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MOGHERINI'S CHALLENGE

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Federica Mogherini should be satisfied, and indeed she looks very happy: her path to the job of High Representative, the EU foreign policy chief, was not an easy one. In a way it was an uphill fight. In part this was due to the complex alchemies related to the sharing of the top jobs in the Union's structure, but there were also other hurdles to overcome. Her young age, alleged lack of experience and, more ominously, the explicit accusation – picked up and broadcast by several media – of being “soft on Russia”. Objections that were either unfounded or irrelevant. About her age, as an Italian let me stress that, after living for decades under a gerontocratic regime, some new faces in politics should be saluted very positively. We must also be very careful not to indulge in more or less hidden misogyny: I have not heard that the 39-year old Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and the 37-year old new French Minister of the Economy, Emmanuel Macron, are “too young”. As for experience, definitely Mogherini does not have the CV that Javier Solana had when he was given the job of High Representative but -with twenty years dealing with foreign affairs in her party and in Parliament- she has a lot more experience than what her immediate predecessor Catherine Ashton had when she got the post.

Finally, the alleged “softness” toward Russia, even if we want to admit it exists and is not a polemical invention, could not be attributed to her but to the Italian government. She certainly did not go to Moscow as a personal initiative.

Now that the battle is over, and Federica Mogherini is getting ready to assume her functions in Bruxelles, it is interesting to note that the tone and the content of the international press on her personality and profile are much “cooler” and less instrumental to other political agendas. Everyone was surprised when the Wall Street Journal, who had been a leading voice in the barrage of criticisms toward her candidacy, came out on September 4th with an article that registered her “mix of poise, linguistic skills and some clear-eyed grit”. Federica Mogherini now looks happy, but she is not giving any signal of underestimating the huge challenges that she will have to face in her new job. Quite the contrary, she has repeatedly said that she is fully aware that the job is a real tough one.

The EU is confronted with serious crises both in the Mediterranean and Middle

East area and in the East of the European continent – crises which threaten to have dire repercussions both in terms of the security and of the economic interests, from energy to trade, of the European Union.

Cynics say that the Middle East is a permanent, probably insoluble problem – starting from the Israeli/Palestinian issue – and maintain that there is really nothing new there. This is definitely not true, insofar as what we are witnessing today is not only the clash of conflicting state interests - with the involvement of non-state actors, including terrorist organizations - but rather the product of a collapse of a plurality of nation-states. It started already some decades ago with the implosion of Somalia, and today this process has reached the shores of the Mediterranean (definitely not “out of area” both for the EU and for NATO), where Libya is well on the way of becoming a failed state. The very phenomenon of the “Islamic State” is the product of the double crisis of the Iraqi and the Syrian states, while threatening to make those twin crises irreversible.

All this happens in the presence of a shift in US policy under President Obama – not toward isolationism, an impossible option, but in the direction of a growing awareness of the limits of American power, as well as on the basis of a critical reassessment of the unsustainable ambition of a unipolar, Washington-centered international system. Today, however, it has become clear that there is no “opting out” from the Middle East situation, and Obama perhaps, without renegeing on his rejection of American unilateralist interventionism, is moving in the direction of the policies of another Bush, that Bush Sr. who proved that stopping a dictator like Saddam, and forcibly reversing his invasion of Kuwait, did not mean “going to Baghdad” and involving America in the task -proven impossible- of building a pluralistic and democratic system in conditions of ethnic and religious fragmentation. Obama has decided now to use military means (for now limited to bombing) to stop the jihadis of the IS both in Iraq and Syria. But, like George H.W. Bush, he will not even think of “going to Damascus”.

The alternative is not between doing nothing and occupying a country dismantling its previous leadership and political-military structure. “You break it, you own it”, and it is only reasonable that Obama feels that the US cannot afford to “own” another dysfunctional country.

But if the shift is from unilateralism to alliance and partnership, Europe has a role to play, and also interests to defend and a responsibility to recognize. No division between “old” and “new” Europe here, just as there was none at the time of the first Gulf War, while George Bush’s attack on Iraq under false pretexts was disastrously divisive.

Federica Mogherini will have to be a promoter and coordinator of this indispensable European role (yes, we have to prove that the US is not the only indispensable international actor) – a task that will be complex but not impossible, especially if we focus on the panoply of instruments that the EU has at its disposal. Some powerful and well-tested, like those relating to the economy and to development, some – like in security and defence – that should move forward from their present mainly declaratory stage.

Even more direct will be Europe’s responsibility in addressing the crisis in the East. A crisis that was unexpected, but perhaps only because after the end of the Soviet Union we had imprudently filed the “Russia dossier”. The problem today is a lack of firmness – and even Mogherini’s critics have had to admit that there was nothing ambiguous in what she said after her election on the need to stop Putin’s adventurism and provocation. At the same time, however, we should not overlook the fact that even people who are certainly not suspected of being “soft on Russia”, like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, have written that we

should also look beyond the present crisis and, while focusing especially on making Ukraine into a viable country, both politically and economically, we should combine firmness against aggression with the search for a type of relations with Russia that will take into account its legitimate interests, which evidently do not include Moscow's right to use force to protect them. This is necessary not only to avoid the unthinkable prospect of war on the European continent, but also to deprive Vladimir Putin of the sweeping consensus that he obtains today by playing on the widespread grievance of Russian citizens who resent "the West" (mainly the US but also Europe) for what they feel was a lack of recognition of those interests.

As Europeans we can only wish Federica Mogherini –and ourselves- good luck.