THE EU EASTWARD ENLARGEMENT: PROSPECTS FOR IRAN-EU REGIONAL COOPERATION

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The subject matter of this article is complex and broad and impossible to do justice in these few words. On the other hand, I do not attempt to give a full overview of the relationship between EU and Iran but rather, focus on a narrow aspect of it. In this framework, the fundamental question from Iranian perspective is whether EU enlargement will lead to strengthen the EU-Iran regional cooperation? To answer this question, I have categorized this article in three different parts; first, enlargement and its consequences on EU foreign and security strategy, second, the Iranian perception of EU enlargement, and the third, the areas of cooperation between Iran and enlarged EU focusing on South Caucasus.

ENLARGEMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY:

The 2004 enlargement of the European Union which often referred to as “historic”, has left the EU with 25 members and a most probably new logic of decision making. The 2004 enlargement will not be the EU’s last. Bulgaria and Romania are already negotiating for membership and will enter to EU in 2007 and Turkey accession talks were due to begin this morning. Furthermore, in the wake of the Thessalonica Council of June 2003, the accession process for some Balkan countries is also on track. Croatia since June 2004 is a candidate country and probably will be a full member within the next five years. Also Macedonia’s candidature is advancing rapidly. The enlargement, especially with the Turkish accession, will draw the EU frontiers to the Middle East, South Caucasus and Iran. Thus, in mid term, we will have a Magna Europe that extends from Portugal to Iran, with over 30 countries and almost 600 million people under European institutions and laws, a vast territory without any economic, social, cultural and political frontiers. These new dimensions will affect European approaches to a range of global and regional issues.

The EU global ambitions are characterized by the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), whose goal is to transform the EU into a global actor that can exercise a stabilizing influence in the Mediter-
Iranian, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, as well as Central Asia and Caucasus. On the other hand, enlargement will impose some immediate challenges to the EU security and foreign policy. This global challenges and key threats are well recognized by EU politicians in the document called “A Secure Europe in a better world: European Security strategy” (12 Dec. 2003). According to this document, the developments in the global arena have increased European dependence and vulnerability on transport, energy, information and other fields. According to this text, Security is a precondition of development. Conflict not only destroys infrastructures but also encourages criminality, deters investment and makes normal economic activity impossible. Energy dependence is a special concern for Europe. Europe is the world’s largest importer of oil and gas. In the security strategy text, also Key Threats are listed as terrorism, proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Regional Conflicts, organized crime and failed states. Europe is a target and a base for terrorism. Regional conflicts such as those in Middle East and South Caucasus impact on European interests and security directly and indirectly and providing opportunities for organized crime. Europe also is a prime target for organized crime. Cross-border trafficking in drugs, illegal migrants and weapons accounts for a large part of the activities of criminal gangs. One should take into consideration that 90% of the heroin which enters the Europe, comes from poppies grown in Afghanistan. State failure is also an alarming phenomenon, which undermines global governance, and adds to regional instability. Thus, the integration of acceding states may increases EU security in some way but also brings the EU closer to troubled areas. It is in the European interest that countries on its borders are well-governed. Neighbors who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organized crime flourishes, all pose problems for Europe.

On the basis of the above mentioned realities, the enlarged and enlarging EU will need to redefine its relation with its immediate neighbors in East. In the paper called “Wider Europe-Neighborhood: A New Framework for relations with EU Eastern and Southern Neighbors” (19-20 June 2003), states that the EU’s aim is to work in partnership to develop a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighborhood with whom the EU’s enjoys close, peaceful and cooperative relations.

IRANIAN PERCEPTION OF EU ENLARGEMENT

The process of enlargement and EU foreign and security policy development is of interest from Iranian perspective. From a geopolitical point of view and due to the international situation, the Iranian foreign policy is linked to Europe and EU has been regarded as one of the important priori-
ties of the Iranian foreign policy in recent three decades. Although, Iran is not under the European Neighborhood Policy umbrella, as an immediate neighbor of EU (after Turkey accession) not only plays a significant role in the region which is vital for the enlarged Europe but also will be affected by the consequences of the enlargement. Enlargement presents a complex issue area for Iran and includes both opportunity and challenges or gains and looses for Iran. In the International scene, Iran views EU a capable actor to take a stronger and more active role in the world affairs especially towards an effective crisis management. EU has instruments in place that can be used effectively both through multilateral cooperation in international organizations and through partnerships with key regional actors. An active and capable European Union would make an impact on a global scale.

In the regional context, Iran admits that European Union has its own motives for gaining influence in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Instability in these regions would affect both Iranian and European security. Regional conflicts, ethnic and territorial disputes, regional and trans regional rivalries, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, failed states, drug business, illegal migration and growth of social discontent are among those threats which Iran and EU are facing in these regions.

In sum, there are potential benefits for Iran from enlargement. In the political and security terms, it will improve the weight of Iran in the regional interactions and in some way may counter balance the weight of USA in the region. But on the other hand, Iran has some reasons to be worry about isolation or exclusion, to the effect that the EU will become more inward–looking after enlargement or that its distinct and strong demarcation line between “inside”’ and “outside” will move much closer to Iran. In addition, it may be viewed as a treat as it can be presumed to extent the zone of so called common American and European values which for Iran means more pressure.

THE AREAS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN IRAN AND ENLARGED EU

There are some distinct areas of cooperation between Iran and the enlarged Europe. On the international security matters, there are increasingly visible areas for cooperation in international affairs. In a world of global threats, security and prosperity of the countries increasingly depend on an effective multilateral system. The development of a stronger international society, well functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order should be a common objective. Both Iran and EU should work to make international organizations, and current regimes and treaties more effective.
In terms of regional issues, there have been signs for some time that Iran and EU have overlapping and converging interests in the Middle East, South Caucasus and central Asia. In this regard, the South Caucasus and Central Asia play a significant role. Due to geographic proximity, the EU fears that instability in the region would also affect Europe. Since 1991, the EU retained a low profile and an undefined strategy and has been active in Central Asia and Caucasus through the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia (TRACECA), and Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE). The European Union is considering military peacekeeping activities in the region and the OSCE, which is closely linked to the EU, considers the region to be an integral part of the European security system. Since 2003, the European Union has long voiced its intention to develop a reinforced role in that region and a number of factors militate for greater EU role. In Europe, internal shifts like enlargement, the elaboration of European Constitution and presentation of the EU “Security Strategy” are seeing as the birth of a new EU, with new member states, new interests and needs. In this regard, the European Union has started to reshape its policy towards states on its new borders through the European Neighborhood Policy and has included the South Caucasus in this document. In addition, the EU has appointed its Especial Representative to the South Caucasus. In the Caucasus region, regional changes in recent years marked a turning point with leadership elections in all three states, each offering scope for rethinking EU relations. In particular, the ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia and “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine brought a young and reforming generation to power, insistently demanders for a greater EU role. While less in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the scope for an EU role has widened quite dramatically. With these developments, the South Caucasus has moved from being a backwater of EU policy towards the front end. The EU Security Strategy clearly identifies the South Caucasus as one of the regions, in which the EU should take a “strong and more active interests”.

As far as Iran is concerned, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was an important geopolitical change in the northern borders of the country. As a matter of fact, the emergence of post-Soviet republics was a combination of threats and opportunities which could have pivotal consequences for Iran. Since these countries are part of Persian Civilization, the geographical proximity and historical and cultural links made a proper opportunity for Iran to improve relations with these countries. On this base, the new republics were a new security and political breathing atmosphere, a huge market for the Iranian goods and capitals and some countries which had no access to the free waters and need transit roots for energy transfer.
and transport. On the other part of the coin, the collapse of Soviet Union was a new source for instability which along side with regional and international rivalries could affect Iran's security and stability. More than European Union, Iran is rigidly concerned and affected by regional conflicts, ethnic and territorial disputes, failed states, drug business, migration and growth of social dissatisfaction.

CONCLUSION

To answer the main question that I raised in the beginning of this article, one should argue that enlargement will have positive consequences in the regional cooperation between Iran and the EU and even can deepen and widen the bilateral relations. First, it works in the direction of a multipolar international system which forms one of the bases for Iranian thinking about international politics and Iran views in positive the fact that the EU is developing this kind of capacity in international management.

Second, security of Iran and EU is strongly affected by security trends in the Middle East and Caspian region and this is on of the most important aspect of cooperation between both sides. Threats and opportunities in the neighboring regions for Iran and enlarging EU are almost the same and the grounds for cooperation between both sides in the region are prepared. Historical and Geographic logic has proved that Iran is main factor in the peace and stability in the region and shaping any security arrangement without Iran if possible, is not successful. The “centrality” of Iran in this region has become more apparent after the collapse of the Soviet Union and recent development in Iraq. Developments in the region which Iran belongs to, is framing Iran as a regional power. These developments can be interpreted that the position and influence of Iran in the region is steadily growing and can not be ignored.

Third, The South Caucasus, here as a case study, remains covered in a high degree of strategic uncertainty. The future of the region is due to establish peace and security and this will be met through a firm cooperation between the actors. Whether these actors choose to move towards cooperation, or to follow rivalry, is of great importance for the regional peace and stability. All the actors in the region should reach a common perception of the threats and opportunities and try to shape a collective security system. Despite similar perceptions about the situation, the shared perspectives especially in terms of establishing peace and stability in the South Caucasus have not been really put on use in practical term and concrete cooperation has not materialized. Iran repeatedly has declared its readiness to cooperate with European Union as well as individual countries in European conti-
nent to establish a collective security arrangement. This is why, in relation to enlargement, there are numerous concerns about the place of Iran in European Neighborhood Policy. Interaction with Iran should be based on inclusion Iran in the regional security arrangements rather than exclude and isolate it. Iran’s capacity as a regional power should be acknowledged by the EU. In this perspective, EU enlargement means a further incentive for the intensifying and deepening of relations. In the face of common challenges, differences may decline in importance.

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