently revised, stated how it views world challenges (not much differently, then and now, from the US postured). But no sense of urgency in putting its act together has yet shaken public opinion and political parties that seem instead bent upon raising the respective drawbridges.

Waiting for the result of yet another referendum, the EU integration process has come to another standstill, in the stop-and-go progression that has characterized it since its inception. While many world issues are knocking at Europe's door, and may eventually tear it down.

The fact is that after experiencing two suicidal conflicts, Western Europe has given up the use of force as a legitimate instrument of international relations (as the caveats in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate). In spite of its "headline goals" and assorted "battle-groups" at the ready, the EU will not therefore boast war-fighting capabilities that it does not seek, relying instead of the attractiveness of its "smart" civilian power, the EU's trade-mark. Albeit slowly and controversially, its role as a crisis-prevention and crisis-management actor, through economic and social cooperation and integration, is emerging. The EU has conclusively moved from being an economic space to becoming a novel political, stabilizing factor. The enlargement process in itself should constitute the most impressive demonstration of the EU's rising common foreign and security policy, and provide its most convincing political credentials.

The European project has always been a political endeavor, but deep down, European integration has always been spurred by security concerns. It is an intermittent story with sudden leaps whenever international shocks struck: in 1956 with the Suez affair; in 1968 with events in Prague; in 1989 with the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. Things have not been as dramatic since then, but the groundswell is obvious for all to see. The road may continue to be long and winding, but the aim of an "ever closer union" will persist.

Confronting the crisis in Georgia last year, then steering the G20 London financial summit, and now in the negotiating prospects in the Middle East (while continuing to nurse the situation in the Western Balkans), the European Union has shown that there are situations in which its role has become indispensable. As a matter of fact, the meekness of the EU's reaction to the Georgian conflict last year must be attributed not to the limited effectiveness of the European security policy, as much as the uselessness of the Russian action. Difficult as it appears for the EU to emerge from the bipolar protectorate into a world that has suddenly so radically changed, the point is not that the EU still lacks a common foreign and security policy, but rather that it is not yet considered a useful interlocutor by other would-be international protagonists, such as Russia, China, the Arab world and Iran.

At the continental level, in the geopolitical void resulting from the disintegration of both the Warsaw Pact and the USSR, NATO's expansion and the EU enlargement ensured a stable transition from centralized, authoritarian regimes to Western democratic standards. The EU was of course slower because its socio-economic implications are more complex than the mainly security based ones prevailing in the Atlantic Alliance. Furthermore, the EU will basically remain a reactive, "consumer-driven" international player: its genetic code relies on the responsiveness to its policies, not only in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean but especially all along the belt of instability that still divides a continent that the 1990 Paris pan-European Charter wished "whole and free".

Sadly, the Russian leadership declares that the EU's "neighborhood initiative" (recently upgraded to an "Eastern partnership"), toward countries with no imminent prospects of institutional integration, constitutes an interference in Moscow's "privileged sphere of interests". Meanwhile, it continues to disregard the negotiations for a new "strategic partnership" with the EU. Consequently, the "new European security architecture" promoted in the past couple of years by Presidents Putin and Medvedev has remained an abstraction, which the conflict over South Ossetia and Abkhazia has obfuscated.

The Kremlin's overriding aim seems to recover its superpower status, which it apparently wants Washington to bestow. President Obama's summit meetings in Moscow were just the initial steps of a much more complex "resetting" of bilateral relations, which Moscow considers a precondition for any other international agenda. Which, for the moment, leaves Europe out.

Even after the hoped-for entry into force of the Lisbon Reform Treaty (with its longer-term President of the Council, the High Representative holding a prominent position in the Commission, and a Parliament with a sharper overseeing role), Brussels' intended greater role in the management of European and world affairs may continue to be impaired by external constraints rather than its own structural deficiencies.

In order to develop its foreign and security policy, Europe needs to achieve not only a more coherent strategic relationship with the US (within and without NATO), but also with Russia, establishing a more structured and productive triangular relationship. A task that presupposes, first and foremost, the convergence of the EU expanded, more heterogeneous, membership, in order to persuade Russia to shed its traditional "wait-and-see approach" that continues to weigh down on international relations, world-wide. Moscow has yet to appreciate that, in its own strategic interest, it can find in Brussels the non intrusive, non aggressive, intrinsically cooperative partner it needs in order to diversify its options and bolster its international credibility and influence.

In the meantime, the European project will continue to feed on its own momentum, relying on the acquiescence, if not always the committed contribution, of its extensive membership. The reinforced cooperation mechanism foreseen by the Lisbon Reform Treaty should provide it with the reactive capability, that world circumstances require. They have demonstrated time and again that power can no longer consist solely of military might, but instead on the ability to enlist the contribution of other like-minded partners in the restoration of a workable multilateral system.

Its proclaimed ESDP (European Security and Defence Policy) ambitions have often made it appear like a mouse that roars. Still, its political relevance is undeniable: why else would the Russian foreign minister object to its "eastern partnership" initiative? Why would Turkey want to join? Waiting for Lisbon ratification, what is patently lacking to the EU is not so much an adequate institutional structure or the operational capabilities: it's the narrative, i.e. a more consistent policy of informing and enlisting public opinion, nationally and internationally. A way must also be found on the international scene to systematically interject the preventive, normative power that the Union is best at.

A multiple-speed Europe is precisely what present international circumstances suggest. It has already adopted diversified modules, such as the Euro and the Schengen regime. In terms of foreign policy, which can hardly be pre-determined or responses pre-established, the coming together of the "willing and able" according to circumstances as they arise, will not suffice. An adaptable European structure, with a hard core surrounded by flexible configurations, such as the "permanent structured cooperation" formula foreseen in the Lisbon treaty, could prove more credible and effective.

The world may have become flat, but it will not take care of itself. It still needs prodding and guidance, by example rather than through impositions, a task that rests primarily with the countries apparently seeking to replace the authority of the Security Council with the looser oversight of some restricted G20-type group. Russia, China and other emerging countries must in any case recognise that inclusion implies responsibility-taking, with no exclusive spheres of influence and with a common approach to trade, climate and energy global issues.

Europe, as the only multilateralist international actor, is best suited to show the way. Not a mere space any more, nor an impressive power yet, the EU must be accepted as a more useful player, in the many cracks left behind by an obviously outdated "great-power system".

A single EU voice in international organizations that deal with global challenges would of course help. For it to happen, the institutional consolidation established by the Lisbon mini-Treaty must come into effect. Even if appropriate institutional instruments, will of course not be enough to provide the self-confidence and political conviction needed to support a more articulate and consistent foreign policy.

Both nationally and internationally, the political narrative of the EU must be stepped up. Now that Europe, for all intents and purposes, has been made, its inhabitants must be "Europeanised", out of their self-satisfied, indifferent, essentially passive attitude on matters of foreign policy and security affecting their future, if only in order to protect their social and economic achievements.

Guido Lenzi is the former head of the NATO Desk at the Foreign Ministry, Minister at the Italian Mission to the UN, Director of the WEU (now EU) Institute of Security Studies in Paris and finally as Permanent Representative to the OSCE in Vienna. He has also served as Diplomatic Advisor to Italian Ministers of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Interior. Guido Lenzi has extensively published articles on foreign policy issues and researched on East-West relations, multilateralism, national and international institution-building, and European integration issues.