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THE ROLE OF THE EU IN FIGHTING PROLIFERATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IRAN CASE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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Why the EU?

Even as little as 5 years ago, the idea that the EU should have taken a prominent role in tackling a security issue linked to weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and indeed should have staked a good deal of its prestige on the outcome, would have seemed like a fantasy to most people including me. It is true that the integrated Europe had never been completely a nuclear innocent. EURATOM was one of the original 3 communities established in the 1950s and has for a long time played its part against proliferation by allowing Europeans to cooperate under strict and transparent safeguards for the peaceful exploitation of nuclear energy. Since the start of Political Cooperation, the member states have been developing common positions of an increasingly clear and formal kind upon arms control and non-proliferation issues arising in other international fora. And since the end of the Cold War, EU funds have increasingly been deployed to help partner countries—above all, the Russian Federation—in cleaning up their left-over and unwanted WMD materials and in converting former WMD scientists to new careers.

But whether consciously or unconsciously, up to 2003 the Europeans preferred to leave these as a range of unconnected and relatively low-key activities—like the Bourgeois Gentilhomme who was speaking prose for most of his life without realizing it. The likely reasons, in retrospect, included both external and internal factors. In the 20th century the EU generally tried to keep itself out of what might be called the ‘hardest’ issues of military security in the outside world. It did so particularly when there was a tradition of handling US-European and Russian-European dialogue through other channels—in this case, the Nuclear Planning Group of NATO and NATO’s long-standing role as the arena for Western consultations and position-building on nuclear arms control. A third point is simply that no-one was making much fuss about proliferation in the 1990’s or, consequently, demanding that Europe should do anything special about it. Internally, meanwhile, the topic was seen as a sensitive one because of the co-existence in the EU of two nuclear powers and many non-nuclear ones some of whom had strong anti-nuclear views, even as regards civil nuclear power. An interesting attempt between German and French thinkers in 1995 to consider the use of French and British weapons as a strategic protection for the whole EU went nowhere, and the atmosphere was soured by complaints from some fellow EU members, including the newly arrived Nordics, against France’s nuclear testing programme at much the same time.

Yet in March 2003—actually on the very same day that the forces of certain EU members entered Iraq together with the US and in the face of outrage from certain other Europeans—the Political and Security Committee that now oversees EU foreign, security and defence policy met in Brussels to start debating a new common strategy of the Union on WMD. The meeting was calm and constructive, with countries like Britain and France, Italy and Sweden all speaking along the same lines. Guidelines and a plan of action for the new strategy were approved as early as June and the full text of a strategy was endorsed by the European Council in December 2003. Why this sudden breakthrough?

- Proliferation boosted up the international agenda since 9/11, esp. in connection with so-called ‘rogue states’ and non-state users (terrorists), and with 3 particular targets of concern: Iraq, Iran and North Korea
- the Iraq crisis itself showed the risks and costs involved (i.a. in terms of European unity and confidence) in tackling these problems in the way apparently preferred by the US—ostracism, coercion and military force against the suspected offenders
- the EU needed the therapy of work on future, more constructive and consensus-based policies precisely to overcome the damage of the Iraq split (NB other examples besides WMD inc. the main ESS)
- EU generally starting to understand its own security responsibilities and potential better, as part of its own dynamic of evolution and not least in response to imminent enlargement (= more space to look after, more national policies to harmonize, more partners to draw on).

As the strategy document itself summed it up: proliferation had become a clear and omnipresent threat to the international peace and stability on which the EU's own survival and welfare depended, and (to quote:) 'all the states of the Union and the EU institutions have a collective responsibility for preventing these risks by actively contributing to the fight against proliferation'.

What EU strategy?

The EU strategy is typical of the EU in that it is complex and sophisticated text which strives to bring together a uniquely wide range of institutional resources and possibilities. It is typical of its time, i.e. the first 'rebound' after the Iraq crisis, in that it strives to combine the kind of seriousness about the threat needed to boost the EU's image in American and other people's eyes with the building of a specifically European paradigm for policy responses, based on a strong preference for orderly, multilateral, cooperative solutions and for keeping the use of force strictly as a last resort. (Exactly the same points can be applied to the EUSS). Key features of the strategy in this context—not necessarily in the order in which they appear in the text—are

- (a) Explicit support for arms control/disarmament/non-proliferation treaties, for the international agencies that serve them, and for the powers/resources these agencies need to carry out effective monitoring and enforcement (contrast with US...)
- (b) Determination that the EU should itself set the best possible example, hence review and strengthening of its own performance in treaty observance, inspection, export controls, relevant safety practices and so on (contrast with US...)
- (c) Recognition, however, that treaties and good examples are not enough, hence need for active and practical measures esp. to cut off access to dangerous materials/knowledge for non-state actors who are difficult to catch by either international law or military force: export controls again, 'CTR' (or international Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Assistance, INDA) programmes to continue collecting/destroying stocks, retraining of scientists, etc
- (d) Idea of 'mainstreaming' non-proliferation into all relevant internal policy areas
- (e) Ditto for external policy areas: cooperation with major partners inc. US (where using compatible methods), active assistance and competence transfer for new neighbour zones, link-up with aid policies and regional policies, 'non-proliferation' clause adopted in Nov. 2003 for insertion in all future (cooperation, trade etc) agreements with third countries
- (f) Approach to individual 'problem' cases based on broad security analysis:
'The best solution to the problem of proliferation of WMD is that countries should no longer feel they need them. If possible, political solutions should be found to the problems which lead them to seek WMD'.
Logically enough, treatment of such cases should be firm but holistic, including use of political and economic levers, dialogue and negotiation and improvement of the regional environment, while keeping forceful interdiction and intervention as last resorts.

Why Iran?

Important to note that follow-up to 2003 WMD decisions went forward across a broad front and involved many new ventures in institutional, functional, export control, CTR and other dimensions as well as tricky negotiations over an agreement including a 'non-proliferation clause' with Syria. However, Europe's direct diplomatic intervention with Iran was the most dramatic attempt to test out the new strategy and it came into the open in October 2003, even before the strategy was formally adopted. 3 EU Foreign Ministers (UK; France, Germany) declared that they had agreed with Iran that it would adopt the IAEA's Additional Protocol (imposing a higher degree of safeguards and transparency at Iranian nuclear plants) and would suspend the enrichment of uranium. The EU institutions became involved soon afterwards with Solana visiting Tehran, and with Brussels making clear that finalizing an EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) with Iran would now be conditional also on resolving the proliferation issue—although EU concerns about human rights in Iran also remained very much part of the package. Without wearying you with the details, the basic problem ever since has been that Iran has proved impossible to pin down on what its enrichment moratorium meant, and has now said it will no longer fully observe it, and has rejected all Western offers of favours in return as insufficient ((i.a. because it sees a need for security assurances from the US), and has still failed to satisfy the IAEA that it has come clean about its past nuclear activities [update after Nov. IAEA Board meeting]. Hence, EU involvement not ended but certainly can't be called successful as of now.

Why did the Europeans pick on Iran for this experiment? Probably:

- Of all current 'problem cases' Iran is, after the US/UK buy-out of Libya, the closest to the EU homeland: lying in an extended neighbourhood region important for European security generally, and also for oil supplies; EU sees Iran (as oldest, largest power) as key to this region's stability for good or ill

- EU also sees more clearly than US that Iranian cooperation or at least acquiescence (+ limit on mischief making) is crucial for allowing the Iraqi mess to be cleared up, and for avoiding a dangerous tip in regional power balance/dangerous polarization of region after fall of Saddam
- EU wants to preempt US (or Israeli) military attack on Iran, or other crude attempt at regime change
- EU already embarked on long attempt to 'normalize' relations with Tehran after end of fatwa problem: knows how hard the job is but believes it has some expertise in using the diplomatic technique
- EU approach had to be based on assured unity of 3 big powers (in fact, hard tested by subsequent events!): other cases were too far away to generate the necessary common will, or were too divisive (e.g. the question of ensuring future non-proliferation in Iraq itself)

What Lessons?

Obviously not final and genuinely open to debate. Will explore here in framework of four big paradoxes in approach that EU has chosen to adopt (+ was largely obliged to adopt).

A. National or Collective?

Initial approach by 'EU3', confidentially and without consultation, rightly caused annoyance among other EU members, but hard to see where else the will to act would have come from and who else the Iranians would have listened to. Generally, meaningful discussions on non-pol policy evolution with major non-EU powers (US, Japan, Russia) are also carried out by 4 largest EU powers at G8 or in other small-group and bilateral settings. Smaller EU powers that have taken initiatives have often done so in other institutional settings (UN, NAC) or unilaterally (Blix Commission)—though Anna Lindh of Sweden was also the first to propose the WMD strategy! On the other hand, Iran story shows that big powers depend on back-up by all members, on access to institutional resources, and on EU's role as a legal entity in order to offer any substantial 'sticks and carrots' and—in the event of success—to conclude binding agreements. How to reconcile the various roles, rights and sensitivities involved? Chance to make better use of EU's less big members?

B. Sticks and Carrots

The EU has a potentially much wider range of them than an individual nation and than any other institution (NB esp. its ability to apply collective funds). But—and this is a general problem for EU strategy—they are still spread out over 3 pillars and also shared between the central institutions and the nations: hence v. difficult to apply to a single case in a coherent, simultaneous, sustained, 'pincer' fashion. Also, in Iran case, they [have up to now] proved too weak overall and the EU's hand has been harder to play because Teheran doesn't recognize some sticks as sticks and some carrots as carrots, and is not a consistent/unitary interlocutor (mention background in recent SIPRI book, 'Europe and Iran: Perspectives on Non-Proliferation'). Though some aspects of Iran 'cultural' challenge are unique, these last problems would probably affect EU when pursuing its WMD strategy in any other case that is (a) not a small and weak country, (b) not within the enlargement catchment area and (c) not in any close historical/cultural (e.g. ex-colonial) relationship with Europe. This leads back to more basic question of whether EU's 'nice policeman' approach (on WMD or any other strategic challenge) can work when the targets don't believe in niceness and the EU hasn't the strength or will to compel them in any other way. (To be fair, there is no proof yet that anyone else's approach works better either!)

C. Independence and Interplay (the EU and other major actors)

The point of having an EU strategy is to let the Europeans act on their own initiative and in their own style, but in any serious case of WMD concern it is not realistic to expect they would ever have the field to themselves. The 'interference factor' from other great powers has been particularly clear in Iran—the US threatening, raising the stakes at the IAEA and potentially UN, and thereby creating Iranian concerns and counter-demands that the European can't satisfy; Russia getting involved with ideas of nuclear fuel deals. These other powers' engagement plus China's generally protective attitude towards Iran have had the secondary effect that the EU cannot expect to enlist the IAEA Board in any simple way behind its own efforts; and in practice, in such wider institutional settings the Europeans have had to play a tactical game of the USA's choosing. Lessons not all bad, however: EU did manage to bring round USA from complete scepticism to tolerance of its efforts + support for some specific offers to Iran, while EU and Russia have been able to communicate more smoothly and found more common base of interest than Washington and Moscow left alone could have done. Message is perhaps that EU should not be discouraged about trying to bring in its distinctive approach where this has comparative advantages, but it must be ready to exercise diplomatic skill and resolve at 2 levels (with the target and with others aiming at the same target); and if it wants its relations with these others to be one of partnership, it must consider what price it will have to pay and is ready to pay for that.

D. Strategy as Therapy: Kill or Cure?

WMD strategy and its test-case in Iran were designed to [re-]build unity and confidence between the EU Big Three and all members—but could Iran break them again if it fails? Hopefully, EU can avoid US tendency to over-dramatize and

to swing from one mood extreme to the other in these matters. The Iran initiative has if nothing else bought time (a period of time that was especially important for Iraq), raised the EU's profile and taught it some useful lessons. The Big Three have held together better than many expected and this has doubtless helped the EU to get through other WMD-related exercises meantime with relatively good cohesion and lack of recrimination (NPT Review Conference, UN reform exercise). However, to keep the WMD strategy strongly based, energetic and internationally credible, also important to keep up the collective EU effort in less glamorous fields like internal reform, neighbourhood cooperation, export control and CTR, and preparation of good inputs to next events like BTWC review (mid-2003). [Brief mention of conclusions of SIPRI study on future spending from Community budget.] The whole EU philosophy as expressed i.a. in the WMD strategy is that it is not just the dramatic cases that shape the future and that there are ways of succeeding without 'winning'. Let us hope that that will eventually prove to be true over the case of Iran as well!