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## In Search for EU Foreign Policy

*Summary: This paper explores questions concerning the EU approach towards its Eastern neighbors, as well as the guiding premises of EU foreign policy towards these states without promising to answer them fully. The argument is divided into three parts, starting, first, with a discussion of the 'foreign policy' framework that the EU had built with enlargement and the challenges this framework now faces. Second, the paper examines the European Neighborhood Policy in light of the wider questions raised above. Third, the paper finishes with thoughts on what could be done to strengthen the EU foreign policy profile.*

**H**ow should the European Union (EU) approach its Eastern neighbors? What should be the guiding premises of EU foreign policy towards these states? Does current policy, subsumed mainly under the European Neighborhood Policy, satisfy EU needs?

In a context where further EU enlargement is under question, these questions must be raised. In addressing them, the argument here will step back from the specific foreign policy issues that arise in the Eastern neighbors in order to consider more perennial and strategic concerns confronting the EU. In so doing, the thinking developed here has two starting points. The first is, indeed, that enlargement, at least as we knew it, has entered a period of suspension beyond the states that currently stand on the accession track (here, we should include the Western Balkans). Enlargement may be resumed in the future, but probably will not be in the medium term. The point in

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this paper is not to address why this is the case, simply to accept this as a necessary starting point for thinking about EU approaches.

Second, as a result, the EU has little choice but to reconsider how it goes about promoting its interests abroad, and especially towards its Eastern neighborhood. In the 1990s, enlargement became a surrogate foreign policy for the EU. This option no longer being possible for now, the EU and its member states face urgent questions. Without being able to offer enlargement to states on the EU's Eastern borders, what foreign policy does the Union have – *if any*? In other words, if the EU can no longer seek to transform its Eastern neighbors into mirror images of itself, which accession effectively entails, what should the EU seek from them? Or, should the EU still seek to transform its Eastern neighbors into mirror images, even without offering them accession? The questions continue: If the EU cannot use the accession track as the driving process to promote its interests and values in neighboring states, what sort of relationship should the EU develop? Is there utility in the notion of 'privileged partnership'? Clearly, these questions are as fundamental as they are difficult to answer.

This paper will explore such questions in more detail, without promising to answer them fully. The argument is divided into three parts, starting, first, with a discussion of the 'foreign policy' framework that the EU had built with enlargement and the challenges this framework now faces. Second, the paper examines the European Neighborhood Policy in light of the wider questions raised above. Third, the paper finishes with thoughts on what could be done to strengthen the EU foreign policy profile.

## **A Rare Bird**

As a foreign policy actor, the EU has been something of a *rara avis* on the international stage.

For one, the EU has been unlike the *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE), which opened membership automatically to all states following the collapse of the Soviet Union, stretching as far as Central Asia. The OSCE is also very different to the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO), which has succeeded since the mid 1990s in blurring the lines between membership and non-membership through a range of what may be called political-military outreach programs. One might be tempted to argue that NATO has blurred the line so much that Article Five on collective self-defense itself has become hazy in terms of which states it might cover. The ambiguity is deepened by the fact that some states in the NATO partnership programs have been more active in NATO-led operations than full NATO member states.

By contrast, the EU offers a Manichean universe, where a country is either a member of the Union (or in the process of accession) or fully outside its scope. In foreign policy terms, if not in economic (*viz.* EFTA), the EU has not developed significant space between membership and non-membership. In the EU world, there are no blurred lines.

In addition, EU policy had taken, at least until the development of the *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP), a very peculiar shape. Throughout the later half of the 1990s and into the first decade of the 2000, the EU policy of enlargement to twelve new states became a surrogate for the development of real foreign policy. Enlargement was EU diplomacy by other means, and, for this reason, it is often hailed as the EU's greatest foreign policy success.

Should enlargement really be seen as foreign policy? Certainly, enlargement fell within the realm of foreign policy as its consequences transformed the political face of Europe. Nonetheless, the question remains. Exporting democracy *is* foreign policy; importing democracies is something quite different. In this sense, one could argue that enlargement had strong imperial connotations, recalling, indeed, aspects of policy from a past era. What is more, as one has witnessed since 2005, the crisis/debate in Europe over the nature of the enlarged EU and its legitimacy has served to highlight that enlargement was also a deeply confused *domestic* policy choice for many citizens of the EU.

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Above all, enlargement was a luxurious policy, because EU values and interests were advanced at the one and same time with neighboring states. Through the enlargement framework, the EU did not need to strike a balance between these two dimensions – a task constantly facing both states as well as other organizations. In addition, under this process, neighboring states had little choice but to accept almost all EU demands and meet all EU expectations. Enlargement created for the Union a deeply asymmetrical relationship, leaving Brussels with significant control over the terms of reference and objectives of interaction with a neighboring state. In this sense, foreign policy could be drafted quite comfortably in offices in Brussels and rolled out from theory to practice in such a manner that rarely happens in the foreign policy of states, where policy suffers always from friction with reality,

most importantly other parties' desires and interests. Of course, enlargement was not friction-free and the translation of policy to practice saw large-scale adaptation to realities on the ground. Nonetheless, the link between *what was sought* and *what was achieved* in enlargement was uniquely close for such an ambitious foreign policy endeavor.

Enlargement was a comfortable policy also because the EU did not have to distinguish between, or, indeed, even define, its strategic and tactical interests with another party. The two were intricately blurred. The EU and its member states did not have to untangle an order of priorities in its policy towards another state, as these were set forth uniformly in thirty-some chapters that the accession country had to complete in order to accede to the Union.

So, enlargement was a luxurious and comfortable 'foreign' policy for the EU, where the hard work was undertaken in the strenuous process of foreign states' implementing EU demands and expectations. When compared with traditional foreign policy, the EU's interlocutors had little real choice and scarce say.

Genuine foreign policy is different altogether. It operates in a world that is the opposite of the luxurious, which is defined first of all by constraint - constrained resources, constrained ambitions, and the constrained ability to control an interlocutor. In traditional foreign policy, the interlocutor rarely wants to become like you, as was the case with enlargement, and only sometimes wants the same thing as you. From this angle, most traditional foreign policy is occupied with the difficult task of seeking to convince another party to agree to your agenda and only then to implement it in a way that is amenable. This is a very different game. And one that requires careful prioritization of interests, the subtle and often changing balancing of these interests with values, and the delicate positioning of tools to advance certain limited ends. If enlargement is a hot house flower; foreign policy must be a weed.

What was the result for the EU?

First, lest we forget, this was the greatest wave of enlargement experienced thus far, and it changed dramatically the shape of Europe. But, second, we must recognize that it also atrophied EU foreign policy before it was really born. Foreign policy leaves no choice but to prioritize interests and stakes, to disentangle values and interests, and to develop tools tailored for discrete situations. With the policy of enlargement, the EU avoided these challenges. Driven by its logic, European 'foreign policy' sought to refashion a neighboring state exactly in its image. Which other country or organization in the world can claim such a post-modern imperial ambition?

So, the stakes are now high. At a time when enlargement has been suspended, genuine foreign policy by the EU must be driven by new principles. Three principles may be highlighted here.

First, the EU must develop real partnerships with its neighbors. In current circumstances, the Union will not longer find in its neighbors willing partners for deeply asymmetrical relationships where the EU will be able dictate its desires and pursue all of its interests. The EU will have to develop more equal and balanced ties in its external relations. The nomenclature of such partnerships, whether they are called 'privileged' or 'special,' is of little importance; the substance matters more. The key objective should be to build partnerships that blur in a meaningful way what remains still a strong line between membership and non-membership.

Second, the EU must rethink the notion of conditionality, which had been the main tool driving enlargement. In new conditions, when the end-game of accession is not a real immediate perspective, the Union has to consider which carrots and the sticks it can offer and use in order to induce its foreign interlocutors of the advantages of accepting the EU agenda and accommodating EU interests.

Third, and more fundamentally, new circumstances require the EU and its member states to consider the world differently. Certainly in terms of the immediate EU neighborhood, the Union

should adopt the logic of political, economic and security *inter-dependence* with third countries rather than the logic of enlargement.

How might these three principles be translated into EU interaction with its Eastern neighbors in Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus as well as the three South Caucasus countries? In brief, applying new principles to this region would mean that the EU would pursue one all-encompassing objective with these neighbors. This would be to advance EU interests and values by ensuring that these countries do *not* feel the need to apply for membership to the Union. Pursuing this objective would mean, in practice, for the EU to become far more engaged with the neighbors, especially at the political and security levels, as driven by the logic of inter-dependence.

In sum, if the EU can no longer say to its neighbors, '*you will join us*' then the Union must be able to say '*we will be with you*'. The task is challenging. From a quasi-imperial actor, the EU must become a limited foreign policy player that is able to advance its interests within an operating environment of deep constraint.

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## The Stakes with the Neighborhood

So, the stakes raised by the *European Neighborhood Policy* (ENP) are high.

With ENP, the EU must move beyond the straitjacket of enlargement thinking to advance its interests without offering accession, with means that are more than technical assistance but less than membership. With this new policy, the EU faces the challenge of creating productive and substantive space between membership and non-membership. Tall orders.

The ENP was launched in 2003, the first Action Plans with ten neighbors were agreed in December 2004, and the first mid-term progress reports were issued in December 2006. In late 2006, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner revealed a strategy for strengthening the ENP, which includes the prospect of deep economic integration, greater visa facilitation, closer association with CFSP and the development of a new regional approach to the Black Sea. In addition, the ENP has been underpinned by a new financial instrument, the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, bringing together existing instruments into a new and single structure. In its strategy documents, ENP is stated to have been designed to promote the stability, security and development of the states on the European Union's borders. In brief, the ENP constitutes something of a bargain with the states on the EU borders. Basically, in return for progress towards the implementation of EU-modeled reform, neighbors will benefit from closer economic integration and more EU support. The policy is destined for those countries that do 'not currently' have the perspective of enlargement.

Much has been achieved in putting into place the new policy framework. In addition, the coordination of ENP with CFSP has been strengthened greatly from what was a very poor start. EU action in Moldova has been a case in point. EU foreign policy towards Moldova now works under the framework of the ENP *Action Plan* and through the actions of the designated Special Representative of the High Representative on the Council side. The result is a far more active presence in Moldova, including EU involvement in the settlement efforts on the Transnistrian conflicts. To note also, the Commission has deployed a Border Assistance Mission on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border, which has had an important impact on the context for conflict settlement.

All of this is excellent. However, the question remains whether ENP is up the task of developing genuine foreign policy for the EU. Despite all of its innovations and strengths, the answer is negative. The ENP is not the solution to EU's need to develop foreign policy in a post-enlargement era.

First, the ENP remains driven by the logic of enlargement, in so far as it seeks for the EU's neighbors to refashion themselves as EU mirror images, but without offering them access to the resources or the finalité of enlargement. In other words, EU neighbors should become like the EU even though they are not offered the incentive of joining the EU. For this reason alone, the ENP falls short of addressing the central challenge of foreign policy, because it remains trapped in the logic of enlargement.

Second, the ENP fails to blur the lines between membership and non-membership. Perhaps worse, in many instances, the ENP acts to blur the notions of 'Europe' and the EU in such a way that a neighboring state may not feel legitimately 'European' if not a member of the EU. Quite understandably, this blurring has been cause for distress in the capitals of Eastern neighbors who consider themselves European by history and culture. The policy does not provide yet for real partnership with neighbors, and it remains highly asymmetrical. The Action Plan with Moldova may not have thirty accession chapters, but it does have thirty-five pages of actions that Chisinau must undertake – in return for which, the EU offers relatively little.

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Finally, the political and security thrust of relations with neighbors still receives too little attention in ENP and within the Action Plans. In Moldova and in the South Caucasus, real progress made in this area. However, the notion of inter-dependence, mentioned in the founding ENP documents, still gets too little attention in practice.

The result of these weaknesses is that the European Neighborhood Policy fails to prevent neighbors from raising the question of their future accession to the Union. It does not provide enough EU presence or profile in these countries to do so.

## Rethinking

The European Commission has started rethinking parts of the ENP. Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner's communication on strengthening the policy in late 2006 provided innovative ideas that go some way to addressing the concerns raised here. What is more relevant at least for the Eastern neighbors that have EU aspirations, the ENP as a policy framework has a built-in expiry date, because the Action Plans last three to five years. Thus, for some countries on EU borders, the ENP is a medium-term policy.

Rethinking ENP in light of EU foreign policy needs should occur initially at three levels. First, some thought must be given to where leadership of the ENP should best reside. Which part of the EU should lead? The answer to this question must be considered against a recognition of the need to ensure adequate political leadership and attention to what is a critically important policy area. Since the birth of the ENP as 'the wider Europe' project, great efforts have gone into coordinating action between the Commission and the Council, but the process has not been easy nor always successful. Fundamentally, the issue remains unresolved.

Second, new thought must be given to the substance of EU policy towards the neighbors. With time, plainly, the notion of applying the same method to such different EU neighbors as Ukraine and Egypt will become ever more aberrant. Discrete policies must be developed for distinct needs with different interlocutors.

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Finally, the EU and member states must rethink the central objective of the ENP, which should be to blur membership and non-membership for some neighbors as an alternative to full integration into EU institutions and full access to the four freedoms.

For the most part, the argument developed here is valid for those Eastern neighbors, such as Ukraine, Moldova and the South Caucasus, that are deeply interested in closer ties with the EU, even membership in some cases. What of those neighbors that are not? These countries pose the question of the EU developing genuine foreign policy all the more saliently.

The Russian Federation is not interested in accession to the EU. Nor is Russia interested in adopting the EU model of values and standards. In fact, the Russian authorities have dedicated much time and energy to developing their own model of 'sovereign democracy' to reflect specifically Russian needs and experience. The Russian Federation seeks nothing more than an interest-based relationship with the EU. In addition, the Russian government also has its own foreign policy objectives in the shared Neighborhood between Russia and the enlarged EU that do not dovetail with those of the Union. On the whole, Russia is a divisive issue between member states inside the EU. Thus, for the EU, the first task with regard to Russia is to develop a unified foreign policy. This is far from easy.

Belarus is another major gap in EU foreign policy. Since 1997, the EU has pursued an approach of limited contacts and limited sanctions against the



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leadership in Minsk, offering to Belarus to resume contacts and assistance in exchange for democratic change in the country. As such, the EU has been asking *everything* from Belarus while offering (almost) *nothing*. It is not surprising that Minsk has been deaf to such proposals. The EU, thus, continues to send signals to a government that simply does not care to listen. Thought must be given to preparing the ground for change in Belarus, including the Russia dimension of this question. Again, the challenge is difficult.

In addition, countries in the ENP have been facing real difficulties. The Commission has repeatedly drawn to task Moldova's government on the slow progress made to fulfill the *Action Plan*. Clearly, the Ukrainian leadership has not resolved the deep divisions that shook the country during the *Orange Revolution*, without which significant movement towards the EU is almost impossible. The South Caucasus remains hardly a 'region' at all, tangled up in simmering conflicts and longstanding trade restrictions.

So, the EU's Eastern Neighborhood is troubled and full of uncertainty. But the point of foreign policy is precisely to promote interests and values in difficult situations. The EU has left the hot house; it has yet to become hardy and resistant, but it must.