11. Fragility and resilience in the European Union: an emerging discussion

Overview

Security was probably a more important issue for the European Union (EU) in 2015 than it has been at any time in the past 20 years. At the same time, thinking about security has become more challenging given a fast-changing context that includes the global mobility of people, the free movement of capital in a fragmented and inadequately regulated financial system, the limited capacity of states to manage change and the evolution of state sovereignty, the rapid advance of technology and the changing demographic and spatial patterns created by globalization, urbanization and digitization.

During 2015, conflicts in Libya, Syria/Iraq and Ukraine required an EU response, including measures to address spillover effects, most notably the large-scale displacement of people and an increased threat of terrorism. Cities in the EU experienced mass impact terrorist attacks carried out by religiously inspired individuals and groups. The November 2015 attack on Paris was carried out by a large group of attackers, some with military training and experience from conflict zones, with significant logistic support—posing a different kind of problem for the EU, which has mainly framed terrorism as a matter of law enforcement.

In the context of Europe's historical experience, modern EU citizens have high expectations. They are accustomed to being able to move freely, without undue concern about being the victim of violent attack. They expect to carry on their lives without being exposed to a high risk of crime, and to be protected against the impact of unexpected and disruptive events. Many EU citizens have never known anything other than a peaceful, prosperous and stable environment.

Roughly two-thirds of respondents to an April 2015 EU-wide survey believed that the EU will experience increased levels of terrorism and organized crime (including cybercrime) in the future, and they ascribed this increase to a growth in extremist ideologies, the spillover effects of war and political instability outside the EU, as well as persistent poverty and social exclusion. Roughly 70 per cent of respondents believed that climate change and pollution would exacerbate security threats.

In 2015 the EU adopted a new internal security strategy with a focus on terrorism and organized crime, in particular gun enabled crime and economic cybercrime. A security dimension was also recognized in other public policy

frameworks. In 2015 energy security was included as part of a new framework to create an energy union, which is part of a forward-looking policy on climate change and its implications; the re-evaluation of relations with the EU neighbourhood continued; a comprehensive agenda for migration was initiated; and guidance was produced on the public health impact of the sudden arrival of large numbers of people.

The EU member states are the primary actors in responding to security threats, but the EU is not just a platform for organizing interstate dialogue and promoting voluntary information exchange. Member states expect and insist that their common instruments will be applied directly to help address complex and interrelated challenges. Citizens expect the EU to play its part in ensuring that their high expectations are met, and are quick to criticize it when the contribution does not seem sufficient or effective.

The EU's working practices—such as planning and budget cycles that stretch over 5–7 years—equip it to develop a certain persistence and continuity in action that, while not well suited to crisis response, can bring about important systemic change over time. Moreover, while the balance that has to be struck in a union of 28 sovereign states makes it difficult to agree on a common approach, the continuous dialogue that leads to an agreement promotes continuity once a decision is reached.

While migration is the exclusive legal competence of the member states, national decisions about migration have consequences across the EU, including security implications. In 2015, the member states tasked the European Commission with developing a comprehensive Agenda on Migration that might lead to a more integrated approach, depending on their reaction to what is proposed.

In contrast to migration, the EU does have a common framework for addressing refugees from armed conflict and victims of oppression in their home countries. However, while asylum seeking is a familiar problem, existing procedures were not designed to cope with the unprecedented scale of recent arrivals. The sudden arrival of very large numbers of individuals seeking asylum required an emergency response.

Section I of this chapter examines the EU internal security strategy. Sections II and III examine two urgent problems facing the EU and the response to them. Section II examines the immediate response to the multi-site, mass impact terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and section III examines the refugee 'crisis', including the responses to it.

IAN ANTHONY