
DOES THE EU HAVE A SYRIA STRATEGY?

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Nor has it helped to advance Europe's strategic interests in the region at large, given the EU's near-invisibility in the various peace talks. A fresh and more geopolitically minded approach could pay more dividends for the EU.

Post-modern reluctance

One could be forgiven for expecting the EU to have stepped up to the plate.

After all, instability in the Mediterranean region is not in the long-term interest of European countries as a whole.

And with the increasing interconnectedness of this maritime region, Europe needs to look to shores yonder to provide for its own security. In some respects, Europe is doing just that -witness operations Sophia in the Mediterranean and EUCAP Sahel in north Africa- but in Syria, the most consequential conflict theatre on earth, it is signally absent.

Perhaps Europe's reluctance to get into the thick of things is understandable: the conflict has proven to be intractable, involving a myriad of local parties whose trustworthiness and reliability make for shaky allies, while the risk of escalating conflict between key outside players continues to loom largely.

What is more, Europe seems to act like it has 'learned its lesson.'

Various European countries got badly burned due to their involvement in the war in Iraq; were accomplices in the bungled intervention in Libya in 2011; or are questioning the merits of their participation in the war in Afghanistan, a seemingly never-ending conflict.

More broadly speaking, Europe's timid role can be ascribed to the fact that it still prefers to see itself as a post-modern power which will not get its fingers dirty through geo-politicking.

The reality is however that, if the EU is to have any leverage in shaping the outcome of the Syrian conflict, it will have to operate as a more overtly geopolitical player.

This does not necessarily mean it needs to deploy military force, but it means that Europe can only get its way if it is prepared to play into the needs of the key players on the ground, most of all the Astana trio of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Leveraging linkage politics

So how can the EU achieve its objectives in Syria?

The key lies in engaging in 'linkage politics' with Russia, Iran and Turkey – the key powers that influence events on the ground. This means mobilising real leverage that Europeans have in other areas so as to incentivise hard-nosed actors in Moscow, Tehran and Ankara to agree to the EU's vision of a democratic, stable and prosperous Syria.

The EU's current Syria strategy, now almost a year old, does not cut it in that respect.

Reflecting the Union's 2016 Global Strategy, it seeks to be more principled than pragmatic, stressing the need for "promoting democracy and human rights" and an "inclusive transition."

This is to be achieved through supporting e.g. security sector reform, good governance and the rule of law.

However, apart from the fact that these are all highly politically sensitive domains, these types of support are unlikely to constitute compelling levers to bring Putin and others around to sign up to the EU's agenda.

Instead, with Russia, one avenue would be to work together more closely on Libya to achieve stability there.

With Iran, Europe's economic clout can be mobilised as a means to try to get Tehran to become a more constructive player in the region at large, as can perhaps Europe's ties with Saudi Arabia be used to help defuse the smouldering crisis across the Persian Gulf.

Turkey constitutes perhaps the thorniest challenge, but for Ankara, the EU could make a real difference for instance in helping to reverse the impending geo-economic crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Creating room for manoeuvre

Hence, the EU should have an interest in broadening its policy options so as to create real leverage where this is otherwise lacking.

That linkage is already part and parcel of regional politics is quite evident: consider how Russia, Iran and Turkey already play different cards in different theatres across the Middle East.

Syria itself is the fulcrum of the region's linkage politics.

For the EU, this means that it needs to articulate its veritable strategic interests in Syria, identify where it can truly exercise leverage, and then use this in pursuit of its desired vision.

Only then does it stand a chance to turn its country strategy into reality.

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