



Raiders of the Lost Art: Strategy-Making in Europe

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Have Europeans lost the art of making grand strategy? In a reflection process initiated by Sweden, Poland, Italy and Spain, they are invited to rediscover it and draft a “European Global Strategy”. This policy brief argues that what the EU needs most is a short set of priorities for collective action, to be reassessed for each term of the High Representative.

NECESSITY: THE EU NEEDS STRATEGY

The European Union may well avoid debating strategy, but as a foreign policy actor it cannot avoid doing strategy in the real world, like it or not. Confronted with the Arab Spring, to name but the most obvious example, the EU must choose a course of action. Even a choice for inaction still is *strategic behaviour*: a policy choice with long-term effects on the values and vital interests of the policy-maker. Strategic behaviour can be improvised – but its effects are more likely to be positive if the policy-maker debates and decides on strategy beforehand.

As Colin Gray points out, “The only difference between having and not having an explicit grand strategy, lies in the degree of cohesion of official behaviours and, naturally as

a consequence of poor cohesion, in the likelihood of success”.¹

What is strategy? Strategy is a *tool* at the service of policy-making. Starting from the fundamental values of the policy-maker and the interests that are vital to upholding those values, strategy defines (1) the priority long-term objectives to be achieved, (2) the types of instruments to be applied to that end, and (3) the means to be allocated. The result is a long-term reference framework for short-term, day-to-day policy-making in a rapidly evolving and complex environment – a guide for strategic behaviour.²

Why is strategy useful? Of course, foreign policy to a large extent means reacting to events. But a well-defined set of priorities allows the policy-maker to assess which events are more important to deal with than others and to deal with them rapidly, as well as to deal with issues proactively in order to shape the environment and prevent (more) undesirable events. Should the EU passively watch the Arab Spring unfold e.g.? Or should it, discreetly but actively, try to steer its outcome in a direction that is compatible with its interests? The opportunities are there, as President Morsi’s international positioning shows: surely there are shared foreign policy objectives with Egypt.

Yes, Europe's leadership has to focus on resolving the economic and financial crisis. But the more limited the means, the more crucial it is to prioritize and make sure that the means the policy-maker does have are put to use in the most relevant way. "Gentlemen, we have run out of money. It's time to start thinking", to quote Sir Winston Churchill (who else).³

Does the existing European Security Strategy (ESS), adopted in 2003, do all of this? No. The ESS tells us how to do things, but not what to do. It mostly concerns the instruments: the ESS codifies the (important!) choice for a preventive, holistic or comprehensive, and multilateral way of doing foreign policy. But to achieve which specific priority objectives? The ESS itself does not provide those, nor has it been used as a basis to develop them. So the argument to review the ESS is not that it is not viable. Quite the contrary: the choice for a preventive, holistic and multilateral foreign policy is the right one. But the choice of instruments should not be confused with the choice of objectives: doing things the right way is insufficient if one doesn't know why one does them. The reason why the EU needs more strategy is that the ESS is incomplete. The ESS definitely is a milestone in European strategic thinking, but it should not be its terminus.

For in the absence of clear priorities, the EU rarely takes to the initiative on the key foreign policy issues of the moment (contrary to the other great powers) or, when it does, its initiatives tend to be fragmented and stove-piped. Consequently, it is not very successful in prevention, despite its rhetoric, and to what it has not been able to prevent, it tends to react late. Furthermore, the allocation of the means bears no relation to any prioritization of objectives. As a result the generation of means has not been stepped up where necessary, notably in the military field.

The Lisbon Treaty has greatly enhanced the foreign policy machinery of the EU, by

strengthening the position of the High Representative and creating the European External Action Service (EEAS). A more complete strategy would help that machinery to overcome some of the deficits of EU foreign policy and live up to its full potential. Strategy has a multiplier effect.

SCOPE: THE EU NEEDS A GRAND STRATEGY

In addition to the ESS, the EU does also have some excellent strategies for specific regions and issues, such as the strategy for the Sahel. But the debate today should focus on a more global level: that of *grand strategy*, i.e. a strategy for foreign policy or external action as a whole.

Without an encompassing grand strategy in which to anchor them, conflicts will inevitably arise between the various partial strategies, perfect though each in itself may be. How e.g. to reconcile the Sahel strategy's emphasis on security cooperation with Algeria to stabilize the region with the same country's imperviousness to the human rights objectives of that other partial strategy, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)? If the EU operates at the level of partial strategies only, such questions cannot be resolved, for the answer requires choices to be made at a higher level: grand strategy.

Without grand strategy, how is the EU to react to events that affect several of its partial strategies, or even all of them, as major geopolitical developments such as the Arab Spring, the pivot of American strategic engagement to the Asia-Pacific region, and the financial crisis do? Their implications need to be discussed within each partial strategy, but they may require a reprioritization of partial strategies, and a reallocation of means between them, which is a choice at the grand strategic level.

Grand strategy inherently has a broad scope. Diplomacy, defence, trade,

development, etc. are all indispensable dimensions. Grand strategy should not be bound by any existing organizational chart. In fact, ideally it would steer the division of responsibilities (and should inform the review and, as required, reorganization of the EEAS starting in 2013). But the responsibilities of the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission can provide focus. The core of an EU grand strategy will be within her remit, and for those dimensions where it is not she is excellently placed to coordinate with her fellow Commissioners.

The existing ESS actually *is* a grand strategy, or at least it operates at that level. Contrary to what its title suggests, security and defence are in fact the least developed dimensions of the ESS, on which it remains much vaguer than on a comprehensive neighbourhood policy and on effective multilateralism, among others. Hence any new incarnation of the ESS should have a new title that reflects this broad scope, such as a *European Global Strategy*.⁴ In substance any new grand strategy would thus de facto replace the ESS, though it would not necessarily take the same form.

Indeed, ever since the failed attempt to revise the ESS in 2008 (which produced only a report about its implementation) the official debate has focused far too much on form and process, to the detriment of substance. Debating in what form a strategy will be enacted is a pointless exercise though, as long as the substance of that strategy remains undecided.

SUBSTANCE: THE EU HAS INTERESTS

EU foreign policy must be preventive, holistic and multilateral, because this approach reflects the *core values* on which the EU itself and all of its domestic policies are based. The underlying *idea* of external and internal action is the same: equality.⁵ Peace and stability reign where governments provide the greatest number of

their citizens with the greatest security, freedom and prosperity. The combination of democracy, capitalism and strong government has succeeded in making the EU the most equal region on the planet, and is the key factor in engendering a “feeling of solidarity and sense of belonging in Europe”.⁶

“The more limited the means, the more crucial it is to prioritize”

Within the EU, the *fundamental purpose* of the policy-maker is to preserve and deepen that social model, those core values, until everyone in every Member State is included. Outside the EU, stimulating governments (through partnership and multilateralism) to equally provide for their citizens (holistically, i.e. qua security, freedom and democracy, and prosperity) is the best route to peace within and between third States, and thus to (prevent threats to) the security of Europe. The subtitle of the ESS sums it up very well: *A Secure Europe in a Better World*.⁷

This approach constitutes the core of the ESS and should remain at the core of any grand strategy because, quite simply, it works. Empirical evidence shows that even countries that overall are poorer but where citizens are more equal will be more stable, healthier societies, than richer but less equal countries.⁸ The Arab Spring has demonstrated that where inequality becomes too great, revolt, long though it may take, inevitably follows. The aspiration to equal access to the political arena, to prosperity and to physical security is universal.

Furthermore, in this way EU grand strategy pursues a fundamentally positive agenda, which is in the mutual interest of EU citizens and citizens of other countries. There are no direct *threats* to Europe’s territory today, and the EU

should not seek to invent or provoke them. A threat-based agenda will produce a reactive, defensive or even antagonistic foreign policy. A positive agenda on the other hand will stimulate initiative, transparency and partnership in dealing with the complex global *challenges* that the EU does face.

Pursuing a positive agenda does not mean ignoring interests however. One of the causes of the absence of initiative and prioritization in EU foreign policy is the reluctance to discuss interests. But the EU's social model cannot be preserved, which is the Union's fundamental purpose, if certain conditions are not fulfilled. These conditions constitute the Union's vital interests: defence against any military threat to the territory of the Union; open lines of communication and trade; a secure supply of energy and other vital natural resources; a sustainable environment; manageable migration flows; the maintenance of international law and universally agreed rights; preserving the autonomy of the decision-making of the EU and its Member States.

Not only do all Member States share the same *vital* interests; no Member State can any longer preserve all of them on its own. What the preventive, holistic and multilateral approach assures is that the EU can safeguard those interests while maximally respecting the legitimate interests of others. Vital interests are at the heart of grand strategy: they must be pursued – but that does not have to be a zero-sum game.

The EU's vital interests as derived from its fundamental purpose will indeed be the key to deciding the priority objectives which the instruments of the preventive, holistic and multilateral approach are to achieve, and on which the means will be focused. Prioritizing is the point of strategizing. The aim of EU foreign policy is neither to replace the national foreign policies of the Member States, nor to compile a long and thus useless list of all their national

foreign policy priorities, nor to sum up all existing EU external policies.

An EU grand strategy should prioritize those foreign policy issues that (1) are the most important for all Member States because they most directly concern the vital interests that they all share and (2) on which there is the greatest added value in collective action by the Union and the Member States. The result should be a short list of priorities, not for all eternity, as a declaration of principle, but for the next five years, as a mandate for all of the EU institutions – as an agenda for comprehensive *action*, now.

Four priority issues then come to the fore on which it is most urgent to take the initiative and try to shape the environment: the Arab Spring, the American pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, energy, and climate change.

MORE SUBSTANCE: THE EU HAS PRIORITIES

(1) *The Arab Spring*. The EU had an elaborate strategy for its southern periphery: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean – it just never implemented it. Instead of promoting more equal access to security, prosperity and freedom as a way to durable peace and stability, the EU went for the semblance of stability by supporting any regime, regardless of its domestic record, as long as it was willing to help the Union fight terrorism and illegal migration and, for those concerned, to sell it energy.

Now the EU's response is *More for More*, giving extra support to those embarking on reforms. But after the major shock of the Arab Spring, taking a fresh start based on essentially the same strategy, in other words more of the same, may not be sufficient. A much more fundamental reassessment of strategy is in order, which has to look beyond the confines

of the ENP region: in many key dimensions the Maghreb, the Middle East, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf are interlinked. That does not mean that all of these regions should be included in the ENP – that would be neither practical nor desirable – but it does mean that the EU must seek flexible ways of working with varying constellations of countries in different issue areas.

Vital interests are obviously at stake, so the EU cannot afford to wait for the dust to settle. A proactive policy is of the essence, also because many other outside actors are already on the ground, often with designs that run contrary to EU interests. The crucial challenge is to identify the emerging structural changes and long-term trends resulting from the Arab Spring, and to decide which are to be encouraged and which are to be avoided, and what leverage can be brought to bear to that end.

“The EU’s ambition should reach as far as its vital interests impose”

One thing should be self-evident in any case: after the failure of the ENP, the status quo is not an option. Its betrayal of its own foreign policy idea cost the EU its legitimacy with the people of the region. That legitimacy, without which EU leverage will remain limited (at least without reverting to coercion), can only be regained by a policy that sincerely promotes equality in terms of security, prosperity and freedom, and which produces visible effects in the near term. If not on its doorstep, then where does the EU believe its positive agenda can come true?

Elements of a revised strategy for the “broader southern neighbourhood” include a reallocation of EU financial means to this vital region, as well as stimulating relevant financial contributions from other States and

international organizations, to fund a major economic stimulus package. If clear and effectively enforced conditions are attached, that can consolidate democratization and accelerate peaceful transition where it has yet to happen. Major infrastructure projects (notably in the energy and transport sector) can stimulate trade and trust between neighbouring countries while serving EU interests. Simultaneously, shared interests on specific foreign and security policy issues can be the basis for effective partnership with the new regimes especially.

(2) *The American pivot.* The refocusing of American strategy on the Asia-Pacific (and, not to be forgotten, the Gulf) and the concurrent expectation that Europeans deal with security problems in their own periphery, imposes autonomy upon Europe. The immediate implication is that Europeans need to decide, collectively (since this is beyond any single State), on the additional capabilities that they require. Any such decision will amount to guesswork though, unless it is grounded in the more fundamental decision on what it is Europeans actually want to do. Which are the regions and types of contingencies for which as a matter of priority they will assume responsibility, based on their vital interests, and what is their level of ambition in exercising that responsibility? In other words, Europeans need a specific strategy for security and defence: an EU white book.

That is not the same as a CSDP white book. The question is which role Europeans, collectively, see for themselves as security providers. Whether they act upon that and do operations through the command structure of the CSDP, NATO, a Member State, or the UN, is an ad hoc decision, in function of the specific task at hand. It is the EU though, as a foreign policy actor, which decides the grand strategy which a white book is to serve, so the

latter cannot be decided but by the EU as well.

Capability development as steered by such a white book is primarily a task for the CSDP though: only by Pooling & Sharing among Europeans can the Europeans shortfalls qua enablers for expeditionary operations be solved. A white book is a guide not only for capability development and military contingency planning, but also for intelligence, monitoring and early warning, and should focus the EU's comprehensive prevention efforts on the priority regions.

Obviously, the neighbourhood will be priority number one in any white book. But how far does the neighbourhood extend? Is it the EU's ambition e.g. to assure peace and stability in the Sahel? There are opportunities: in a region where the actors on the ground have very limited assets, deploying just one helicopter squadron can make a substantial difference.⁹ Or does the region for which Europeans will assume responsibility end at the southern border of Algeria and Libya? Or at the Mediterranean shore even? Iran leads to another important question: how does Europe see its role in case of conflict?

The EU's ambition should reach as far as its vital interests impose: as a global trade power, maritime security is a global concern for the EU. The trade route that today is threatened in the Gulf of Aden might as well be cut somewhere in Asian waters. A fair contribution to the collective security system of the UN seems another evident guiding line, notably the implementation of the Responsibility to Protect. Agreement on priorities should facilitate the mandating of action by the able and willing Member States, making use of the most appropriate EU, NATO, UN or national HQ, but in any case under the political aegis of the EU.

(3) *Energy* and (4) *climate change*. Short of nuclear war, the potentially most destructive challenges,

not just to Europe but to human progress as such, are energy scarcity and global warming. In *Why the West Rules – For Now*, Ian Morris argues (most convincingly as well as wittily) how since the origins of mankind, its development has been conditioned by nature and geography, and by its own technological progress.¹⁰ When development hits a technological ceiling, it does not just stagnate but recedes. Energy scarcity is precisely such a technological ceiling which it becomes urgent to break through, especially as in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, relying on nuclear energy appears ever less desirable.

While global actors are competing for access to the remaining fossil fuels, finding the technological solution to break through the ceiling need not be a zero-sum game. Indeed, if the breakthrough is not realized, all great powers will be equally disastrously affected, and when that happens, it will not have mattered much whether until that point Europe or China controlled the last fuel reserves. With regard to climate change, it is even clearer that we live in an age of what Giovanni Grevi¹¹ has dubbed interpolarity: multipolarity goes hand in hand with interdependence between the poles, as no great power can solve global warming on its own.

In addition to domestic policies (notably qua market integration and research and technology), EU foreign policy needs to mitigate the short term effects, e.g. the dependence on external energy suppliers that limits its margin of manoeuvre (whereas the US is seeking energy self-sufficiency), and the multiplier effect of climate change on tension and conflict within and between States. But EU foreign policy also needs to forge partnerships with all relevant actors to tackle the fundamental problems. The EU notably needs to instrumentalize its strategic partnerships in function of specific foreign policy priorities (thus to give substance to “effective multilateralism”).

PROCESS AND FORM: THE EU NEEDS A NARRATIVE

If and when the Member States do agree on a set of priorities, i.e. on the substance of grand strategy, the challenge is implementation – strategy should drive *action*. That is when questions of process and form come back into play.

The first issue is how the strategic reflection itself is organized. The process should promote creativity and thinking out-of-the-box, brevity and clarity, and ownership, making sure that the priorities arrived at truly reflect the issues on which the Member States are willing to act and to mandate the EU institutions to take to the initiative. Thinking out-of-the-box means starting from a blank sheet, even though the core of the existing ESS is to be integrated in a new grand strategy, and usually proves difficult within the formal institutions. Creativity and just that little extra bit of daring are more likely to manifest itself in a specific format, a series of seminars that includes as representatives from Member States not just the foreign and defence ministries, but other ministries and national MPs as well (a “mini-convention” as it were), alongside representatives from the European Parliament, the President of the European Council, the President of the Commission, and the High Representative – and, of course, the academic community and civil society. Incisive discussion notes should provoke a profound debate.

The outcome of the process is not necessarily a document, or just one document. The aim is also to create the enduring *awareness* in the capitals as well as in Brussels that grand strategy exists and certain choices have to be made at that level, which should in turn create a certain suppleness in constantly reassessing the importance of interests and the challenges to them and re-prioritizing accordingly.

Indeed, the aim is not to enshrine a set of priorities that is to remain valid for as long as

possible and can be carved into the walls of the EEAS building (as some seem to interpret the ESS) – that is the opposite of strategy. While the analysis of interests and challenges preceding the setting of strategy obviously has to look at the longer term, its main aim is, once again, to decide upon an agenda for action for the short to medium term (up to 5 years), to guide day-to-day decision-making and the allocation of means (including in the context of the next EU budgetary cycle). To make absolutely sure that interests, challenges and priorities are reassessed at least every 5 years, it could be an obligation to update grand strategy during each term of office of each High Representative.

“Strategy should drive *action*”

Strategy does not end with setting objectives, choosing instruments, and allocating means though. Action should be followed by assessment of its effectiveness and reporting back, in order to complete the policy loop. The obligation to evaluate policy in function of the strategic priorities and regularly report back to the highest political level should ensure that those priorities continue to drive action. As a result of not providing for this, the ESS has lost its driving role, though it remains an important tool of public diplomacy.

That finally leads to the question which usually overshadows the debate on substance: in which form should an updated grand strategy be codified? The EU must legitimize its foreign policy and sell its grand strategy, to its citizens and parliaments, first of all, and to the outside world – the clearer it is about its strategy, the more predictability and stability in our external relations. That does require a document, a strategic narrative, to be adopted by the European Council. That document should not be all-encompassing though. On the one hand, the Heads of State and

Government can also give a tasking to the relevant institutions to elaborate upon strategic priorities in more specific partial strategies. On the other hand, certain assumptions can actually remain implicit – that is why the reflection process is important in itself. The European Council need not try to spell out Europe’s vital interests e.g., but it can stress the fact in itself that interests drive strategy.

Such a document should be short and sharp, and it should be positively toned as well as ambitious. The starting point should not be what Europe is scared of, the threats, but what Europe wants to achieve: the positive agenda inherent in the core foreign policy idea of the Union. Drafting such a document should equally take place outside the formal institutions, as was the case for the original ESS. A small team representing the quartet of the Presidents of the European Council and the Commission, the High Representative, and the European Parliament should do the job (providing substantial drafts to the “mini-convention” and producing a public outcome document). The European Council should make clear that any such document replaces the ESS (unlike the 2008 Report on its implementation, the status of which was never entirely clear).

CONCLUSION

Finally, it should be clear that a grand strategy is a mandate to the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission, as the point(wo)man in the making of EU external action. That means that the High Representative should initiate decision-making in the Foreign Affairs Council, and should initiate action by the EEAS and the Commission on the set priorities – and it means that the capitals should allow the collective institutions that they have created to take that initiative.

A strategic actor, to start with, requires a strategy: it needs to know who it is and what it wants. It needs the economic means to pursue its strategy. But probably most important of all, it needs the *will* to act upon it.

In the words of Colin Gray again: “Just because a government drafts a document which proclaims the existence of a grand strategy, or a ‘comprehensive approach’, there is no guarantee that the baronies of officialdom will behave cohesively, coherently, and comprehensively. Strategy, grand or military, is never self-executing”.¹²

Endnotes

¹ Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge. Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 28.

² Sven Biscop & Jo Coelmont, *Europe, Strategy and Armed Forces. The Making of a Distinctive Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

³ Though the quote is also attributed to New Zealand physicist Sir Ernest Rutherford, in this paper on strategy the author chooses to believe Churchill is the source.

⁴ As this author proposed in *A New External Action Service Needs a New European Security Strategy*. Security Policy Brief 29 (Brussels: Egmont, November 2011).

⁵ The Lisbon Treaty added the emphasis on equality in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”.

⁶ The dwindling of which, as a result of the crisis, is deplored by the Future of Europe Group of the Foreign Ministers of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain in its *Final Report* of 17 September 2012.

⁷ The core phrase in the ESS reads as follows: “The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states. Spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human

rights are the best means of strengthening the international order”.

⁸ See Paul Krugman, *End this Depression Now!* (New York: Norton, 2012); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers our Future* (New York: Norton, 2012); Richard G. Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁹ Alexander Mattelaer, Luis Simón & Amelia Hadfield, *A Coherent EU Strategy for the Sabel* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2012).

¹⁰ Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now. The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

¹¹ Giovanni Grevi, *The Interpolar World: A New Scenario*. Occasional Paper 79 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2009).

¹² Colin S. Gray, op.cit., p. 28.

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