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The Limits of convergence: EPC in Crises

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As the twentieth century moves to its close the peoples of Europe, satiated by collective violence and perhaps anxious to distinguish themselves psychologically from the United States, seem determined to ~~feel~~ feel ~~badly~~ about any war they become involved in. No matter that in the recent conflicts over the Falklands and Kuwait the outcome was swift and relatively painless (for the victors), and that the causes being fought for were more obviously just and more clear-cut in their character than in many past disputes, when outpourings of nationalistic self-righteousness were commonplace. Certainly a major side-effect of the Gulf War has been a crisis of conscience over the purposes and effectiveness of Europe's would-be foreign policy, understandably given that the low profile of European Political Cooperation (EPC) in the crisis contrasted uncomfortably with the ambitious proposals launched during the Italian Presidency of the Community in the second half of 1989 and intended to shape the outcome of the imminent Intergovernmental Conference on Political Union. The failure of EPC to whip (in the British Parliamentary sense) member-states into line during the pre-war diplomacy, and the consequent loss of initiative to the United States over coalition policy, and to the Soviet Union over efforts at conflict resolution, seemed to have demonstrated conclusively the finite limits of convergence for the national foreign policies of western Europe.

Those who take a more specialist interest in European International Relations - that is to say, the clientele of this conference - know that matters are not quite so straightforward. Not only does EPC, like the rest of the European Community system, exhibit an action-reaction cycle in which setbacks bring forth renewed efforts at cooperation, but any perspective longer than that of the Gulf crisis, August 1990 - February 1991, shows it up in a much more favourable light. Over a twenty year period, there is in fact a pattern of oscillation to be discerned, peaks and troughs along a gradual upward gradient, as the scope of EPC has widened,

consensus has become more habit-forming, and the outside world has begun to sit up and take serious notice of what has been happening since the Davignon Report inaugurated a new species of diplomatic association in 1970.

Yet troughs there have been, and in the public eye they tend to be particularly associated with the great dramas of world politics, when the foreign policies of those who aspire to influence the shape of the international system come under the closest scrutiny. Although EPC by its nature tends to be concerned more with quiet, long-term, preventive diplomacy, it is not unfair to judge it according to the test of performance under conditions of extreme strain. For diplomacy cannot be conducted on one's own terms. The international system is intermittently volcanic, and it is as important to be able to deal with the inevitable occasional eruption as to promote the circumstances in which conflicts can be resolved before they become dangerous. It is therefore necessary to look at the record of EPC in coping with crises, of which there have now been at least a dozen, both because we can often best understand an institution through knowing its deficiencies, and because it is at these times that EPC comes to the notice of the wider public, inside Europe and in the world outside. It must be stressed however, that the focus here is not 'EPC in crisis' (that is, suggesting the system is on the verge of disintegration) but 'EPC in crises' where the focus is on how the system has responded to the intermittent onset of highly threatening international developments.

The issue is given particular relevance by the fact that the Conference of Foreign Ministers have in the past addressed precisely the same question. On coming to negative conclusions in 1980-81, they carried through in the London Report the particular reform of instituting 'crisis procedures' whereby any three member-states can convene at 48 hours notice a meeting of the Political Committee 'or, if necessary, a Ministerial meeting' in order the better to react in an

emergency. Heads of Mission in Third Countries were also to follow these procedures, and Working Groups were 'encouraged to analyse areas of potential crisis and to prepare a range of possible reactions by the Ten'.¹ How far then, has EPC lived up to these injunctions, and how bad, indeed, was its record before they were issued?

The Nature of Crisis²

Before the record can be outlined and evaluated, it is important to establish a base-line by clarifying the meaning of 'crisis', with particular reference to the EC and its foreign policy activities. In the literature on foreign policy analysis, a consensus has emerged on certain elements of a definition of crisis. In the first place it is necessary to distinguish between an international crisis, involving two or more states, and representing a crisis for either part or whole of the international system, and a foreign policy crisis, which is experienced by individual foreign policy actors according to the incidence of certain conditions. Not every participant in an international crisis will necessarily experience a foreign policy crisis. For example, the United States intervened decisively in the Suez war of 1956, but its foreign policy was not thereby plunged into crisis.

The first of the conditions whose occurrence represents a crisis for the actor concerned is the threat to fundamental values. If an entity believes that its core beliefs or principles are in danger, then it will be on the verge of being plunged into crisis. But equally important is the sense of time being limited in which to make a decision about how to react to such a threat. If it seems that there is no particular deadline, and that the danger may not come to a head for a long time to come, then the system concerned will not be on full alert, and it will be difficult to talk about it being in crisis. Lastly, and developing out of the second criterion, there must be some sense of a compelled choice, or turning-point. That is, even if the actor does nothing, things

will change. Thus decision-makers come inexorably to a parting of the ways, where they have to go one way or the other. The status quo is no longer an option. If these three criteria are fulfilled for any given entity, whether individual human being or planet earth, its governing system will be in crisis.

It remains to ask what crisis does not mean, what the experience of crisis entails, and in particular what it means for a system like EPC, half state half conference, the centaur of international diplomacy.

Contrary to conventional opinion, at first supported by academic analysis in the guise of Charles Hermann and his followers, a crisis does not necessarily involve the element of surprise. There have been many cases of thoroughly predictable crises occurring, such as the Arab-Israel war of 1967. Moreover once the crisis has begun, even urgency is not a universal characteristic. The reality of operating under known finite time constraints is not the same as a sense of urgency, as the slow evaporation of the UN deadline of 17 January must have made clear to Saddam Hussein this year.

Equally, despite the weight of Michael Brecher's view, the likely prospect of military activity does not seem to be an inherent part of the onset of crisis. Crisis is a state of being which can occur in many entities or organisms, not all of which have the capacity for violence. It does, for example, make perfect sense to talk about a person's life-crisis in terms of the three criteria outlined above, whereas to add the extra condition of the likely resort to violence would simply muddy the conceptual waters. Even in foreign policy crises, the military criterion would rule out the kind of economic crisis that regularly besets European-American relations, or the kind of diplomatic crisis that afflicted the European Community in 1965-66.

Once a crisis has begun, what does that mean for the actors concerned? It is firstly always important to ask 'a crisis for whom?', given the assymetrical nature of many international crises. Mussolini's attack on Albania was a trauma for the latter, but a sideshow for the former. China's attack on Vietnam in 1979 can hardly be termed a crisis for EPC - although it would be revealing to speculate on the reasons why not. In fact those immersed in crises, military or not, are usually all too aware of the fact, for it entails a step-change upwards in stress levels, the perception of vital interests being at stake, and often major rearrangements of decision-making procedures so as to cope with the new fluidity of events. Pathological changes in behaviour will often occur, as individuals and groups reach the edges of trauma. Dean Rusk in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Richard Nixon during Watergate, and half the French population during 'la grande peur' of 1789 are all well-documented examples.

The meaning of crises for EPC

For EPC, the above definitions and consequences of a crisis apply, but with the rider that since 'actorness' is a partial and intermittent phenomenon for European foreign policy, it is not possible to assume that what some Member-States will perceive as a serious challenge will be seen in the same way by all the Twelve. When events in the external environment appear to precipitate a crisis for the Community as a whole, they raise the very issue of whether indeed the separate states do share 'fundamental values' in international relations, which when threatened inspire a crisis, or whether - as in recent dramas - they in fact rank basic concerns like sovereignty, order, peace and human rights in different ways according to their domestic political culture. Equally, on the other two key attributes of a foreign policy crisis, a sense of finite time in which to act, and the existence of an unavoidable turning-point, a group of states like EPC may well display a variety of responses, ill-suppressed by the loose mechanisms of collective decision-

making and obligation. Over the Gulf, as there had been over the Falklands, there was considerable disagreement, particularly in private, as to when the chances of a peaceful settlement had become exhausted. Of course, these two cases reveal the other strikingly unusual characteristic of EPC when compared to -states-as-actors, namely that not only does it not have the capacity to employ military force, but there is much uncertainty as to whether the system should move towards acquiring a defence dimension at all.

Thus it is difficult to predict with confidence that any given crisis in prospect will be a crisis for EPC as such, although it is certainly possible to say that it should be one. It will depend on the actual responses of the national governments, in their compulsory consultations (since 1987) but voluntary decisions, as to whether an event becomes a crisis for EPC. Here as in so much, the Community's identity is determined by cases, not rules, and cases which are not even cumulative in their effects.

Looking at the past record, it is nonetheless clear that regardless of internal differences, events have at times imposed themselves on Europe, so that the existence of a serious crisis could hardly be denied or ignored. At others the strong concerns of particularly influential Member-States have effectively imposed a crisis-definition on EPC as a whole. Let us turn, therefore to the actual issues which may be reasonably delineated as having been crises for EPC (and by implication to those which may not), given that Europe has so far been far more of a civilian power than a super-power in the making. What kinds of substantive issues have involved Europe in a foreign policy crisis, and why? The following preliminary list does no more than give an abbreviated account of the most convincing candidates, of their reasons for inclusion, and of EPC's performance in coping with them. The paper ends with some evaluation, in the hope that the two issues -the nature of the data-set presented, and its

interpretation - may provoke debate not just on the specific matter of behaviour in crises but also on the question of what can be expected of EPC in the current international system.

The Record: A List of the Foreign Policy Crises Experienced by EPC

1973

The October war in the Middle East constituted a crisis for EPC in the sense that it could have led to a major confrontation between the superpowers, and did lead to OAPEC targetting all western states with massive price-increases, and some with the extra penalty of embargoed supplies. EPC responded to the war with little more than a call for a ceasefire, and an eventual reference to the need for Israel to give up its 1967 conquests while also meeting the rights of the Palestinians. On the energy front, EPC proved incapable of cohesion and initiative, although it did gradually move into the foreground of the Euro-Arab Dialogue, initiated in response to Arab requests at the Copenhagen summit in December 1973.

1974

The Sampson coup of July 1974 led to condemnation by the Nine, but it was hardly a crisis for EPC until Turkey invaded part of Cyprus. Even then, the fact that for members of the Community this was a regrettable but not fundamentally threatening act explains their lack of strong collective response. It was not perceived (even by Britain) as a major crisis. Perhaps, however, the argument should be reversed. Did the Nine not perceive it as a crisis for the EC partly because they knew they were incapable of action?

1975

The chaotic situation in Portugal, although slow-burning and strictly the internal affair of that country, seems to have represented more of a foreign policy crisis for the EC than

the invasion of Cyprus had done. Revolution in this strategically important country, with the possible contamination of Spain, was something of a nightmare scenario. It is well-known how the Nine used positive sanctions through EIB loans to prop up the position of the centre in Portugal. Procedurally, however, EPC took second place to the Community institutions proper.

1979

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in the last week of the year, produced a crisis in east-west relations which some have seen as inaugurating the 'second cold war'. Because the US responded with such hostility this had to represent a crisis for EPC, although it is arguable that had Washington done nothing the Europeans would have regretted the development and turned to the next business. In the event they did nothing for three weeks, creating an impression of paralysis which brought forth by way of reaction both a neutralisation proposal for Afghanistan and the eventual 'crisis procedures' themselves of the London Report. The former failed, and US-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate.

1980

The Iranian hostage affair represented a crisis for EPC only insofar as it threatened the United States, Europe's main ally, although it is true that it also endangered the basic principles of diplomatic society on which the interests of all states depend. Insofar as the Community sought to be proactive in the matter it was largely in an attempt to defuse the sense of crisis and head off the possibility of violence, whether against the captives by Iran or against the captors by the US. The Nine found it easy to issue statements condemning the hostage-taking, and to support the US in more discreet diplomacy, but when it came to the question of sanctions, they once again fell back on foot-dragging and internal debate. Although later in the crisis the good offices of the Europeans proved useful, EPC had not distinguished itself by effective influence over either Washington or Tehran.

1981

According to Simon Nuttall, in the Polish Crisis at the turn of the years 1981-2 the new crisis mechanism of the London Report 'spectacularly failed to function'.³ After General Jaruzelski's proclamation of martial law on 13 December 1981 EPC issued the predictable condemnation but postponed decisions on sanctions. Once more it seems likely that the event itself was less of a crisis for the EC than the USA's reaction to it - although Poland was clearly now on the verge of a tragedy that could have inflamed the whole continent. Washington's announcement of sanctions without prior consultations caught EPC napping and as in 1979 it proved difficult to convene meetings, let alone take decisive measures. Greece, in particular, then obstructed the taking of EC sanctions against the Soviet Union.

1982

In 1982 there were three events which can reasonably be described as actual or potential crises for the EPC system. The first of these was the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands, which was a crisis for the Ten simply because it involved an attack on the territory of a Member-State. Although EPC is not a collective security alliance it has to be supposed that any such invasion would ipso facto be regarded as a serious challenge to Europe's solidarity and political will. In the event the Community (ie not just the separate states, who also went ahead with an arms embargo) acted quickly to ban imports from Argentina, which was taken aback by the Community's firm response. Solidarity only lasted, however, for a month, as both Ireland and Italy found it domestically very difficult to support Britain in what was clearly going to become a shooting war. Denmark also had problems. Nonetheless, from Britain's viewpoint, the necessary diplomatic message had been sent to the world community by the Europeans, and EPC had responded well enough to the crisis.

The second major event of 1982 for EPC was the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon on 6 June, which put paid to the last vestiges of hope for European mediation in the Arab-Israel dispute arising from the Venice Declaration. It was thus a crisis for EPC's line on the Middle East, itself the most important policy-area in EPC. At first the Europeans were over-shadowed by the G7 Summit at Versailles in the coordination of a response. The ten Foreign Ministers met (at the request of Greece and France) on 9 June alongside a NATO meeting in Bonn but the need for compromise between differing national positions meant that EPC was in no position to take a high profile. All that could be done was to advise the Commission to delay signing the new Financial Protocol of the existing trade agreement with Israel.

In the same month another, if less dramatic, crisis loomed on the scene when President Reagan extended trade sanctions on materials being used to build the Soviet-west European gas pipeline, to the European subsidiaries of American companies. This was an assertion of extra-territorial legal rights which the relevant European governments could not accept, and diplomatic confrontation ensued. This was, of course, primarily a political issue, but since it was a question of restraints on trade, it came under the Community's competence, and an EEC formal protest ensued on August 12. After various escalatory measures on both sides the United States backed down on 13 November. This was a distinct, if not very public, triumph for the Europeans' ability to hold together in an intra-alliance politico-economic crisis. Perhaps indeed, it is in such circumstances that the EC is at its strongest, as exchanges in the GATT have often suggested. The latter, however never involve EPC and are not 'foreign policy' actions in the traditional sense.

1983

1983 saw both the American invasion of Grenada and the Soviet shooting down of a Korean airliner loom on the horizon of EPC

as mini-crises. The first, in October, was greeted with a deafening silence from Europe, whose main aim was to pretend that the invasion of a sovereign state did not constitute the threat to basic values that it would have done had any other country than the United States perpetrated the deed. The Commission displayed more signs of angst over the invasion than did EPC. The same had been broadly true over the downing of KAL007 in September, where the obscure circumstances of the affair produced hesitancy and concern lest super-power relations seriously deteriorate. Greek dissent once again prevented unanimity even at the level of declarations.

1985

The developing governmental crisis in the Philippines caught the Ten napping, and possibly divided in their attitudes to the last days of the Marcos regime. Certainly EPC was not seen at its best in anticipating a change of regime and coordinating national positions as events unfolded. On the other hand the Philippines was only likely to turn out to be a real crisis for EPC if civil war erupted and the United States intervened. That would have put to the test the Europeans' implicit claim to be heard as a distinctive and more moderate western voice in the Third World.

1986

Terrorism dominated 1986. In April the United States bombed Libya in reprisal for suspicions of Libyan involvement in various acts of terror against US targets in Europe. This was nothing less than a humiliation for EPC, rather similar to the hostage rescue mission of 1980, which came just after the Europeans had agreed to sanctions against Iran as a way of heading off the use of force. The British allowed US F1-11s to fly from bases in East Anglia but in doing so deceived their European partners. Sir Geoffrey Howe, wittingly or unwittingly, gave the impression to his fellow foreign ministers just hours before the attack took place that he had no knowledge of any such operation. That it was inherently a

crisis for the Europeans was evidenced by the immediate execution of two hostages in the Lebanon in reprisal for the raid, and by the threat of further operations against European interests. The procedures for consultation, however, worked well. No-one could complain that Ministers did not actually meet often enough.

In the autumn came the Hindawi affair, when a Jordanian Palestinian was sentenced to a very long prison term in Britain for having plotted to blow up an El-Al jet in mid-air. This time the pattern was reversed, but EPC still ended up looking inadequate, as Britain failed to convince its partners of the virtues of solidarity towards Syria, whom it accused of having master-minded the plot, and with whom it broke off diplomatic relations. Some of the other Europeans refused even to send their Foreign Ministers to attend a meeting on possible sanctions.

1989

The shootings of student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in June 1989 produced a rupture in the developing relations between the EC and China. The imposition of limited sanctions demonstrated that the Europeans were of one mind on these outrages, and that political dialogue with this potentially important partner would have to come to an end. But Tiananmen was not a crisis for EPC in the sense that it was for the people of China.

The pattern of dubious actions by great powers taking place during the dead days of late December continued in 1989 with the botched US invasion of Panama. Once again, what might in theory have been a crisis for EPC, with intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, turned out to be more of a mere embarrassment. Only if domestic opinion inside Europe had raised a storm about American actions would the issue have to come to a head, and given the disreputable character of the Noriega regime toppled by the US, that was

unlikely. EPC could once again get away with barely audible or decipherable expressions of concern.

1990

Clearly Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 represented a crisis for any country or group of countries concerned for the future of international order in general and stability in the Middle East in particular. The Europeans were in fact very quick off the mark in condemning Iraq, and individually active throughout the crisis-slide phase in trying to broker a peaceful solution. Collectively, however, they increasingly looked ragged, even inept, and the USA and USSR dominated the diplomatic environment. Britain's identification with the US, the reluctance shown by a majority of Member-States to take any high-profile position at all, and the persistence of France in trying to get its erstwhile Iraqi partners off the hook on which they had impaled themselves, all contributed to the image of EPC as superficial and ineffectual. The crisis showed that consultations are not enough; there has to be a common definition of the problem and of the best means with which to respond to it.

Evaluation

It should have been clear from the above recitation of cases - which may not be comprehensive - that EPC is not particularly well-suited to handling international crises, even when the Europeans themselves are directly involved. There is a distinct tendency, not to avoid crises, for that cannot be done, almost by definition, but certainly to play them down and defuse their significance. This is, of course, not uncommon in international relations, but it should be remembered that while in most crises the actors oscillate between wanting to 'win' and seeing the crisis itself as the enemy which must be eradicated, the Europeans almost always take the latter view, since they do not have the capacity for games of chicken or compellance.

The 'crisis procedures' instituted after the London Report have worked with increasing effectiveness after a shaky start, in that there have been fewer long gaps between the onset of a crisis and a response from the Political Committee or Foreign Ministers Conference. On the other hand it is difficult to know whether the Working Groups have in fact managed to anticipate crises by taking a more self-conscious approach towards their prediction, while it is evident that mere mechanisms of consultation are only one part of the problem. EPC is not yet in a position to be able to react firmly, decisively, and dramatically to major international events. It has been able to respond increasingly quickly to such events, but that is a rather different matter.

Thus EPC has tended to want to define crises out of existence by ignoring them or locating them into longer-term patterns of diplomatic exchange. This has particularly been the case when they have been the collateral product of American actions or intra-alliance relations. Only when a crisis can be contained within political and economic limits are the Europeans likely to be confident enough to accept the logic of a crisis and consider escalation themselves.

Over the twenty years of its life, EPC has got better at engineering consensus, in and out of crisis, and at avoiding the humiliating silence of complete inaction when faced with a new drama or threat. But Member-States are still often forced into anodyne generalisations by the fundamental lack of the capacity to agree amongst themselves on international questions. This is not, it should be stressed (contrary to popular opinion during the Gulf war) simply a function of the EC's lack of a military dimension, which is in any case being corrected with surprising rapidity by the convergence of EPC and WEU. Even at the diplomatic or economic levels of civilian power, the collectivity which is the EC is not at its best in a crisis. Its comparative advantage is in the long-term attempts to change the environments out of which crises tend to spring, so as to inoculate against them. Such an approach may seem unnecessarily high-minded to many, and it undoubtedly makes a virtue of current necessity. But it also makes considerable sense when laid alongside, for example, the stumbling failures of crisis-driven policies in the Middle East or Central America.

Yet crises will continue to occur in the short-term, often unexpectedly, and they will continue to exert great pressures on European foreign policy solidarity. It remains to be seen how EPC, now 20 years old and in early adulthood, will cope if it has to face another crisis involving the kind of sharp attack on the vital interests of most Member-States which when it occurred in 1973 demonstrated so devastatingly the limits of European unity. The crises of the years since then, difficult and embarrassing as they have often been for EPC, have not yet posed the same degree of challenge.

1. 'Report on European Political Cooperation issued by the Foreign Ministers of the Ten on 13 October 1981 (London Report)', in European Political Cooperation (EPC), 5th Ed., Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, Bonn, 1988 pp61-69.

2. On the problems of defining crises see: Charles F. Hermann, (Ed.) International crises: Insights from Behavioural Research (New York, Free Press, 1972), Richard Ned Lebow, Between Peace and War: the Nature of International Crisis,

(Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1981), and Michaël Bracher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld Crisis, Conflict and Instability (Oxford, Pergamon Press 1989).

2; In Simon Nuttall's forthcoming (1992) book on the history of European Political Cooperation, Chapter 5. In compiling this record of the crises which EPC has had to face, I have drawn liberally on Nuttall's authoritative account. See also the very useful data in Roy H. Ginsberg, Foreign Policy Actions of the European Community: The Politics of Scale, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1989).