

by Tony Koutsoumbos

Few reforms are needed more urgently in Europe today than the forging of a coherent and, as far as possible, single EU foreign policy and yet few reforms are less likely to see the light of day in the current political climate. The blame for this must lie squarely at the feet of the European Council, ultimately responsible for trying to insert the proposals for an enhanced decision making process and an EU foreign minister, amongst others, into a confusing constitution that never had much chance of being approved by an angry electorate.

When the citizens of the EU were asked to rank the most serious problems facing the continent earlier this year by the German Marshall Fund, they naturally put terrorism and the credit crisis at the top of the agenda. However, a large majority also expressed grave concerns about the resurrection of the Russian bear and its use of its energy supplies as a weapon, not to mention its tanks and warships, whilst almost as many said they wanted closer relations with America and that NATO was still essential to their security.

It's safe to say the 'masses' were on the money in their assessment of the most immediate threats to European security. Indeed, their concerns, along with illegal immigration, cyber-crime and climate change, have featured heavily in the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy's drive to establish a new security strategy for Europe. Central to formulating a single European response to these challenges, therefore, has been the push to update the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

As they are, the policies have failed to unify the EU in its dealings with the rest of the world, rendering the Union inefficient on the occasions when member states do take a common approach, such as in the Balkans, and wide open to manipulation by foreign powers when they don't, such as the United States during the Iraq war and Russia now. The reforms envisaged by the constitution went some way to addressing these problems: a single foreign minister to represent the EU abroad; a legal personality to allow the EU to conclude international agreements; EU-wide investment in research and development; an EU equivalent of NATO's clause 5 committing all states to collective "aid and assistance by all the means in their power"; the agreement of all member states to make available troops assigned to other multi-national task-forces to European battle-groups too; as well as a refined decision making process with opt-outs for any member state opposed to any EU decision to deploy troops.

So why then, if European electorates agreed on the supra-national nature of the threats and challenges facing their countries and their governments agreed on a set of measures to tackle them, were the proposed reforms thrown out by the Irish this year when they voted in a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, seen by many as simply a watered down version of the constitution? The answer is simple. The EU's attempts to package these paramount changes within a vast and unreadable document that few wanted made it impossible to pass them. Indeed a poll taken of voters immediately after the Irish referendum revealed that the majority

of those who voted 'no' did so because they did not understand what they were voting on.

However, Europe's electorates lost faith in their elites long before then. The reasons behind the French and Dutch 'no' votes on the constitution proper in 2005 were far less kind than the Irish and revealed a deep-seated resentment of European elites and indeed their own. And for what? A flag and an anthem that we already have and that nobody cares about. Since then, any attempt to do the sensible thing and try and pass the reforms necessary to create a single coherent foreign policy has been viewed with suspicion and contempt. Indeed if the Lisbon Treaty hadn't been voted down by the Irish it probably would have fallen at a later hurdle. Of course, the peddling of half-truths and even outright lies by the Europhobic press in countries most likely to need a referendum on such treaties like Ireland and the UK hardly helps.

What hope remains for a single European foreign policy then? Ironically, it would seem that the security of the continent now lies in the hands of national leaders regaining their people's trust and convincing of the merit and the need for a unified approach. The election of a President in the United States with a respect for the transatlantic alliance and an understanding of the importance of a multi-lateral approach to the world's most serious problems would go a long way too.

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