
A strategy for Europe's neighbourhood: keep resilient and carry on?

Sven Biscop | Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College, Director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont, Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and Professor at Ghent University

Theme

If it cannot offer more than building up resilience, the EU risks locking itself out of its own neighbourhood.

Summary

While external and regional powers are engaged in fierce geopolitical competition in Europe's neighbourhood, the EU itself wants to focus on building up the resilience of its neighbours. Not only is it far from clear who is to be made resilient against what where there is no more or less benign government but, where countries are only just coming out of war, their first priority is national survival and their demand is for security guarantees. Would sovereignty and equality not be a better *Leitmotiv* for EU strategy in the neighbourhood?

Analysis

The strategic goal was set at a highly secret meeting on the top floor of the EU's Berlaymont building in Brussels: Ukraine must be Western.

Obviously, such a meeting only exists among the complex conspiracy theories that for many are more attractive than the simple reality, ie, that the EU had no real strategy for Ukraine. Indeed, one is almost tempted to hope that there would actually be more meetings, perhaps not altogether secret but at least discrete, where more precise strategic objectives are marked out for the EU's foreign policy.

To create a sphere of influence in Europe's neighbourhood would of course not be one of those objectives. The EU has no need for exclusivity. Brussels seeks good-neighbourly relations with all bordering states, but certainly has no principled objections against them having as close or even closer relations with other powers as well. EU self-esteem does not require its neighbours to look up to it. But what the EU cannot afford is that its neighbours look away from it. The risk is very real, however, because the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) from June 2016 decided that henceforth the focus in the EU's relations with its neighbours should be on building up their resilience. That seems rather too distant an approach at a time when all the other great and regional powers are directly engaged in the geopolitical competition that is raging all around Europe.

Indifferent neighbours

To the east of Europe, an assertive Russia has the advantage of clarity over a more nuanced EU. From Russia you may get more than you want –but you do know what you will get–. What exactly is on offer from the EU, and how far the EU is willing to go to live up to its offer, is far less clear. Nuance is often perceived as hesitation. Meanwhile China, under its Belt and Road initiative, is ever increasing its presence through a massive investment in infrastructure through Russia and Central Asia all the way to Europe. For the first time, China's neighbourhood has begun to overlap with the EU's.

That 'new silk road' is also branching off to the south, where the EU's presence and expenditure is already dwarfed by the pervasive influence of the Gulf States and the enormous amounts they spend –in a country like Egypt, for example, at least 10 times more than the EU–. And what the EU does offer comes with 'irritating' human-rights conditions attached. Russia has become a major geopolitical player again in the Middle East, as has Iran, while the election of Donald Trump has raised doubts about the future engagement of the US. Though several EU Member States are engaged in the campaign against IS, neither they nor the EU as such plays any but a minor role in the high politics of the Middle East.

There is a serious risk that the EU's neighbours, even though for many the EU still is their most important trade partner, will begin to see it as irrelevant. If the EU were to be surrounded by a ring of indifferent states, it would be even more difficult to defend its interests in its neighbourhood: to avoid spill-over from war (including terrorism), to manage migration and to safeguard trade routes and energy supplies.

Resilient neighbours

Something new is on offer, however: resilience. The EUGS puts forward resilience as 'a strategic priority across the EU's east and south both in countries that want stronger ties with the EU and in those... that have no wish to do so'. Resilience as a buzzword has already overshadowed the EUGS's intended catchphrase of 'principled pragmatism'. It does signal a pragmatic and justified move away from proactive democratisation, because all recent interventions have shown that countries simply cannot be democratised from the outside –they can only democratise themselves–. The implication is that whenever interests coincide the EU can and must work with the powers that be – even if they are repressive–.

At the same time though, the EUGS states that the EU 'will persistently seek to advance human rights protection'. For the problem, as the EUGS states, is that 'repressive states are inherently fragile in the long term'. A distinction is thus emerging between democratisation, which the EU can support if it happens but cannot engineer, and human rights, on which the EU will remain very vocal, if only to legitimise courageous internal human-rights activists. This implies that the red line should be that the EU cannot engage in any form of cooperation that condones human rights violations.

There are tricky grey zones here. Any counter-terrorism cooperation with security and intelligence services, for example, is bound to run into the fact that in many neighbouring countries maltreatment and even torture are routine practices. How to cooperate with

these services without condoning such practices is not always clear. By and large, though, the EUGS does offer clear enough short-term guidance.

But what about the long term? What is this resilience that the EU thinks it can engineer?¹ The more standard definition used so far by the Commission is 'the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, adapt and quickly recover from stresses and shocks such as droughts, violence, conflict or natural disaster'.² This is a rather defensive concept.³ It is saying that the problem will hit you, for the EU is not going to solve it, but it is going to help you get speedily back on your feet again afterwards. Keep resilient and carry on.

Implicit in this is that if Europe's neighbours are resilient to certain threats, those threats will not reach Europe itself. In more standard geopolitical jargon, a resilient neighbour would be called a buffer state. That is a role that may appeal to certain governments, if the EU offers a high enough price. The EU has clearly begun to use Turkey as a buffer state in the field of migration, for example, paying it a hefty sum in return. Where democracy exists, there is something to be said for making it resilient. But the role of buffer hardly seems appealing to any self-respecting citizen or to any truly democratic government, which will inherently have loftier aspirations for its country than that.

More problematically, in many neighbours there is no democracy. For many people the main threat is their own repressive government. Who is the EU seeking to make resilient against what, where there is no more or less benign regime? The EUGS actually defines resilience as 'the ability of states and societies to reform', ie, to reform themselves. The EU has given up on regime change and cannot escape cooperating with repressive regimes in the short term. But certainly it should avoid making *them* even more resilient in the process. In many neighbours, citizens in fact need to be resilient against the government –but how the EU could help while cooperating with that same government is far from clear–.

Putting forward resilience cannot paper over the inherent tension, where there is no democracy yet, between the EU's need to work with the regime today and its hope that citizens themselves will change the regime in the future.⁴ The risk is both that by cooperating with a regime now, the EU will actually solidify it, and that it will turn it against Europe by too openly encouraging its own citizens' aspirations for regime change. That might even lead the regime to harm those citizens –and the EU does not have a good record in preventing or responding to that–.

¹ For a more positive view of resilience, see Eduard Soler i Lecha & Nathalie Tocci (2016), *Implications of the EU Global Strategy for the Middle East and North Africa*, Future Notes, nr 1, MENARA Project, Barcelona, July.

² European Commission (2012), *EU Approach to Resilience: Learning from Food Crises*, EU, Brussels.

³ On the concept, see Jonathan Joseph (2014), 'The EU in the Horn of Africa: Building Resilience as a Distant Form of Governance', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 52, nr 2, p. 285-301; and Wolfgang Wagner (2016), 'Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's New Leitmotiv: Pragmatic, Problematic or Promising?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 37, nr 3, p. 414-430.

⁴ Michael E. Smith (2016), 'Implementing the Global Strategy Where It Matters Most: The EU's Credibility Deficit and the European Neighbourhood', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, nr 3, p. 446-460, at p. 452.

Equal neighbours

The EUGS also says though that 'states are resilient when societies feel they are becoming better off and have hope in the future' and, in the same paragraph, that 'we will fight poverty and inequality'. This could point the way to a more promising *Leitmotiv* than resilience.

Inequality is the root cause of instability in the neighbourhood. Repressive regimes perpetuate inequality between citizens in terms of security, political participation and prosperity. Such regimes can maintain themselves for a long time, often by pursuing confrontational external policies to deflect attention from the internal rot –internal stability at the cost of regional tension–. But the day always comes when their citizens' patience wears out. Then, very suddenly, the regime implodes, relatively peacefully, or explodes, with a lot of violence. That is why repressive regimes are indeed inherently fragile –and why durable stability can only be built on equality–.

Substituting equality for resilience does not overcome the dilemma that ultimately Europeans prefer democratic regimes to the authoritarian regimes that they nonetheless want to work with today. Like resilience, promoting equality does not directly address the political nature of a regime and leaves its sovereignty intact. But unlike resilience, equality is a very positive concept to sell and can appeal to citizens in the neighbourhood. At the same time, it can be sold to the regimes, because it increases domestic stability and thus in the first instance serves their interest. In the long term, though, a gradual increase in equality qua security and prosperity offers the best hope of creating the conditions in which, eventually, peaceful transition to less authoritarian government can occur and political equality can be achieved as well.

Finally, equality fits much better with the EU project itself. No European politician will stand for election on a platform of resilience, because it does not meet the egalitarian aspiration that is at the heart of European society. Europe's own domestic stability is based on equality, as ensured by the welfare state –though many need reminding of that strategic fact–. This European way of life is the major source of Europe's power of attraction.

This is not to say that promoting equality is that much easier than promoting resilience, but the EU does have instruments. On the security side, reform and capacity-building in the justice, security and defence sectors is rightly highlighted in the EUGS. On the socio-economic side, though, the EUGS stresses aid and trade, but probably investment is even more important. The aim: creating showcases of equality –economic poles of attraction that combine profitability with decent job conditions and better social provisions–. If substantial investments are made, the investor naturally imposes conditions –that is not an infringement of national sovereignty–.

The EU could initiate such a policy but it does not have the financial means to see it through alone: it will need to convince other actors of this agenda, both international organisations and states. But it will also have to revisit its own spending in the region. The EU does not really practice 'geo-economics', ie, use its economic instruments to

pursue overall strategic objectives, including security, political and economic aims, instead of the latter only. That would be a truly comprehensive approach. In a very basic way, there can be no new strategy for the neighbourhood if the Commission keeps spending its money in the old way.

Peaceful neighbours

The EU cannot build either resilience or equality, however, until the neighbourhood is at peace. In the east as in the south, a fragile ceasefire is the most that can be hoped for in the coming months, and the risk of violence flaring up again will remain very high. Under these circumstances, the first priority of many governments, as well as of groups controlling de facto autonomous regions, will remain national survival. They will be looking for external military support and security guarantees.

The EUGS commits the EU to 'engage more systematically on the security dimension' of conflict, especially 'to protect human lives, notably civilians' and 'to support and help consolidating local ceasefires'. Unfortunately, Member States do not seem to be inclined to act as the security guarantor of any of their neighbours. In the east, many have rather come to regret the EU's involvement in Ukraine, where reform is progressing at a snail's pace, if at all. In the south, there is no view on what the future order in the Middle East might look like, and no desire to become embroiled anyway. The focus is on securing European territory against further terrorist attacks.

If the EU has nothing to offer, states and statelets that feel threatened will look elsewhere for support: to Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. As their influence rises, EU influence diminishes. If the EU is not careful, it risks being locked out of important parts of its own neighbourhood. This is not a plea, of course, for the EU to throw its weight around the way Russia does. But it is crucial to think strategically about what future the EU envisages for its six Eastern Partners, and what regional order it aspires to in the Middle East and North Africa. Such a strategic reflection should first of all inform an active EU diplomatic agenda. As present as the EU is in the diplomatic efforts to solve the Ukraine crisis, as absent has it remained from the key negotiating tables on the Middle East. Then the EU can assess which actors can help it achieve its agenda and merit its support in defending their sovereignty, including in the field of security and defence, starting with capacity-building and equipment on a scale that can make a difference.

There is a moral issue here. The EU always encourages democratisation when it happens in the neighbourhood, both out of principle and because it is very much in its interest. In Ukraine it did so very convincingly, and many European politicians joined the flag-waving crowds in Kiev's Maidan Square. Does the EU then not also have a moral duty to help defend democracy or a democratisation process when it is threatened from the outside, as in Ukraine? Or from the inside, as in Turkey? The EU likes to hold up Tunisia as the success story of the Arab Spring. But what if its security were to be threatened and a democratically-elected Tunisian government ask for urgent military support: could Europe turn it down? And is the EU really doing enough to shore up the fragile unity-government in Libya?

The question, in other words, is: should the EU not be the security guarantor of the democracies (in being) in its neighbourhood?

Conclusions

Sovereignty and equality

The point of EU strategy for the neighbourhood is obviously not to try and dominate the region. The point should be to prevent any other external or regional power from doing so. The states of the region should make their own choices; neither Brussels nor Moscow nor Riyadh nor Tehran should decide for them.

To that end, the EU should pursue good-neighbourly relations with all governments, and encourage them to deepen the relationship, without aiming to directly affect their relations with other powers. Cooperation must be possible with everybody, whenever interests coincide, with one red line: the EU can never be a party to human rights violations.

The double *Leitmotiv* of this engagement could be sovereignty and equality. The EU should emphasise that full respect for every state's sovereignty is a principle of its engagement—and that this contrasts sharply with other external powers, who are seeking clients rather than partners—. Not imposing its own choices upon them does not mean that the EU cannot be critical of its neighbours: it must be, when they violate human rights or threaten the peace in the region. But the focus should be on engaging with partners to find ways of increasing domestic equality, in all of its dimensions, as the surest road to stability. The EU's engagement will only be credible, however, if it also commits to help defending the sovereignty of those partners who can help Europe realise its view on a peaceful regional order in the eastern and southern neighbourhood, and of those partners who are, or are becoming, democracies. That presupposes, of course, that the EU has a view.