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Putting the right words in the right order: Reflections on the Report of the Reflection Group

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The Reflection Group on the future of the EU to 2030 issued its report on 8 May. The Group was established by the European Council in December 2007. It was led by Felipe Gonzalez, former Prime Minister of Spain, with a dozen or so members in total.

The overall tenor of the report can best be described as alarmism leading to a call for renewal: internal and external threats to Europe's prosperity and social stability are piling up; only a process of European renewal can reverse our inevitable decline.

The threats are manifold: slow growth and declining competiveness in Europe mean that the world's centre of gravity is shifting to Asia; we have an ageing population; we under-invest in education and innovation; we depend on others for energy, which, along with climate change, raises the spectre of social, economic and political destabilisation; and we face a range of external threats, from terrorism through money laundering and cyber-crime to human trafficking and intellectual piracy. To cap it all, EU citizens have lost confidence in the EU.

In the past, the EU has offered peace, stability and progress. It has developed a distinctive social market economy. It has been a reference point for inter-state relations, a transnational community of law, and an exemplar of soft power.

These remain assets for the future. In addition, however, the EU offers advantages over individual Member States and is greater than the sum of those States, by virtue of: being able to apply multi-level governance to global problems like climate change; economies of scale, for example via the single market; and its role as a 'power multiplier'.

Urgent action is required if those assets are to be put to work successfully in defence of Europe's prosperity and security. Europe, the EU, must be ambitious, assertive and determined. In practical terms, this means: a big investment in the policies and institutions required to create a successful Europe-wide economy which creates jobs, provides security and avoids systemic financial shocks; a commitment to energy efficiency and to diversification of supply, as well as tackling climate change; and new thinking on international security, backed up by new investments in the instruments of common security and defence policy. Labels abound: 'a highly competitive social market economy'; 'flexicurity' in labour markets; a 'new deal' for the single market; a 'regulatory framework to unleash innovation and creativity'; pro-active immigration policy; a 'new industrial revolution' to tackle energy problems and climate change; a new European Security Model; a common European strategic concept; 'responsible interdependence'; and a new 'grand bargain' for global governance.

With regard specifically to international development, the main references are in a short chapter entitled 'Europe in the world: becoming an assertive player' - the title alone tells a story. This is echoed in the first two paragraphs, which talk of the need to increase Europe's economic competitiveness, provide its citizens with freedom and security, and reshape international governance to enable the EU to promote its agenda. 'Asymmetric dependence' on global suppliers of scarce resources is unacceptable, hence the need for 'responsible interdependence', assured through improved multilateral governance.

There is recognition of a higher purpose, with reference to 'inclusiveness, equity, sustainable development, collective security, respect for human rights and the rule of law and fair trade

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"Europe's new strategic concept should acknowledge common stewardship of the world, its resources and its people"

practices'. Nevertheless, development in this formulation is mostly an instrument of a wider strategic concept. In key sentences, the Reflection Group says that,

'(a common European strategic concept) should pull the EU's diplomatic, military, trade and development policies together with the external dimensions of its common economic policies. Only by merging all its available tools will the Union be able to act as a transformative power and contribute to reshaping the rules of global governance. . . . Only by developing such a strategic approach to its external affairs will the EU be able to translate its huge financial effort . . . more effectively into political leverage. It should use its structural advantage to pursue smart development and trade policies. . . The strategic use of the EU's varied tool-kit should also allow it to become a more effective promoter of democracy, the rule of law and human rights . . . Last but not least, . . . the EU should lead the reform effort to make international institutions more legitimate and conducive to shared responsibility, while promoting its own interests in the process'.

Three thoughts on this:

First, most of the right words are there, though not necessarily quite in the right order or with the right emphasis. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the moral case for investing in development takes second place to the imperative of securing Europe's interests - a perspective familiar from the European Security Strategy of 2003. That may not matter too much if the instruments are deployed in development compatible ways, but the risk is that aid, for example, will be subordinated to foreign policy and spent in the 'wrong' places or in the 'wrong' ways. This would not be consistent with the Lisbon Treaty, which stipulates that aid must be used to reduce poverty. If there were to be a new 'strategic concept', it should recognise the moral pillar as well as the instrumental one.

Second, the moral pillar is imbued with a sense of partnership not found strongly in the Reflection Group Report. The rest of the world is treated as either a threat (younger, more innovative, owning the resource we need) or an opportunity (mainly markets). There is little sense of common stewardship of the world, its resources and its people. For example, falling poverty and rising wealth in Asia is a cause of celebration, reflecting as it does fewer child deaths and more opportunities for people to live productive lives. Similarly, Asia's success in developing new technologies to combat climate change is a global benefit. The authors of the report could adopted more of the language of partnership from development cooperation. There have perhaps been too many international relations realists holding the pen, and not enough idealists.

Third, the case for 'more Europe' rather than, say, more trans-Atlanticism or more effective UN-based multilateralism, is only thinly sketched. A single European market with portable social security, and a commitment to joint European security forces may or may not be the only or best answer to the global challenge. Where does ECOFIN run out of road and the G-20 take over? Or EuropeAid hand over to the World Bank? These are pragmatic questions about where the priorities lie in multilateral space, which the Report does little to answer, despite approving references to 'multi-level governance'.

There is a case for reinforcing Europe's role in international development, and it is one we make, in the European Development Cooperation Support Programme, and more widely through the European Think-Tanks Group. It begins by recognising shared interests in poverty reduction and sustainable development. It emphasises partnership and mutual accountability in Europe's relations with developing countries and regions. And it makes the case for 'more Europe' in both idealist and realist terms: as a vehicle for expressing European values, but also because there are economies of scale and other sources of comparative advantage in Europe-wide collective action. The end-point may not be that dissimilar – but it is important to have the right order as well as the right words.

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