The Belgian Presidency of the EU: Foreign Policy Priorities

1. The contribution of the Belgian presidency to the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon concerning the international relations of the EU

Belgium assumed the rotating presidency of the EU at a very difficult time of transition for Europe. On the one hand, the international economic crisis which erupted in 2008 is far from over and is giving rise to global tendencies towards political instability; and on the other hand, the new mechanism of the Treaty of Lisbon reinforcing the role of the EU in the world has not been implemented entirely, resulting in a partial re-nationalisation of the foreign policies of member states. These external and internal uncertainties require particular skill on the part of the rotating presidency in balancing innovation with continuity, new institutional structures with the inevitable inertia of the preceding institutional practices.

It is not very easy to achieve this necessary dynamic balance, as clearly demonstrated by the serious difficulties encountered by the Spanish presidency in the first semester of 2010. The Spanish avowal to maintain the old system (whereby the rotating presidency of the Council and the European Council played a major role, even including the choice of the agenda and the venue of the summits) had led to the cancellation of the EU/USA summit of March 2010, postponed at the request of the Americans as a consequence of the Obama administration’s unfavourable view of the progress being made in implementing the new institutional construction of the EU.

The Treaty of Lisbon which came into force on 1 December 2009 imposes appreciable limits on the powers of the rotating presidencies especially with regard to foreign policy. Not only will the High Representative for foreign and security policy have to synthesise the foreign policy powers of the council and the commission (and preside over the new council for foreign policy), but the new President of the European Council, full-time for two and a half years (renewable once), will possess a primacy of sorts where the foreign representation of the EU is concerned.

The fact that it was a Belgian, Herman van Rompuy, former Prime Minister (a member of the Flemish Christian Party) who was elected President of the European Council at the end of 2009 made it possible for the rotating Belgian presidency to be more easily eclipsed at a time when the new treaty no longer attributes a major role to the rotating presidency of the council, notably on the occasion of major international summits. This judicious option in favour of the low profile of the Belgian presidency (perhaps facilitated also by the state of the federal government – with Yves Leterme as President and Steven Vanhacker as Minister of Foreign Affairs, that is to say for current affairs – in the absence of an agreement for a new government since June 2010) resulted in a faster implementation of the Treaty of the European Union, signed in December 2007 and which came into force on 1.12.2009.

Several international summits typify the semester of the Belgian presidency. It began with Brazil (Enterprise Conference on 14 July), continuing with South Africa (28 September), ASEM (4-5 October), China (6 October), South Korea (6 October), Ukraine (22 November), Africa (Tripoli, 29-30 November), Russia (7 December) and the USA.

Very importantly, the successful summit between the EU and the USA was held in Lisbon on 24 November, following the meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. It is precisely the very strict adherence on the part of Belgium to the letter and spirit of the new treaty which enabled this important transatlantic summit to take place. The prominent personalities at the Lisbon summit were above all, in accordance with the new treaty, the
President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, the President of the Commission, José Barroso, and the EU High Representative for CFSP (foreign and security policy), Lady Catherine Ashton. The lingering ironic comments of the international press on the double presidency of the EU are misplaced: the EU is not a state and, for a long period of time at least, will not have a new treaty and therefore not a president combining the present functions fulfilled by Mr Barroso and Mr Van Rompuy. We have to live with and benefit from the positive weekly coordination between the two authorities allowing for an appropriate division of duties and the primacy of the President of the European Council on the occasion of international summits. And as far as the office of the EU High Representative for international policy is concerned, its counterpart is to be found in the foreign affairs ministries of third world countries. In conclusion on this point, contrary to Spain, the Belgian presidency, by giving a “good example” of the coherent implementation of the new treaty, has created a precedent and it will be difficult – not to say impossible – for large or small states to reverse this.

The summit with the USA on 24 November therefore succeeded in making progress regarding the concerns shared by both sides. Whereas the NATO summit concentrated on the new security strategy and on Afghanistan, the EU/US summit focused its attention on three common priorities: overcoming the crisis and economic questions (exchange rate instability, sustainable growth, questions left open by the G20 in Seoul, the outcome of the Doha round of the WTO); secondly, climate change and the preparation for the Cancun conference; thirdly, the security of citizens (the fight against cyber crime, the commitment to ease the process of transatlantic extradition, international security, Iran, and the satisfaction felt on the success of the NATO meeting held the day before). The mutual understanding between the great powers of the West regarding economic and monetary relations is of great importance at the time of the euro crisis and the stagnation of the G20. The Transatlantic Economic Council and the EU/USA Energy Council have been charged with implementing the commitments with regard to fostering cooperation, free movement and innovation. The Transatlantic Economic Council is expected to present a report in 2011.

2. A success and a failure of the EU: the ASEM meeting and the UN Assembly. The difficulties for the EU to impose itself as a unitary player on the international scene

All the international summits with the USA, China, Japan, Russia, India and Africa as well as other partners are held in accordance with the spirit and letter of the new treaty; the two presidents, Van Rompuy of the European Council and Barroso of the Commission as well as the High Representative for foreign policy, Lady Ashton, were clearly at the forefront.

However, what has become evident is that several factors are acting against the emergence and recognition of the new Lisbon EU as a complete and separate unitary organisation. As such, the transition has not been successful in view of the resistance on the part of the other participants - states or international organisations outside the EU. This is why the rotating presidency is at times obliged to play a determining role. For example, the eighth meeting in Brussels of the ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting) on the 4-5 October 2010\(^1\) was almost entirely organised, politically prepared and conducted by the Belgian presidency and Belgian states.

\(^1\) ASEM was founded in 1996 by way of its first meeting, held in Bangkok. Subsequently it has met regularly every two years in Europe and Asia: in London, Seoul, Copenhagen, Hanoi etc.
diplomats (a particular role being played by the Senior Official Ambassador, Bertrand de Crombrugghe). It is Belgium which first and foremost had to wrestle for the institutions of the EU to have a place at the forefront of the conference.

It is also Belgium which had to find a compromise to the question of the place of the new members of the enlarged ASEM: this happened in the case of Russia which was initially rejected as belonging to the European group as well as to the Asian group. The solution was to create a special place for the countries which – like Russia – are at the same time European and Asian. ASEM has been a success in terms of the multilateral and bilateral meetings that have been made possible. The very low level of institutionalisation approved by the Asian states continues to limit the range of dialogue of this forum. As a result there is little sign of progress with regard to the three pillars of ASEM: economic and commercial co-operation, political dialogue and cultural cooperation. ASEM is a very interesting case as it provides valuable information as to the difficulties faced by the EU in establishing itself on the international scene and in being recognised as a political, unitary player.

On several occasions the Asian partners of ASEM have reacted with bewilderment to the proposal of the Belgian presidency to attribute a central role to President Van Rompuy on the occasion of the official opening of the conference. The argument of the Asian states is that ASEM is a forum of states and not a meeting of the regional organisations of Europe and Asia, that is to say a forum where states meet and participate as individual entities. The Belgian proposal was finally accepted in this exceptional case (and perhaps the nationality of President van Rompuy also played a positive role).

This difficulty encountered at the ASEM meeting should have alerted the EU leaders to the need for more caution in their approach on the occasion of the annual assembly of the United Nations in New York. On the contrary, they considered that the time had come to request the right to speak on behalf of the EU and in the name of the EU as a whole as a unitary player. However, it became clear that this was not the case: there was a majority vote in the Assembly against the EU request on the basis that this would have created a disparity with the other regional organisations of the other continents, the African Union, MERCOSUR etc. Of course, this rejection is not definitive but this defeat is serious as it highlights a substantial external difficulty in the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon and a confusion of ideas within the EU as to the nature of the EU. If only some members consider the EU to be a state, it will have difficulty in gaining recognition from other states and international organisations as well. The rotating presidency bears no responsibility for this failure which is due to the ambiguities in the present transitional phase of the EU in its complex process of transformation into a global unitary player of a kind hitherto unknown. Those responsible for the EU sometimes forget the conclusion arrived at by validated comparative research - that is to say that the EU is a regional organisation, certainly very sophisticated but still a regional organisation of 27 states and not a European state in the process of construction. Its politicisation and institutional reinforcement following the new treaty in no way imply the construction of a European super state, whether one likes it or not. These ambiguities require an additional attempt at clarification on the part of the institutions of the EU.

3. Noticeable progress: the European Council of September 2010

While it will remain in everyone’s memory for the row between Barroso and Sarkozy regarding the rights of the Roma, the European Council of 16 September had another important point on the agenda. The conclusions endorse the document which was presented with regard to the international relations of the EU, the first one to have a significant impact for years. After the famous “Solana Document” of 2003, the EU had begun to reflect on its
external relations: on the one hand it was a question of publishing the analysis of the evolution of the international system whilst the unipolar period of 2002–2008 was in the process of giving way to the predominance of the multipolar tendency and to the emergence of new players such as China, India, Brazil, or to the return of Russia (in EU language it is a question of “strategic partnerships”2. On the other hand a new synthesis was required between the development of the EU as a more coherent and unitary political player with a greater show of solidarity (as a result of the Treaty of Lisbon) and the vast spectrum of civil external relations which the EU and the EC have been extending for decades.

The conclusions approved on 16 September by the European Council constitute a step in the right direction and it is to be deplored that the media have in no way grasped the extent of the innovations taking place. In a word, the EU is aware of the necessity and the urgency to come up with a new comprehensive vision of international relations, adapted to a multipolar world and including an evolution of the agenda concerning external relations. There are two main innovations: focussing attention on major countries and extending the international agenda of the EU to new matters linked to sustainable development.

By way of presenting a programme of international meetings and summits (bilateral and multilateral), the document expressly acknowledges the emergence of a multipolar world in which relations with the USA are essential but also a world that is rooted within the context of plural relations with very diverse powers.

These bilateral and multilateral relations exhibit elements of similarity and diversity at the same time. The diversity – much debated and evolutive – focuses on the classification of the partners into “strategic” and non-strategic. An element of similarity of the strategic relations with the major countries also constitutes a risk – namely that the neighbours of the major countries singled out as “strategic partners” (seven at the present time, with perhaps Indonesia and South Africa being added to the list in the course of the coming months) may be offended by this selection of the EU which reinforces regional hierarchies to their detriment. This is the case of Argentina and Mexico in Latin America as a result of Brazil’s choice as a strategic partner; or the case of Indonesia and South Korea as a result of the EU focussing on China and Japan. A double corrective can and must be contemplated if the EU wishes to avoid diminishing instead of increasing its international influence. On the one hand, interregionalism must be re-launched – that is to say “bloc to bloc” dialogue between regional organisations, notably with MERCOSUR, ASEAN etc. These interregional discussion rounds are becoming marginal in the new “realistic” strategy of the EU whereas they played a central role in the 1990s. On the other hand emphasis must be put on regional cooperation within each individual strategic partnership. The danger is that this focussing on the major counties as well as the shift towards bilateral free-exchange agreements with countries such as Korea, Singapore or some African countries (accorded individual Preferential Trade Agreements by the EU) result in a serious weakening of regional organisations in the world. By not committing itself to open regionalism, the EU will be acting against its own interest in propagating its own model of “conflict prevention” around the world and in the development of regional convergence.

What are the roots and the guidelines of this new document with regard to the contents and the substance of external relations? A renewal process has been taking place for some years: the commission paper of June 2006 “Europe in the World” explicitly points out that the

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2 *USA, Canada, Japan, Russia, China, India, Brazil
international role of the EU will be all the more effective by establishing coherence between internal and external policies. Not only, therefore, is coherence necessary between the two institutions responsible for external relations – the commission (commercial policy, development and humanitarian aid etc.) and the council (foreign policy and joint security) thanks to the new powers of the High Representative for foreign policy. And not only is there a need for enhanced solidarity and loyalty of the member states vis-à-vis the EU and its international standpoint but equally coherence is necessary at a third level: between internal policies for sustainable growth and modernisation and external policies.

The commission is re-launching this innovative approach, noticeably stemming from DG Relex but also from several other internal services on the occasion of the rotating presidency in the second semester of 2007 (Communication of October 2007). The most important political result of this pressure as well as other internal factors calling for innovation must surely be the European Council of Lisbon’s approval in December 2007 of the “Declaration of Globalisation”, drawn up by a group of experts presided over by Ms M. J. Rodriguez and submitted to COREPER by the rotating presidency. The role played – among others by the driving force of the “Lisbon Strategy” of modernisation (launched in 2000 by the Portuguese presidency) – explains both the explicit mentioning of the “external implications of the Lisbon Strategy” in the European Council’s document of December 2007 as well as the spirit of the approach.

Why is it an important step? The answer is that it has resulted in a clearly widened agenda in the case of external relations. It no longer only involves traditional diplomatic relations and the stakes of high international politics (Iran, Afghanistan, Korea etc.). The EU, if it wishes to be seen as a political actor, must certainly endeavour to express unitary positions and policies also in relation to sensitive documents regarding world politics. However, the EU is presenting itself with an innovatory profile of civil power: “The importance of issues like climate change, energy policy, trade, development or Justice and Home Affairs issues, including migration and visa policy in dealings with partners and at a multilateral level must be fully taken into account in preparations for summits and international events. In this regard the European Union should further enhance the coherence and complementarity between its internal and external policies. The practice of holding orientation debates well before summits should be further developed, with a particular emphasis on setting priorities and concrete tasking.”

There are two elements giving impetus to this substantial widening of the external relations agenda. Firstly, the EU is far more “relevant” as a global actor with regard to trade, development cooperation, sustainable development and cooperation in social and environmental issues. Secondly, the EU has a particular interest in a world-wide propagation of its socio-economic model and its social and environmental standards in order to avoid a “race to the bottom” within the context of competitive globalisation. Moving from an “inward looking” vision to an “outward looking” interpretation of all the objectives of the Lisbon strategy (a society of knowledge, competitiveness, and technological innovation, research, education, social inclusion and cohesion etc.) is therefore in the interests of Europe and its citizens. Thirdly, my experience as an advisor of DG research and the meetings between the Big Four and the USA and Japan have strengthened my conviction that Europe is not isolated in the world and that an effort in communication can contribute to sharing knowledge and political standpoints with strategic partners and the other states. The essential themes of the “Lisbon Strategy” and “EU 2020” can be seen as aimed at a convergence between the EU and its international partners, the result being an upward revision of the social and environmental standards of the other actors of the multipolar world and an improvement in common governance in the face of global challenges.
The consolidation of this innovatory approach as set out in the “Conclusions of the European Council” of September 2010 shows that the EU is moving one stage forward towards a more meaningful vision of international cooperation and the global agenda for sustainable development and peace.

As a consequence of establishing this new framework, a practical innovation is taking place – to which the Belgian presidency has also contributed: the increasing importance of the energy and environment protection policy objectives with regard to the external relations of the EU.

In spite of the problems of budgetary constraint imposed on states by the economic crisis (which paradoxically helped in fulfilling the objectives of Copenhagen 2009 as far as the reduction of emissions is concerned as a result of decreased production, even if only temporary), the EU is reiterating its commitments to the big three 20% objectives in respect of the Cancun conference. The preparatory meeting which was held in China and the G20 summit have nevertheless confirmed two tendencies: a) on the one hand, the enormous difficulty in attaining the initial objective of the EU, a binding international agreement concerning climate change and its limitation to 2 degrees centigrade. The failures sustained by the Obama presidency (the Senate’s “No” to the anti-climate change package last summer and the mid-term elections strengthening the opposition bloc) and the reluctance on the part of emerging countries are making the objective more remote. b) On the other hand, the year which followed the Copenhagen conference bore witness to the possibility of making progress even in the absence of a binding treaty. For example, China is making noticeable progress towards renewable energies and sustainable development as symbolised by the World Fair in Shanghai, the aim of which was to emphasise China’s commitment to the protection of the environment.

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