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Realising Europe's geopolitical vocation

The basis of the EU's global vision has been shaken. Now more than ever, the EU's route to a credible international role lies in its neighbourhood

With the return of war on the European territory, the European Union has rediscovered its geopolitical ambitions and capabilities. And yet how to rebuild a post-war European security architecture remains a dilemma. In the last year, many of the basic assumptions underlying the EU's global vision and action have been shaken.

The union has learnt that — from economy to energy to defence — strategic dependence does expose it to adverse circumstances and can ultimately jeopardise European integration. The EU's world constricted as Russia became a systemic enemy, China reinforced its status as an economic competitor and countries in the Global South became increasingly vocal in their criticisms of the EU model.

Now more than ever, the EU's route to a credible international role resides in its neighbourhood. If it wants to accomplish its global ambitions, it has to learn how to play the role of a regional political actor.

That is not easy. The EU is not an island and there is no ocean separating it from some of the most troubled areas in the world — from the Balkans to the eastern neighbourhood, from the middle east to Africa. Moreover, its relationship with the neighbourhood countries has been going through a profound and difficult evolution.

The perspective of membership, which represented a powerful foreign-policy instrument at the beginning of the century, is unattractive (United Kingdom), poisoned (western Balkans, Turkey), excluded (northern Africa) or too remote (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia). Over time, the EU has developed various schemes to keep these countries engaged and connected but with little success. In fact, the EU is losing its grip on the European sphere, and this leaves a political vacuum which is rapidly being filled by other actors, while fuelling conflicts and crisis.

A new and hopeful initiative

There is thus room and requirement for a new, strong political initiative for a comeback of the EU as a regional power. Can the new European Political Community (EPC) represent such an ambitious project? It is difficult to tell from its first manifestation in Prague on 6 October. Forty-four countries, 27 EU member states and 17 partners, including the UK and Turkey, gathered the day before the informal summit convened by the Czech rotating presidency of the EU Council.

It was a big photo-opportunity and a significant display of cohesion of the European family in the face of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. There were discussions on two issues of the day: energy and security/stability. There was even a limited but tangible result, facilitated by the French president, Emmanuel Macron. A civilian EU mission is to be sent to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan to facilitate a normalisation of their conflictual relationship, shaken by the reverberations of Russia's violent focus on Ukraine. Finally, there was a promise to reconvene in six-month time in Moldova, and again after six months in the UK.

In some respects, this is a surprising result. The idea has taken off at incredible speed, by European standards, since it was launched by Macron on Europe Day (9 May). The European institutions and some European leaders, including the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, endorsed and relaunched the initiative subsequently.

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For sure, the escalating war in Ukraine and the subsequent offer to Ukraine, and Moldova, of candidacy status — together with the need to give answers to European citizens who expressed their preferences for the continent at the Conference on the Future of Europe — were crucial accelerators. And the evolution of the political and economic situation in post-Brexit UK helped in convincing the new premier, Liz Truss, to be present at the European family gathering.

The promoters of the project had to clarify some key aspects and make some changes to the plan to make it appealing to key partners. The EPC is not to be a substitute for enlargement, as feared by some of the western-Balkan countries and eastern partners. Nor will it be institutionalised, as this would have prevented the UK in particular from participating. And there is to be no overlap with other pan-European organisations,

particularly the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe.

All this enabled the inclusive format of 44 in Prague. These clarifications will not however be enough to turn the EPC into an effective and sustainable initiative which can represent the backbone of Europe's geopolitical future. Only if we clarify its objectives will it be possible to adapt the format and membership — not the other way round.

Values or interests

There are two main visions for the EPC. One is to create a political space to keep the EU's neighbours anchored to it. Then the lack of institutionalisation can be a problem. If the EU wants to be in the driving seat and avoid the nationalisation of the project, the institutions in Brussels should play a key role in setting the agenda and ensuring its follow-up.

Moreover, only access to EU institutions with a decision-shaping role can offer partner countries added value. Some proposals have already been advanced — pre-EU summit gatherings enlarged to include partners and a parliamentary forum drawn from the European Parliament and the parliaments of partner countries. In this scenario, the criterion for entering the EPC should be commitment to EU fundamental values, including respect for democracy, human rights and rule of law.

A different idea would be to use the EPC to rally the European family against Russia, in an attempt to address urgent issues and longer-term security concerns. Interests more than shared values and rules would then provide a common platform. The informal intergovernmental setting chosen in Prague would be ideal, as it allows the format to be flexible and the membership large. Yet if this serves very well the urgency of the day, it is less convincing as a recipe for subsequent phases. It is difficult to see how the EPC could then evolve from an initial exchange of notes on Ukraine into something meaningful for the future of Europe.

The most important task of the moment for the EU is to develop a clear vision of what is at stake for it and what it is for.

At the moment there is thus no single, clear, long-term perspective, and it will be a challenge to ensure a convergence of interests among 44 states and adequate follow-up without a formal structure. Whether it is wise for the EU to sponsor an initiative in the European continent which it cannot control — since it advocates participation of all states on equal footing and excludes a role for the EU caucus — is also

questionable.

A third way can however be explored, where the intergovernmental setting of the EPC serves as a political forum to discuss the main foreign- and security-policy issues between the EU and partner countries, connected to the agenda of EU summits. This could start with visible, concrete projects which can be advanced and implemented by differentiated groups of members with the support of the EU institutions.

A starting-point could be a Next Generation Ukraine package, to support Ukrainian resilience and future reconstruction. This would keep the EU in the driving seat, while ensuring the format was sustainable and the membership inclusive — even if some partners might fall away.

The most important task of the moment for the EU is to develop a clear vision of what is at stake for it and what it is for. Without clear direction, even the ostensibly smartest political inventions can backfire.

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Nicoletta Pirozzi
Rome

Nicoletta Pirozzi is the Head of the European Union programme and Institutional Relations Manager at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome. Together with Vassilis Ntousas, she wrote the new report 'Walking the Strategic Talk' released in May this year.