Europe as a global power:
Views from the outside

Report of an international conference held in Prague, March 2012

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Europe as a global power by Jan Zielonka

The world is ever less European and Europe is in a deep political and economic crisis. This does not mean that Europe is no longer one of the key global players. The sheer size of its market, the seat at major international institutions, and the scope of its development aid guarantee Europe’s global influence. However, there are signs that Europe is no longer seen as an oasis of peace and prosperity.

The EU response to financial problems of Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Spain created the image of Europe being stingy, rigid and oppressive; hardly a model to emulate. This obviously undermines Europe’s soft power and increases transaction costs of Europe’s international bargaining. Therefore, the way other major players look at Europe becomes of paramount importance. Europe constantly needs to interact with them to meet its basic international objectives.

To begin with, Europe needs to make sure that its vast neighbourhood is relatively stable and prosperous. In this respect the position of Russia and Turkey are particularly critical. Moreover, Europe needs to protect its social, labour, food safety and environmental standards that are being undermined by the global trade competition. China, India and Brazil are very crucial in this context. Europe’s role in the global security governance should also be protected and this includes relations with Japan and other key regional players already mentioned.

This project attempts to shed some light on the way some of the major international actors look at Europe and subsequently design their policies towards the old continent. The transatlantic relations are of paramount importance too but they are being handled by another project.

A large international conference held in Prague in March 2012 was the first event the ECFR organised within its Reinvention of Europe project on this particular topic. The Reinvention of Europe project was launched in 2011 to inject a new dynamic into the discourse around the crisis and questions concerning Europe’s future at both national and European levels. The conference in Prague was organised together with the Czech Institute for International Relations, the Czech Diplomatic Academy and the Adenauer Foundation. It gathered leading experts from India, China, Brazil, Russia, Japan and Turkey, together with several European specialists, including those from the ECFR. Dr. Hartmut Mayer (St Peters College, Oxford) and Dr. Petr Kratochvil (IIR, Prague) made particular contributions to the organisation of this event. The key discussion points are being reflected in this paper.

The conference concluded that the changing balance of forces characterised by economic globalisation, emerging regional powers, new security challenges, cultural diversity and very old problems of development and global social justice all demand a rethinking of Europe’s role in world affairs. Europe has to fundamentally revise its Eurocentric self-image and rhetoric. It should initiate a serious debate on its wider global responsibilities in constant dialogue with the other global players, established and emerging ones. For this an understanding of the expectations, sensitivities and ambitions of non-European powers vis-à-vis Europe is essential.

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We are grateful for the support of Steven Heinz, Thomas Leysen and Umicor for their support of ECFR work on the Reinvention of Europe.
In his presentation Sergei Utkin addressed the identity issue affecting EU-Russia relations, and spoke of how although the EU is seen in a generally positive light Russia feels it deserves to be treated as more of an equal. Russia has the peculiar position of being both a subject of European foreign policy whilst also identifying itself as European. The question of whether Russia is in Europe or Asia has for a long time been a defining issue between Russia and the rest of the continent. Russians feel that a country of such size and historical significance should not be treated the same way as developing or very distant countries with little connection to Europe.

Russians themselves see the European Union in a positive light, especially in terms of what it has managed to achieve. According to Levada Centre polling 71% of Russians view the EU in positive or very positive light (November 2011), whilst a clear majority (56%) are for Russian accession to the EU (October 2010). It is also seen as a good model for the Russia’s own neighbourhood. It is not however seen as a policy priority. For Russians it is a feeling of exclusion from mainstream Europe that leaves a negative impact. The best example of this is the issue of visas to the EU. Whilst much of the Americas and the former Soviet Bloc in Central Europe has visa free travel (or free movement) across the EU, Russians are required to apply for visas along with most of Africa and Asia. “This is both a symbol and a source of various practical problems”. Russians are required to go through bureaucratic humiliations and feel they are being treated like second class citizens, not welcome to the rest of Europe. The visa issue is one of very few that actually interests the Russian public as regards the EU and is what journalists always bring up after summits. Progress has in fact been made with steps currently being adopted including a system of readmission, biometric passports and new rules on asylum. But there is little indication of a concrete date anytime soon. There have been initiatives trying to bridge the gulf between Russia and the EU, notably including an EU-Russian Committee on Foreign Relations suggested by Germany. Some analysts, however, say that while these “sound good in intention”, recent developments in Syria or Russia itself, as well as a difference between a stress on sovereignty and democracy, show how difficult achieving anything concrete would be. This is especially relevant when it come to their common neighbourhood, which is a foreign policy priority to both.

The energy relationship is one where Russia is able to assert itself as an equal. Russia is often depicted as being as dependent as EU member states on this relationship, which in turn helps solidify stability between the two. Many of the problems in this relationship stem from issues in transit countries, which should be resolvable through dialogue. A mechanism for rapid reaction has now been established and if it works disputes will in the future “be civilised and solved in far shorter time period”.

What does Russia want from its relationship with the EU? “Russia definitely wants a strong and stable EU” but one that treats it on equal terms. Pro-European experts in Russia are now afraid that members of the EU will not be keen to establish any closer links with Russia after the return of Putin. But for all the bad press and ups and downs in relations there are things on the table that could make EU-Russia relations better including visa facilitation and visa free travel. “All these ideas stay on the table. It does not matter who initially proposed them. It matters that they could contribute to EU-Russia relations developing”.

“The View from Russia

Sergei Utkin, Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow
Jacques Rupnik, CERI-Sciences Po, Paris
Atila Eralp explained how the deterioration of EU influence has coincided with Turkey’s growing regional role. He was optimistic that relations could be rejuvenated, particularly if Turkey is involved in talks on a more multi-speed Europe.

For Turkey, the EU used to be seen as a major actor of transformation: Turkey’s accession process is credited with pushing forward a whole agenda of reform. For a long time, there was overwhelming public support for EU membership, which was linked to continual progress by the government. This positive view ironically came to an end when membership negotiations officially began in 2005. The “Europeanness” of Turkey has been disputed in public discourse, meanwhile Cyprus and France have helped to block 18 (of 33) negotiating chapters. As a consequence, support for accession inside Turkey has declined, as has the level of trust, accession no longer being seen as a bipartisan process. The EU has lost the attraction it held before and is no longer present in political debates about policy reconstruction.

This deterioration in the accession process, around which EU relations are based, has coincided with both a visible decline of the West and Turkey becoming a strong regional actor under Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. “Turkey has become increasingly more confident of herself and increased its role in the neighbourhood. There’s even an aspiration to become a more global actor.” Turkey has played different influential roles in the past few years in the Middle East and significantly was looked to as a model for many after the ‘Arab Spring’. “Turkey has become more active in the Middle East, not only economically but also in societal relations – people to people contacts”.

For all the difficulties, there is optimism that relations could improve between Turkey and the rest of Europe. It is still the case that eighty per cent of current inward FDI is European, and that Turkey’s regional role owes a lot to its links to the EU. “We should remember that Turkey’s popularity in the region took place because of the Turkish accession process. And when you look at public opinion polls, you can see that. Turkey has become popular as a result of the EU anchor.” It is indeed difficult to talk of Turkey actually being outside Europe, it being already so connected through the accession process, customs union, not mentioning non EU organisations such as NATO. Notwithstanding how connected it is, Turkey does lack a voice on the European stage, which it feels is unfair for such a strategically important and democratic, secular country.

The EU is seen as in decline but that is because of the crisis. Looking at the history of EU integration there have been moments of crisis that have then often led to the EU revitalising itself and becoming stronger. Although the outlook is currently gloomy in the short term, there’s hope that changes of leadership in France and maybe Germany, and a post-crisis Europe in 2014 will revitalise relations with Turkey.

Discussions on a multispeed Europe, so more flexible types of European integration, could actually be beneficial to Turkish-EU relations and these discussions should be extended to candidate countries and neighbours. This should not, however, be presented as an alternative (as the Union for the Mediterranean was) they should be membership neutral, and more inclusionary. If the EU becomes more outward oriented then Turkey could contribute to that kind of EU.
Miriam Gomes Saraiva presented the difference between the two schools of thought within the Brazilian Foreign Ministry under Presidents Cardoso and Lula de Silva and how they differed in dealing with the EU.

Since 1993, Brazil's foreign policy has pursued two parallel and interrelated objectives: greater projection as a global player on the international stage, and regional leadership in South America. There have been two different groups of thinking in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), who have dominated at different stages in the past two decades, who have had very different attitudes to implementing these aims and in particular how they relate to Europe: The institutionalists, connected to President Cardoso, and the autonomy-oriented group, connected to President Lula de Silva.

During President Cardoso’s term (1995 – 2002) there was a strong presence of the institutionalist group who supported international standards and multilateralism and saw Europeans as allies in upholding these values. Cardoso himself actively tried to keep Brazil close to Europe, and had good relationships with politicians including Tony Blair and Lionel Jospin. The priority of the EU at that point, however, was engaging with regional groups, so in Brazil’s case with Mercosur (the South American trading bloc established in 1991 bringing together Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay). “Brazil was told - first you agree with neighbouring countries, and then you come in a group to talk to us”, which led to frustration and disappointment.

The Lula government (2003 – 2010) saw a change in thinking towards a more autonomous and active projection of the country in the international arena. Brazil became more active in international institutions and put in efforts to reinforce links with other emerging countries rather than Europe. It has also developed into a clear leader in the region, especially looking at other countries such as Venezuela. Through its size, growth and assertiveness Brazil has the ability to build consensus in the region. It also invests heavily in its neighbours and leads technical cooperation on issues including health, education and farming.

Today the EU puts more emphasis on emerging economies and tries to develop strategic partnerships, including with Brazil. “But for Brazil it’s not exactly the same. There are shared values: democracy, peace, multilateralism but on many principles the Brazilian point of view is not exactly the same." They now look more critically at Europe’s position: it is not clear to what extent Europeans have the disposition to fight for multilateralism (and so open up the international system beyond the ‘West’) or whether they prefer to stay aligned to the United States.

In Europe there is a common misconception that a democracy with a market economy automatically means policy alignment. So while Brazilians consider themselves to adhere to the same values as Europe they interpret them their own way. “There are many different things that can be seen as human rights and there are different strategies to attain these goals.” Brazil, for example, has a strong tradition of non-intervention and sees Europe as too quick to dismiss quieter diplomacy. It has gained the confidence to put forward international initiatives, including alternative negotiations with Iran, and reform of both the UN Security Council and the IMF.
Rajendra Jain explained how India’s historical ties to the British affect how it sees Europe and how although Europe is seen as important it has not been able to transform shared values into shared interests with India.

The Indian elite’s perception of Europe has been conditioned by its close connection to Britain and the Anglo-Saxon media. The largest number of correspondents is based in London with few in continental Europe. This has resulted in a rather fragmented and partial view of Europe tending to reinforce and sustain traditional stereotypical images and clichés. "Overall there is a big information deficit between India and Europe - it works both ways. And it is important to bridge this divide". In this way, avenues for closer cooperation will be able to be opened for the long term.

Although ties with Britain have been substantially declining and the new plugged in middle class finds the United States more exciting, policy planners retain a strong focus on the UK and Britain remains a major destination for Indian investment. Over 60% of Indian FDI into Europe goes to Britain. Apart from the UK, India has strategic partnerships in Europe with France and Germany, largely neglecting Central and Eastern Europe (except for Poland).

For the great majority of Indians, most of Europe is a strange land, an exotic place for tourism, to which only a privileged layer of society had had access. Indian elites regard the EU as a global economic giant, with its market being its biggest strength and attraction for India and other emerging powers. Correspondingly, efforts are being put in to conclude the EU-India trade and investment agreement because it will not only give access to European markets but also to technologies - so crucial to India's social and economic development.

The EU is not, however, seen as a cohesive foreign policy actor or significant military power. It is relatively invisible as a development aid actor in India. It is also seen to be in decline, a perception only reinforced by the euro crisis.

Nonetheless Europe’s importance for Indian business is likely to increase and a growing number of Indian multinationals are now looking to diversify from an undue reliance on the American market towards continental Europe. There are, for example, many Indian IT companies setting up shop in Central Europe to service the German market.

Most educated Indians also tend to feel that multiculturalism does not seem to be working in Europe, and that European societies have not been able to meaningfully integrate non-Western ethnic minorities, especially Muslims. This is a lesson Europeans could learn from India.

India advocates an open, inclusive and democratic international economic and financial system. But they believe this should be reached through reform of global governance - an issue on which Europeans are perceived to be a conservative force and staunch defenders of the present order, in no hurry to end their overrepresentation in international institutions.

Despite a strategic partnership, India and the European Union have not been able to transform shared values into shared interests and shared priorities because of a big disconnect in world-views, mindsets and practical agendas. These fundamental differences will remain because the two are at different levels of development, come from two different geo-political milieus and have different geographical and geopolitical priorities.
Zhimin Chen demonstrated how China’s positive view of Europe has changed in recent years and how disappointment with the EU has led to a greater emphasis on bilateral relations.

Since the end of Cold war, Chinese policy makers, observers and general public have developed a positive and optimistic view about the European Union. The Chinese considered European integration to be progressive in its ability to prevent war and increase prosperity for its member states. A 2003 Chinese government policy paper (the first ever on a country or region, underlining importance of the EU for China) said “the European integration process is irreversible... the EU will play an increasingly important role in both regional and international affairs.” A 2008 report by George Washington University found that Chinese tend to believe that the EU is becoming more powerful and playing a more important, and that this is due to the integration process.

The common market is also seen positively with the EU today being one of China’s most important economic partners alongside the United States. In 2004, the EU became China’s biggest trading partner and in 2007 it surpassed the US to become China's biggest export market. The EU is also a major foreign investor in China, having poured in FDI in excess of $70 billion. European investors also tend to bring in bigger, less numerous, higher value-added and high-tech projects, which produce a “catalytic impact” on China’s development.

However, in recent years, China has started to take a more sober or “realistic” view of the EU. The Chinese are beginning to complain about the difficulties in dealing with the EU, especially because of the emergence of growing tensions in bilateral relations and a number of political disputes. This has included frictions over domestic Chinese issues (Tibet, human rights) and frictions over European military intervention (as in Libya). The Chinese have also seen that European integration has been slowing down and become anxious at the prospect of an EU in relative decline after the 2008 financial and economic crisis. “The good model of the past has run into a lot of problems”.

In EU-China relations the Chinese are disillusioned with the lack of concrete achievements and inability to form consensus on many key issues including market economy status, the arms embargo and Partnership & Cooperation Agreement negotiation. This frustration has led to a greater focus on bilateral relations, particularly with Germany.

China wants Europe to continue its success story of integration, and is prepared to give help - additional to European led solutions. Chinese would certainly worry that a more integrated Europe would be more interventionist or imperialist. But it is clear that in terms of foreign policy Europeans have a long way to integrate.

Europe is seen as in decline: as Yang Jieman wrote in 2010, if the world is divided into four groups, China being in the ‘gaining group’, and the US in the ‘defending group’, Europe would be in the losing group (along with declining power Japan). But the Chinese still appreciate the importance of such a group of countries. What China would seek in the future is to build the bilateral relationship on a more equal footing, for which Europeans are unprepared. The rise of China gives the Chinese more confidence to pursue that goal.
In his presentation Ryo Oshiba grouped Japan with Europe as declining powers, laid out their similarities in thinking and impact on foreign policy, and explained how they are now rivals in China.

The United States and Europe were in the past often seen by the Japanese as a unified group. The euro crisis and the difference in military action has changed that and toady “both Japan and Europe belong to the so-called declining powers”.

The Japanese believe they share many ideas and principles with Europe including the importance of soft power in influencing world affairs. By this they especially mean non-military approaches to conflict, a commitment to peace keeping and promotion of a rules based international system. There are differences, however, between Japan and Europe who while often using the same concepts, differ in substance, occasionally a source of misunderstanding.

In conflict management Europe is ready to use force if necessary but Japan is more reluctant even in extreme cases. Whereas Europeans try to implement European rules, Japan rather tries to use its influence to negotiate and transfer Asian rules into global regulatory governance.

In terms of trade relations, Europe is still perceived as an important partner and global player. But Europe is also seen to have an underwhelming influence in foreign and security policy. In this way Europe cannot be an effective alternative to the United States (nor can Japan). The intermediate position is interesting however, in which the EU and Japan cannot be considered as alternatives to the US, but possibly as close allies and in this way being able to influence US foreign policy. Until now, the EU has not been able to do this effectively, as it finds it difficult to formulate a coherent approach.

There are other issues where Japan sees EU as a good model including in regional integration and building stronger relations with neighbours. But Japan finds it far harder to implement these ideas.

Europeans often see Japan and China in a zero-sum relationship where Japan is in decline alongside a rising China. In reality, it is also the case that the Chinese market is now open in an unprecedented way and the Japanese business community has already heavily invested in China. This makes Europe and Japan rivals in the Chinese market, adding a new dimension to their relationship.