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The EU's Arc of Instability: Can the European Neighborhood Policy be Resurrected?

by Jeffrey Brown

It has been over a decade since the European Union launched its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) aimed at fostering “a ring of well-governed states” surrounding the EU. Now, a majority of the EU's sixteen ‘partners’ find themselves entangled in increasingly intractable conflicts in an arc of instability stretching from Libya to Ukraine. Buffeted by horrific terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris and the arrival of hundreds of thousands refugees, the EU finds its internal cohesion and mainstays such as Schengen challenged by instability in the neighborhood. While the world's attention has largely been focused on short-term solutions to bolster internal security, intelligence cooperation and the integration of refugees, a pivot toward external action is needed - in the form of a beefed up policy grounded in security and, above all, a shift from conflict management to conflict resolution.

Differentiation in the ENP

After yearlong consultations on the ENP completed last fall, the Commission acknowledged widespread support among Member States, the European Parliament and partners to maintain the “geographical scope” and “comprehensive” approach of the ENP. Although the Commission's review may foreshadow a newfound focus on “differentiation” between policy domains and partners, it fails to prioritize the EU's objectives in the neighborhood. This would be a mistake.

Despite the fact that the ENP is undermined by the shallow and diffuse nature of its own policy intervention, it has been equally overwhelmed by the often unpredictable and sometimes calamitous security situations that reign in partner states. ENP projects supporting economic development, democratic governance and gender equality, however noble and aligned with European values, are unlikely to bear fruit as long as active or frozen conflicts continue unabated across a majority of partner states. In essence, “differentiation” simply rebrands the ENP's fragmented approach to the neighborhood while ignoring the genesis of instability rapping at the EU's door. In response to twelve years of sub-par performance and an ever-increasing list of internal and external security threats, the ENP should instead concentrate its efforts on promoting the cessation and resolution of conflict in the neighborhood.

Moving from Management to Resolution

As of April 2016, ten partners are embroiled in varying levels of active or frozen conflict – including five Eastern Partnership states (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and five southern neighbors (Libya, Egypt, Syria, Israel and the Palestinian Territories). Two others, Lebanon and Jordan, are home to 1.7 million Syrian refugees.

Despite the apparition of armed conflict and mounting humanitarian disaster in partner states, the ENP has been flat-footed in its response, defaulting to non-action or low-level (and low-risk) conflict management. This strategy has been employed most widely in the post-Soviet space, where the EU has sought the long-term de-escalation of conflict in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh through uncontroversial measures such as educational exchanges, humanitarian assistance, border management, strengthening the rule of law, and the deployment of civilian-led crisis management mechanisms. While the EU's strategy of conflict management has paid limited dividends in low-intensity frozen conflicts such as Transnistria, the model is ill-suited to the far more insidious and vast challenges posed by large-scale conflict in ENP partner states Syria, Libya and Ukraine.

Curiously, the Commission's November 2015 summary of the ENP review process dedicates just three lines to addressing the policy's deficient conflict management mechanisms, while simultaneously admitting that the emergence of conflict in partner states threatens the EU's political and economic relations with the neighborhood.

The laundry list of challenges emanating from partner states should serve as a wake-up call for more decisive EU action. The recent attacks in Brussels and Paris and the outflow of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East show that the EU cannot afford to let violence run its course. The on-the-ground reality in partner states should not dissuade the EU from taking a more proactive, unified and constructive role in staunching the conflict. In line with its strategy of "differentiation," the ENP should craft individually tailored conflict resolution plans, which dovetail with the specific challenges facing each ENP state. Depending on the severity of each conflict, measures could include the insertion of civilian peacekeepers, initiatives to support border controls, and police training missions aimed at increasing local capacity to counter the transnational threat posed by the Islamic State group and its confederates.

High-level EU action in situations of ongoing conflict and instability is not unprecedented. EU missions supporting the rule of law in Iraq, police assistance in Afghanistan and Kosovo (EULEX), and border management in the Palestinian Territories are prime examples of the EU's nascent conflict resolution capabilities.

Alignment of Strategic Interest Ahead?

Although there is widespread acknowledgement of the threat posed by instability in partner states, to date the ENP has also been hobbled by the competing interests of member states. However, there are reasons to suspect that a strategic realignment of priorities may be at hand. First, Interpol's revelation that as many as 5,000 jihadists have returned to Europe has cast member states' attention toward source countries such as Libya and Syria. Second, elevated levels of support for the far-right, piqued by terrorist attacks on European soil and refugee inflows, should increase incentives for incumbent governments to band together to pursue more unified and forceful external action. Looking ahead, it will be crucial to monitor precisely how internal challenges brought on by external threats transform EU policy in the neighborhood.

The High Cost of Inaction

Twelve years after its launch, the ENP has failed to secure any of its main objectives. Perhaps most shockingly, the EU and its flagship foreign policy mechanism have presided over a drastic deterioration in the humanitarian and security situations of its partners. Recent crises show that the ENP is in need of not just drastic reform, but an urgent reordering of its priorities. Although the EU has a proven track record of intervention in post-conflict settings, it has been far too risk averse in pushing an ineffectual policy of conflict management at the expense of conflict resolution.

While it remains to be seen if attacks striking at the heart of the EU galvanize decisive action in the neighborhood, the already high cost of inaction grows. Barring decisive moves to guarantee the cessation of conflict, the human toll of malign neglect and threats to EU security will spiral if unchecked. With its vision of a "ring of well-governed states" still far from fruition, the EU should recognize that crafting a muscular ENP is crucial not only to the maintenance of external relations, but also to cement the longevity of the EU itself.

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