

EDITORIAL

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Given that the EU has spent much of the last decade engaged in what has become known as "institutional navel-gazing", it has achieved one or two notable things since the turn of the millennium.

Sixteen countries have adopted what is now the world's second reserve currency, the euro. Ten post-communist states (and two Mediterranean islands) have joined the club. The single market has been deepened, albeit with variable results, in areas from telecoms and energy to postal services and rail transport. The Union has moved decisively into the area of justice and home affairs. It has become the global standard-setter in the fight against climate change.

Yet there is no denying that Europe has expended much energy – far more than it intended – in putting its house in order. The Nice Treaty agreed in 2000, rejected in Ireland in 2001 then approved in 2002; the Constitutional Treaty, agreed in 2004 then voted down, in France and the Netherlands, in 2005; its successor the Lisbon Treaty, agreed in 2007, rejected in Ireland in 2008 and finally approved last autumn after the recession-hit Irish reconsidered. Ten years of institutional agonising which alienated Europe's own publics and left the rest of the world baffled.

As the EU enters the second decade of the 21st century, it has no more excuses for not focusing all of its energies on its policy priorities. The institutions are in place and the individuals nominated to run them. One set of questions has been answered, but another beckons. Does Europe want to be a global player alongside the United States on hard-power issues like the war in Afghanistan and the Iranian nuclear programme? Is it willing to speak with one voice to Russia on energy issues to make it harder for Moscow to divide and rule? Is it prepared to allow Turkey into its fold, and to offer something substantial, if short of full membership, to countries like Georgia and Ukraine? Can it bite the bullet of structural economic reform, something that has become more, not less urgent after the financial crisis?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, the EU will have to upgrade its decisions from lowest common denominator to highest common factor, in the words of Catherine Ashton, the new high representative for foreign and security policy (see cover story). But that does not sound compatible with European Council President Herman Van Rompuy's stated wish to ensure every party should emerge victorious from negotiations.

Europe cannot have it both ways. Consensus should not come at the expense of decisiveness.

