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UN and EU: Partners in Security Governance?

By Luk Van Langenhove

Synopsis

As new global threats emerge triggering renewed interest in regional organisations, the EU can play the role of a partner of the UN in global security governance.

Commentary

SINCE ITS establishment, the European Union has contributed significantly to peace and stability in Europe and beyond. The organisation fervently aspires to contribute to effective multilateralism by supporting the United Nations in addressing global challenges. It has, directly or indirectly, supported the mission and goals of the UN in several ways and flagged its aspiration to be a “global actor” on many occasions.

The EU and UN formalised their relationship in 1974, as the then European Community obtained the status of observer at the UN General Assembly. Over the years, the two institutions have developed strong ties and have cooperated in various domains, including development aid, humanitarian assistance, electoral support, fight against corruption and health issues. The EU is also an important financial contributor to the UN missions and operations. The UN General Assembly granted in 2011 the status of enhanced observer to the Union, thereby strengthening its position and leverage in the UNGA debates. This sets a precedent as the EU is the first – and only to date – regional organisation to obtain this status.

‘Triple F’ Strategy for Greater Role

The enthusiasm expressed by a number of regional groupings about this new development is not shared by all. There are fears that the resolution enabling this could have profound implications for the very nature, working methods and modes of

interactions at the UN. They believe that giving more importance to regional bodies could endanger the “one state, one vote” principle, which would be detrimental to small states in particular. Nevertheless, the acquisition of speaking rights at the UNGA represents a milestone for the European Union, both in symbolic and practical terms.

The question that arises is whether the EU is equipped to contribute to global security governance. The EU’s capacity to contribute to security governance needs therefore to be assessed from an institutional and strategic, financial, as well as material, human and operational point of view. But next to capacity, the ambition or willingness of the EU to act should be taken into account, together as the legitimacy to play a role in security governance, which is translated in its acceptance as a global or regional player by others.

Overall, the main problem might not be the mere capacity of the EU, but the willingness of its members to pool their capacities as well as the acceptance by others that the EU plays a regional and global role. It is therefore recommended that EU member states maximise the pooling and coordination of their capacity at the EU level. The EU can only become a relevant actor at the global level if its ambitions are matched with resources.

To be recognised as a major player, it needs to step up its role within the UN and establish itself as an actor able to deploy both hard and soft power under the multilateral umbrella. For the European region to become a reliable partner to the UN, it is important that other regional organisations active in Europe in the field of peace and security also increase their coordination with the EU.

One way to do this could be adopting a “Triple F” strategy in reformulating the EU’s strategic approach: that the EU be Flexible in its strategic approaches towards the increasing number of relevant actors; Focused with regards to its battles in order to be efficient in the tasks it commits to; and Fast in taking important decisions despite its internal diversity. Realising this would be a big step forward in establishing a networked approach to security governance as well as a contribution towards a more effective United Nations.

Global Threats and Renewed Interest in Regional Bodies

While few invocations of Chapter VIII’s provisions were made during the Cold War period, the collapse of the bipolar world system spawned new global security threats, and the explosion of local and regional armed conflicts provoked a renewed interest in regional organisations and their role in the maintenance of regional peace and security. Over the years many regional organisations were established worldwide.

In this context, the United Nations was forced to acknowledge its inability to bear sole responsibility for providing peace and security worldwide and started to contemplate potential opportunities to develop collaborative relations with regional organisations in the area of peace and security. Since the initial impetus provided by Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s “Agenda for Peace” in 1992, different initiatives have been taken to enhance global-regional security partnerships, such as the ‘Retreats’ between the UN and regional organisations.

The UN Security Council has also been supportive of an effective involvement of regional organisations in the field of peace and security. Since 2003, it has convened a number of debates on the cooperation between the UN and regional and international organisations. In 2005, the Council adopted its first resolution on the cooperation between the UN and regional organisations in maintaining international peace and security.

Added Value of Regional Organisations

Regional organisations, such as the European Union, have specific advantages to bring to all phases of conflict management, these being: conflict prevention; peacemaking; peacekeeping; peace enforcement; and peacebuilding. The argument most frequently advanced relates to the cultural similarities between the states in, or threatened by, conflict and its fellow member states within a common regional organisation.

It has been posited that the greater cultural awareness of regional organisations and their member states can grant them a better understanding of the root causes of conflicts in their regions, resulting in the development of more appropriate solutions – whether these be preventive, to reconcile parties in violent conflict, to keep the peace, to enforce stability and security, or to build a sustainable and long-term peace.

In addition, the cultural similarities of member states of regional organisations may on occasion mean that regional intervention is more welcome than UN involvement, which is often viewed with suspicion by governments. Regional organisations also have certain skills or competencies to which the UN does not have access, which can also contribute to more effective sharing of the financial burden of collective security.

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