

Europe, wake up!

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While Europe gets lost in feckless disputes about, amongst other things, who is to become its next Foreign Secretary, its neighbourhood is on fire. A passenger aircraft is shot down over a conflict zone, and Europe is incapable of promptly sending an investigative unit to determine the cause of the crash and secure the bodies. The Gaza Strip is ablaze from missile attacks and a ground invasion, and the EU is incapable of even initiating mediation between Israel and the Palestinians. The EU is an ostrich, head in the sand (or at the beach) when the world around it is in deep trouble.

With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the EU agreed to protect its strategic interests in the neighbourhood, for which it created the position of high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, or the EU's foreign secretary. But five years on, after the downing of a passenger aircraft over territory held by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, the EU is still unable to send a crisis team to the region, and determine the relationship between this appalling event and an increasingly dangerous conflict between the EU and Russia, one that puts the security and stability of the entire continent at stake. Five years after the start of its external action service, which today employs about 1,500 persons, the EU is incapable of responding in a focused and practical way to this very real crisis. We first wait for the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an organisation of which Russia is a member, to dispatch a mission 24 hours after the crash, and for the US intelligence services – oh, what a shame! – to announce through President Obama that the airliner was brought down by a missile fired by Russian-backed separatists. The EU was apparently incapable of reaching this conclusion on its own.

In the meantime, the crash is being called a “tragedy”, not “mass murder”. EU leaders take cover by describing the horrific attack as affecting only a few European countries, and one in particular, whereas the only correct response should be a forthright expression of outrage on behalf of all Europeans. Even worse, individual national leaders hide behind the very incapacity of the EU, justifying their own supine stances by pointing to the lack of a European consensus for an appropriately robust response. Flags should be flown at half-mast in all European countries, not just in the Netherlands. In the meantime, essential time has been lost in internal discussions, while the rebels were at liberty to remove incriminating evidence of the cause of the crash and whisk away the black box.

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Following its loss in international reputation due to the mismanagement of the financial crisis, Europe is once again dithering and demonstrating to the world at large, and particularly to Asia, that it is incapable of drawing lessons from past failures.

Another mass murder is unfolding in the Middle East in Gaza, where the EU is also invisible again. All eyes turn to the US to calm Israel. Here too, the EU should also take up an active role. It could usefully mediate between both warring parties, because of its more neutral position. But the EU is not doing this, choosing to expend its energies over bureaucratic disputes over appointments, while its influence on the borders of the Union are visibly diminishing. Europeans should be aware that such conflicts, and the miserable incapacity to react that has been clearly revealed in these cases, will have real consequences for the EU and reduce its authority to exercise a pacifying influence on its neighbourhood. If the EU continues to fail to exercise the power that it has, it will lose it, and fall victim to more potent and resolute but less benign actors.

As representative of the 28 member states, the European Union should be able to act more forcefully in both of these conflicts than its individual member states. The means – in the form of structures and officials – exist to act in such cases, but the EU prefers to remain on the sidelines. The destruction of a civilian airliner over Ukraine has been called “Europe’s 9/11”. But so far, the EU’s reaction to this tragedy has been hardly comparable to the resolve shown by the United States following the terrorist attacks in 2001. The EU needs to get rid of its *‘struisvogelpolitiek’*, a Dutch expression to refer to the natural response mechanism of the ostrich.