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Buona lettura!

Death of the WEU – How Brussels shot itself in the foot

"Be careful what you wish for," warns the WEU's former Secretary General ***José Cutileiro****. He charts the many problems created by the WEU's demise and by the creation of the EU's External Action Service*

Wittgenstein warned against generalisations, saying they harmed clear thought. Similarly, European Union leaders should watch their cravings for institutionalisation because it muddles their political thinking.

The maelstrom raised in 2008 by the sub-prime mortgages scandal, by Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy and the ensuing economic crisis and sovereign debt crises has distracted political leaders from institutional matters. But the economy will improve, with the spectre of armageddon again receding into a fuzzy future. With their recovered peace of mind, voices will be heard wanting further formal steps along the road to an ever-closer Union, whatever peoples' feelings on the ground. And clearly some form of tighter fiscal co-ordination seems indispensable if the EU is to survive as one of the world's powers.

This craving for EU institutionalisation led to the constitutional treaty that triggered the 'No' votes in French and Dutch referenda in 2005. European governments then limped back to the drawing board and the Lisbon treaty tried to put Humpty Dumpty together again by getting rid of various symbolic irrelevances and enabling it to be ratified (without referenda except in Ireland) in 2009. Welcome progress was achieved in some areas, but on foreign policy, defence and security the changes introduced by the constitutional treaty and perpetuated in the Lisbon treaty have done more harm than good.

First, on defence and security it is often said that the main reason Europeans don't live up to their NATO burden-sharing obligations and cannot guarantee their own defence without the help of the United States is that – with the exception of the United Kingdom, France and, for special reasons, Greece – their military budgets are far too small. Whenever European governments have tried to tackle their defence shortcomings they have encountered stiff parliamentary and popular opposition.

But that's only part of the story. Defence budgets are not only too small because we Europeans count on the Americans, but also because nowadays there is no inclination anywhere in Europe to admit that sometime, somewhere some foreign power might try to use force against us. This doesn't appear to stem from some articulate form of post-modern pacifism, but rather from a lazy absent-mindedness that of course suits our budget constraints.

Some things were done to improve Europe's defences without raising costs. As awareness grew in the early 1990s that European and American security concerns would be more loosely shared than during the cold war, the Western European Union was revived, with its headquarters shifted from London to Brussels, its membership enlarged to associates who were in NATO but not the EU; and with observers who were EU members but not in NATO. It also brought in associate partners in the shape of countries aspiring to join the EU and its terms of reference were widened to cover the so-called Petersberg Tasks of peacekeeping, peace enforcement, crisis management and the like. Detailed agreements with NATO allowed the WEU to have access to NATO assets and capabilities, so European defence remained a NATO matter, with European security (namely, interventions in other peoples' quarrels to safeguard European interests) falling largely within the scope of the WEU. With occasional blips, the latter's arrangements with NATO worked in practice and allowed WEU associate members and observers to co-operate. In short, military relations between the EU and NATO ran smoothly.

In 1998 at Saint Malo, to please the French and to show that he remained a committed European, the then UK prime minister Tony Blair lifted his country's longstanding objections to the EU dealing with any military matters. And it was at that juncture that the craving for institutionalisation raised its ugly head.

Eager minds proceeded to transfer the WEU's crisis management capabilities, including its arrangements with NATO, to the European Union. When in 1999, the EU's new High Representative for foreign and security policy Javier Solana also became secretary general of the WEU, most of the latter organisation's substance was allocated to the EU (except, until recently, its Parliamentary Assembly in Paris). In Brussels, the WEU's military staff became EU military staff and moved a kilometre or so eastwards from the Sablon district in the historic heart of the city to Rond Point Schuman next to the Berlaymont. Soon, however, a wholly foreseeable yet unforeseen problem arose. Without its WEU associate membership, Turkey lost institutional access to the EU, and in retaliation blocked Cyprus' institutional access to NATO.

Two distinguished British defence analysts, Alyson Bailes and Graham Messervy-Whiting, have commented in a recent Egmont Paper, “Death of an Institution – The end for Western European Union, a future for European defence?”, that the WEU’s membership architecture was exceptionally complex “because the WEU reflected the reality of a Europe of variable geometry, and handled it in the most inclusive possible style. It recognised the ‘Western’ identity and the potential contribution to security, of all nations who belonged either to NATO or the EU as well as those within both and those firmly in line for entry to the latter. It made the bridge between Europe’s two stronger institutions in this participatory sense, as well as with its two-way institutional partnerships. Together with the careful balancing and unpublicised nuances of the different WEU statuses, these features ensured that friction between Turkey and Greece within the organisation could be relatively easily contained and rarely led to serious stoppages of business.” They go on to say that with the end of WEU Assembly the contrast of NATO’s and the EU’s relative rigidity stands out all the more sharply. “It is inevitable,” they say, “that each of these institutions should reserve formal decision-making for its full members only: a situation that makes the challenge of a Turkish veto and a Cypriot veto respectively almost insuperable, failing a change of the states’ own attitudes”. Bailes and Messervy-Whiting also don’t find it “immediately clear why the EU, so profligate in its proclaimed ‘partnerships’ worldwide, could never consider a special military relationship with non-EU European allies”. In the case of Turkey, the strategic loss is particularly serious given the increasingly important role played by such a militarily strong and economically sound country. It dealt another short-sighted blow to Turkey’s EU ambitions.

There is nothing wrong in principle in the EU’s decision to take care of security and defence matters. But more than a decade has passed without any real progress, and consequently meaningful EU-NATO operational co-operation being achieved. The WEU had functioned as a kind of electrical transformer acceptable to all parties, so both politically and operationally the new institutional arrangement leaves a lot to be desired.

In foreign policy, institutional progress – or as some prefer, coherence – came at a cost. The creation of a large and complex European external action service that is separate from the Council and the Commission and staffed by both of them as well as by officials drawn from member states is not proving easy. It is led by Baroness Ashton as a quasi-European foreign minister who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council and is also a Vice-President of the European Commission, and when compared to the formerly small and supple structure put in place and headed by Javier Solana, the EEAS has not been a good deal.

Back in 2003, Solana – who operated practically alone and intervened only when there was agreement among the big member states – presented an 'EU strategic concept' which, despite reading more like a fire brigade's mission statement than a practical reflection on the strategic obligations of a world power, was well received by member states. Beautifully drafted in English, it seemed to give a sense of purpose to the EU's security efforts, and didn't ask for much more money.

Solana had created an excellent network of contacts, and he only came forward when he knew that he would not be publicly contradicted (he never was). He also had a good politician's knack for identifying what on the international scene mattered most to Europeans. He came to be widely known as "Mr CFSP," a feat made possible because although the CFSP itself had little to show, he himself was very impressive. In his ten years' tenure he worked doggedly and consistently to spread the word that there was a European foreign and security policy that is getting stronger and stronger. In this way he prepared the EU member states and their public opinions for an improbable but possible serious outside threat to the Union. Should it come, any action to be taken would have a strong intellectual framework as its basis.

That sort of threat did not come during his watch, and has not come since. In the meantime, his approach and his toolbox have been changed by the Lisbon treaty, so what was a light, nimble and result-oriented mechanism became a vast, rigid piece of heavy machinery, with the treaty also handing on to his successor an impossible job. It didn't establish clear boundaries between Cathy Ashton's role and that of the (also newly created) President of the European Council, or though to a lesser degree, that of the Commission's President.

Co-ordination between these three is difficult enough, while "*le vertige de la cohérence*" in any case expects too much from a single person. To run the new external action service, chair the

Council of Foreign Ministers, be a Vice-President of the European Commission, and also take *ad hoc*
initiatives to further European interests is a daunting job description for anyone. The fledgling external action service is already plagued by turf wars and is far from easy to manage, forcing its boss to spend as much time talking to its 'shareholders' as she does talking to outside powers. Perhaps these can be seen as teething problems, but the highest of the eurocrats in its staff is on record stating that he does not expect the service to work properly inside ten years.

Against the background of renewed nationalism across Europe, there seems little prospect of any real progress in the EU's foreign and security policy in the foreseeable future, either on defence budgets or any other matters. Unless, that is, EU leaders are spurred by the urgent need to deal with the eurozone debt crisis by harnessing institutional change to real political needs and so making a great leap forward on the road to further integration.

José Cutileiro *is former Secretary General of the Western European Union*

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