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The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism in Europe*

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The tale I wish to recount in this keynote address goes to the heart of some of the challenges currently facing the European Union.It is a tale of how a set of assumptions were elevated to the level of self evident truths and pursued to a point where good things turn stale, or perhaps – sour.

When we look back upon the process that led to the forming of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and its defense dimension, the CSDP, one cannot avoid noting the fact that while all agreed that the EU should have such policies, remarkably little thought went into what they should be about.

I wish to use liberal internationalism as a conceptual lens, as concepts that embrace the key tenets of EU foreign policy without being cumbersomely rigid or overly predictive. This is – to use a motoring simile – an analysis of the fuel the EU foreign policy engine runs on, not a discussion of its components, performance or emissions.

There is no canonical description of liberalism. What we tend to call liberal resembles a family portrait of assumptions, prejudices, principles and institutions, recognizable by certain characteristics – for example, a commitment to individual freedom, government through democratic representation, rights of private property, and equality of opportunity – that most liberal states share, though none has perfected, them all.

The EU came into fruition at what we might call a golden age of liberalism and unsurprisingly allowed the ideational vacuum at its core to be filled with the spirit of the age. Unlike, for instance, the United States, the liberal internationalism of the EU was not the result of any grand debate; it was adopted – as far as I can tell – as an afterthought; as if it was the only imaginable foreign policy doctrine for Europe.

This was not as strange as it may sound. Fin de Siècle Europe was at the heart of a global transformation, fostering progress among and within most societies on earth. Liberal policies seemed to be the common denominator for these positive trends. This was a period of remarkable expansion. World average GDP per capita that stood at around 1,000 in year 1900 is around 6,000 today. The world population has increased sevenfold from 1800 to today.

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Technology has advanced in leaps and bounds. The same species that took 1,500 years to go from bronze to iron tools, took seven decades from the first computer to mobile phones you have in your pocket. The world has also grown more peaceful, at least per capita. Violence is, according to the Harvard Scholar Steven Pinker, becoming less common, ranging from the physical abuse of women and to war.

This was matched by a great expansion of international cooperation and a quest for supranational solutions to international problems. According to the Union of International Organisations there are some – 65,000 international organisations in the world today. And the EU is by far the most far-ranging and effective of them all.

Since the late 1990s the EU accrued its own distinctive brand of liberal internationalism, centred on the expansion of 'European values' – a term the EU has never made the mistake of defining. When we examine the sum total of EU foreign policies we see a heterogeneous blend of foreign aid, declamation diplomacy, accession proceedings, economic policies and crisis management. Were EU foreign policy a poem, it would not rhyme.

While the EU's High Representative has been absent from the great issues of our day, a great many second and third tier concerns have benefited from EU engagement. Unspectacular to be sure, but sometimes rather effective (not least in the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo where High representative Federica Mogherini is building on the excellent work of Robert Cooper) – even though the sum total of discrete initiatives is perhaps not warranting the grand term "foreign policy".

So what does EU liberal internationalism amount to? Liberal internationalism as an EU foreign policy doctrine has, as I see it, four cornerstones. The first is the belief that democracy, market economy, the rule of law and human rights are so sticky that if a state accepts one of them, the other three will surely follow. This would lead to liberal democracy as the world's preferred form of government. Second is the idea of economic interdependence as key to economic growth and peace. Globalization would make borders less relevant and necessitate supranational governance. This assumption was based on the fact that democracies rarely go to war against other democracies.

A third factor was technology optimism, i.e. the belief that new technology would solve challenges as they arise. There were years when the Internet revolution promoted prosperity, openness and innovation on a scale the world has not seen since the industrial revolution. The fourth idea – a kind of insurance policy – was the certainty that the over-powerful US stood ready to enforce the liberal world order, as it had done when Jacques Poos' declared "the hour of Europe" at the beginning of the Yugoslav civil war transpired to be something rather less impressive.

This has translated into three assumptions on which, according to Politics Professor Walter Russell Mead, European policy elites tend to agree: "The first is that the rise of a liberal capitalist and more or less democratic and law-based international order is both

inevitable and irreversible. The second is that the so-called Davos elite—the financiers, politicians, intellectuals, journalists and technocrats who manage the great enterprises, institutions and polities of the contemporary world—know what they are doing and are competent to manage the system they represent. The third is that no serious alternative perspective to the Davos perspective really exists; our establishment believes in its gut that Davos has, and always will, have both might and right on its side."

Recent events have called all of these assumptions into question. In recent years the four cornerstones of EU internationalism have all proven less stable than previously assumed. The rise of illiberal democracies in Russia, and perhaps Hungary belies the 'stickiness' assumption. The EUs power of attraction as a political system seems to be rapidly diminishing. The benign impact of interdependence has been belied by the EU response to the refugee crisis where beggar-thy-neighbour policies flourish despite the EUs insistence on the sharing of the negative harvest of globalisation.

A similar picture has emerged over the handling of sanctions against Russia over its behaviour in Ukraine– all agree that there should be sanctions, but few want to bear the costs. Technology seems like less of a panacea given the West inability to halt the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Finally, a United States unable to press international issues, such as the conflict in Syria, from moving in the desired direction appears less inclined to intervene on the behalf of others.

In recent times EU foreign policies, albeit – some of them are not under the aegis of the CFSP have landed the EU in hot water. One was the offer of an association agreement to Ukraine which started a cascade of events which led to the Russian annexation of Crimea and support for armed separatism in Eastern Ukraine. The EU have agreed on sanctions but its policies seem currently to have led to little more than the formation of yet another frozen conflict on Europe's boarders. Ukraine has not been offered the EU membership one might expect, and likely it will not for the foreseeable future.

In the Syrian question EU policies have, in a rather similar manner, for half a decade been more concerned with the purity of the means than they actually reached the desired ends. EU foreign policy elites have been unforgivably slow to realize that the preferred policies of foreign aid, asylum and declaratory diplomacy neither stop the war nor slow it down. One might also fault EU foreign policy elites for failing to realise the stream of refugees to Europe that would ensue if the war was allowed to drag out for years.

During the heyday of liberal internationalism the EU was handed partial sovereignty over key areas such as fiscal and immigration policy by its member states. Some would say that the dual crisis that has racked Europe for nearly a decade, stemming from these two policy fields, highlight the dangers of partial integration where the EU is handed fiscal policy, but not financial authority; asylum policy but not border control. Others would say that it shows the dangers of handing the EU competences that exceed its competence. They would probably both be right.

In this context it should surprise no-one that some argue that the EU needs to integrate deeper towards the goal of 'ever closer union', while others argue that the EU should slow down or even give up its quest to become something resembling a nation state writ large. Equally unsurprising Brussels is firmly in the former camp and the proponents of the latter are generally found outside the political mainstream. Federica Mogherini has announced that an updated EU Security Strategy – an "EU Global Strategy for foreign and security" can be expected in June 2016. The hyperbole does not bode well. The EU does not need a global strategy; it needs a meaningful regional strategy. Too much EU 'foreign policy' already consists of providing commentary on questions it does not influence and too little is said about what it wants to achieve specifically in the questions where it does carry weight.

On the operational level the track record shows that the EU's effectiveness is hampered by a 'consensus–expectations gap', in other words, a gap between what the member states are expected to agree on and what they are actually able to consent to. This gap has three primary components, namely, the ability to agree, resource availability, and the instruments at the EU's disposal. The chief shortfall is in the lack of an effective decision-making mechanism. This might be overcome. The act decisively led ministers to go for the political "nuclear option" of qualified majority voting to adopt a relocation scheme. The voting mechanism is common for less-controversial measures, but has never been used for something as sensitive and divisive as refugee relocation. Perhaps this may also become the new way of the CFSP. If so, it will not happen without opposition. The question is whether EU integration has gained so much momentum that its failures will make it stronger, or whether nation states can (and will) claw back sovereignty from Brussels, given that the status quo seems untenable.

A great struggle thus lies ahead. It will pit nation states against institutions and populations against governments. It will be fought in venues such as the British referendum and government elections, over the handling of the refugee crisis, the Euro crisis and dealings with Russia. No one knows what will be gained, and what will be lost in the struggle that lies ahead. It is possible that crisis will be a springboard to a more deeply integrated Europe, as it has in the past. It seems, at the time of writing, nevertheless more likely it is that the EU Member States will find it harder to accept the negative effects of supranational governance as mutual distrust grows. Or perhaps EU foreign policy elites will adopt a new political paradigm to replace one which created a series of crises that it is incapable of solving.