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The massive arrival of refugees from Syria, above all, but also those from other countries and regions such as Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa have shown EU foreign policy for what it is rather than for what it pretended to be – threadbare. It is not simply a question of the lack of coherence of different member states in their response to the largest movement of population since the Second World War, nor is it only a matter of not using the instruments that exist in the EU tool box (humanitarian aid, neighbourhood policy, etc.) to best effect. The breakdown is not the result of some administrative failure which can be easily righted, it is conceptual. If this reading is correct, the events witnessed on our TV screens last summer suggest that the impact of hundreds of thousands of refugees – for that is what most of these people are – being pushed around the borders of Croatia, Hungary, Austria and France speaks of an utter breakdown in how the European institutions and the three countries which play a key role in shaping the continent's foreign policy – France, Germany and the UK – have framed their foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union a quarter of a century ago.

Today, strong humanitarian impulses compete with growing fears about the absorption of large numbers of Muslims. Why then has Europe not made a much bigger effort to fund the running of the camps set up in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, to ensure not just that the people are fed but that their children are educated? Why have they not insisted that access to Western consular officials and NGOs be greater than it is? David Cameron's suggestion that more should be done to settle refugees nearer the borders of the country they are fleeing makes sense but the British prime minister muddies the waters and displays a cheap xenophobic line of argument when he speaks of a "migration crisis" amid a discussion on national security and goes on to refer to "Islamist extremist violence". French official language is more restrained but every politician except the German chancellor and the Swedish prime minister use words which fan the growing fears about the absorption of large numbers of Muslims in the EU. Anti-immigration parties such as the French National Front are having a field day; arsonists are targeting asylum centres in Germany and right-wing politicians from Hungary to Denmark, Slovakia and Poland are in unison in their fear of an Islamic invasion.

Europe's foreign policy framework has broken down conceptually and will be difficult to recast. Built on the conviction, since 1989, that being the biggest trading group of nations in the world and able to hold itself up as the mirror of post-cold war politics to the rest of the world was the bedrock of its relations with the periphery, now it can only contemplate broken glass. When it was set up at the turn of the century, some European politicians envisaged the euro as a currency that would soon rival the US dollar. Having misread Vladimir Putin when he returned to the Russian presidency and having failed to read the UNDP reports on the Arab world which after 2002 spoke of very serious problems lying ahead for most Middle Eastern countries, Europe blew the peace dividend which accrued from the collapse of the Soviet Union. France and Britain ran down their armed forces. London engaged in unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And Nicolas Sarkozy discarded his predecessor's reluctance to get involved in Iraq. The French head of state led the coalition to rid Libya of Colonel Gaddafi all the while ignoring the advice of those who foresaw trouble ahead. Nation-building was all the rage in the US and EU at the turn of the century; today we are left with broken nations such as Libya and Syrian that nobody knows how to put back together.

European foreign policy was never even the sum of its parts. It liked to forget that its two leading armed members, France and Britain, would always pursue their perceived interests independently from Brussels. It deluded itself into thinking that its trading clout made it an equal of the US. It utterly failed to read its eastern and southern neighbours in terms of realpolitik and hard interests, not least because until 9/11 it spent much more time absorbed in its own institution building, in trying to modernise its economy and speed up growth, convinced of the infinite attraction of its democratic values and economic virtues to the rest of the world.

Today, hard-nosed interests are what count but these will have to be discussed in the context of a continent, many of whose inhabitants and political leaders feel as beleaguered. It will notice that its economy is growing much more slowly than anticipated and that millions of its young people simply cannot find a job. The hubris of yesteryear has evaporated and given way to ever greater pessimism. After 1989, European policy makers proved to be too optimistic about what the continent's foreign policy could achieve. Today the reverse is true.

Europe's southern neighbours, notably in North Africa, take no comfort from Europe's disarray. If the refugee crisis is to serve any purpose, it must be to force the EU to dare to think out of the box, to map out bold scenarios for the future. Dealing with the refugee issue should be one among the many priorities in a comprehensive and bold European foreign policy in the framework of the ongoing EU Global Strategy review.