

EU's external action, a long way to go

Carlos Pérez Padilla (@perezpadillaC)



The European Union, as an international relations subject, is presented as a very special actor. As its name denotes, it represents the most important alliance and cooperation among European states that has ever existed, which has allowed to overcome massive challenges such as the persistent military European conflicts.

One of the outstanding challenges is represented by the capability of the Union to be able to communicate internationally in a coherent and efficient way. If we analyse the structure of the European Union taking into consideration the institutions that play a greater role in the field of international relations, we find the couple Council / Member States and the Commission (with all its directorates-general) / European external Action Service (replacement of the Directorate General for external Relations root of the Lisbon Treaty); which combines an independent service that acts as a ministry of Foreign Affairs under the leadership of the Vice President and high representative of the European Union. This couple works with a strong involvement of Member States through the Council and its diplomatic service, while the EEAS compacts the opinions to create an European position.

However, another institution emerges strongly in the positions of the EU: the European Parliament. Through its Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET); through the delegations, the statements and activism of the MEPs, the European Parliament plays a central role in building up an external position as the EU.

Besides these three institutions, it goes without saying that many others can influence and participate in elements and stances related to foreign affairs, although they have a less significant paper or they are linked to the aforesaid institutional map.

As diplomacy is not a delegated competence of the member states, its exercise by the new foreign affairs ministry is in fact, a true challenge. It is not only necessary to be coordinated and to agree with all the EC colleagues, especially with directorate-generals such as TRADE and DEVCO; but also all relationship troubles with other institutions can result in contradictory stances between the European Parliament and the EEAS.

One of the clearest examples of this issue can be seen in the case of Turkey and Azerbaijan, as the condemn from the European Parliament of the human rights situation in these countries may threaten the interests to forge strategic relationships with them.

Similarly, the states, on its own independence, may play their own game on the international arena. In some cases - like the Ukrainian conflict - this might provoke that the European Union can be seen as another interested party in the conflict; meanwhile France and Germany did actually play a moderating role.

It also makes no sense that it could be required to third countries - especially these who aim to join the EU - to suit and follow the EU interests when its own member states set themselves apart from them depending on their concerns. It is inconsistent and odd that Kosovo, which is an independent country, acknowledged by the EU and functions to all intents and purposes as so; has not been recognized by some member states (including Spain)

All these institutional internal inconsistencies and the capability of the member states to get out of the official line of the EU undermine its external image and lower its credibility. This situation plays against everyone as it waters down the strength of the European Union. It is necessary to fuel the communication and coordination among the member states to guarantee the consistency of the position of the EU.

Long gone is the idea of a European Union that would be the United States of Europe even if that is not what is intended to defend, in my opinion it would be the perfect solution for a strong EU international position. However, we must be aware of the need to empower the structures we created with the purpose of defending either a single, consensus or majority opinion and give it respect and importance that it deserves and needs, instead of having 29 different positions. It is true that it requires certain withdraw by the member states, but it is the only way to truly strengthen our external image.

At the same time, we must give the European Parliament the importance it demands as a democratic structure and as a controller of the executive power that the Commission has, making it participant in decisions regarding foreign policy and its role as an integral part of the international position of the EU. This is the only way to avoid weaknesses linked to internal inconsistencies.

Henceforth, the recipe to improve the external relations of the UE involves a renovated institutional coordination and a strong commitment to respect all decisions taken by the European institutions.

The huge step that the EU has made when turning into an acknowledged actor within the international arena has been crucial. However, there is still need to endow its structures, specially the SEAE, with the resources and abilities necessary for its full development, guaranteeing at the same time the coherence and strength that the EU needs to become a strong global actor.