The European Union as a security actor: Cooperative multilateralism

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If the term ‘Cooperative Security’ is rarely used in European Union (EU) parlance, it is at the heart of the EU’s approach to security as expressed in its 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), together with its comprehensive or holistic nature and its emphasis on conflict prevention.

First of all, and traditionally perhaps, Cooperative Security is pursued in what the EU calls its ‘Neighbourhood’: ‘Our task is to promote a ring of well-governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations’, says the ESS. The EU pursues this via a strategy of positive conditionality: partnership and access to European markets are to stimulate security cooperation and political, social and economic reforms, thus spreading the EU’s model and values. Cooperative Security and comprehensive or holistic security are thus two sides of the same coin.

More recent is the extension of Cooperative Security at the global level, under the guise of ‘effective multilateralism’: ‘We need to pursue our objectives both through multilateral cooperation in international organizations and through partnerships with key actors’, according to the ESS, which calls for ‘Strategic Partnerships’ with ‘all those who share our goals and values and are prepared to act in their support’. This extension of the approach at the global level goes hand in hand with the EU’s slow but steady development as a global actor, and is provoked by the current global environment. Marked by increasing multipolarity, i.e. the rise of ‘emerging’ or ‘re-emerging’ global actors, the ‘changing world order’ creates a sense of urgency. These powers include Brazil, Russia, India and China, commonly known as the BRIC’s, as well as other States with a global scope in one or more policy areas. For Cooperative Security and multilateralism to work and peaceful resolution of disputes to continue, these States too, many of which have a very different model and values from that of the EU, have to be integrated and socialized into the web of regimes, treaties and institutions. The world is not just increasingly multipolar, it is also characterized by increasing interdependence between the poles, which ought to facilitate cooperation. Although other global actors often have different worldviews and competing objectives, all are increasingly interlinked economically, and all are confronted with the same

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complex global challenges. Giovanni Grevi has dubbed this condition ‘interpolarity’: global interdependence is so great that ‘its mismanagement can threaten not only the prosperity, but the political stability and ultimately, in extreme cases, the very survival of the actors that belong to the system’; therefore ‘the ability to shape multilateral cooperation or lead collective action in addressing international challenges becomes a central feature of power’.

The ‘interpolar’ world thus presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Cooperative Security. In December 2008, after a year-long debate about the ESS, the EU confirmed its approach in ‘a report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy — Providing Security in a Changing World’. The report perceives a crucial window of opportunity: ‘At a global level, Europe must lead a renewal of the multilateral order. (...) We have a unique moment to renew multilateralism, working with the United States and with our partners around the world’. But are the EU’s traditional, conditionality-based policies sufficient to achieve this?

Cooperation rather than conditionality
Arguably, what is most distinctive about the EU is what can be called the European social model: the combination of democracy, the market economy, and strong state intervention, at Member State and EU level, to ensure regulation of the economy and social security. This model, including the values on which it is based, can be conceptualized as an integral whole of public goods, to which every citizen is entitled, and which it is the responsibility of government to provide to every citizen: security or freedom from fear; economic prosperity or freedom from want; political freedom, i.e. democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law; and social well-being, i.e. health, education, and a sustainable environment. An assessment of the conditions that have to be fulfilled for this model to prosper, allows identification of the EU’s vital interests, i.e. those that determine the very survival of its model: the absence of a vital military threat to the territory of the Union; open lines of communication and trade (in physical as well as in cyber space); a secure energy supply; a clean and stable environment; manageable migration flows; the maintenance of international law and universally agreed rights; and autonomy of EU decision-making.

In an ‘interpolar’ world, without direct enemies to the EU, and in which cooperation to tackle common challenges is vital, the best way of defending EU interests in order to defend its model and values, is precisely to spread those values. Increasing the access of citizens worldwide to these same core public goods directly addresses the root causes of threats and challenges. In other words,

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