

Toby Vogel reviews a book that explores failures in EU foreign policy and suggests how it can rectify the situation

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy has fallen short of expectations. From democracy in Burma to peace in the Middle East, there is barely a foreign policy issue on which the EU has no opinion. But the huge ambition frequently falls flat when it is translated into actual policies. Even in its own neighbourhood – the Balkans, eastern Europe and north Africa – the EU has routinely failed to make a difference to events on the ground.

This is because the EU lacks a proper strategy and a mechanism to implement it, write Sven Biscop and Jo Coelmont in their excellent analysis of the EU's security policy, "Europe, strategy and armed forces".

The EU does have an ambitious foundational strategic document, the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003. Its preventive, holistic and multilateral approach is sound, according to the authors, but it is vague on the values and interests that the EU is prepared to defend, and on the strategy's implications for policy.

The ESS has failed to shape policy-making, although it is sometimes invoked in order to justify particular policies after they have been decided. Seen both by member states and the European Commission as 'Solana's paper' – it was the brainchild of Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief at the time – it lacked broad support in the EU's institutions. "The EU has not become markedly more proactive, capable or coherent since the adoption of the ESS," write Biscop and Coelmont drily.

Strategic drift

Perhaps the most tangible evidence of the EU's strategic drift analysed in this book are the 24 missions launched under the EU's security and defence policy over the past decade. (The pace has considerably slackened in more recent years.) It is not clear why the EU should be training police forces in Afghanistan, or monitoring a peace agreement in Indonesia. Because its values and principles are under threat? Because it wants to assist a strategic partner? Because it has capabilities that other bodies lack? One will search the EU's foreign policy statements in vain for a justification.

But this book does not simply posit a need for more strategic thinking in the EU. Biscop, an academic, and Coelmont, a former brigadier-general in the Belgian armed forces, see their book as a "normative" undertaking. "It



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Fighting a losing battle?

outlines how to achieve a clear political project for the EU as a strategic actor," they write in their preface, adding that they aim to offer "constructive and realistic proposals" on how to strengthen the EU as an international actor. The proposals are realistic, they write, because the Lisbon treaty and the ESS provide building blocks for a grand strategy and the required instruments for policy.

Biscop and Coelmont, who both work for Egmont, a think-tank in Brussels, offer a cogent argument for using permanent structured co-operation – a mechanism introduced to the field of defence policy by the Lisbon treaty – as the way forward in developing the EU's capacities. A Permanent Capability Conference, they write, could serve as a political

platform to generate military convergence between the member states. The EU would also need a permanent command and control structure, rather than relying on the current ad-hoc arrangements.

Europe's fiscal crisis could generate political momentum for using these building blocks, according to Biscop and Coelmont. "In times of austerity, there is no alternative to European co-operation if Europe wants to remain militarily relevant," they write.

One of the few criticisms this book invites is that the authors fail to explore whether "Europe" really does want to remain, or become, militarily relevant. "No more legal, institutional or procedural constraints can be invoked to delay Europe from stepping onto the scene with a resolute

and proactive foreign policy," they write. While that is true in principle, it is difficult to detect the political momentum, and indeed the leadership, necessary to make this happen.

Failing to tackle this obstacle head-on is one of the few weaknesses of this otherwise excellent, readable and well-argued book.



Europe, strategy and armed forces: the making of a distinctive power
By Sven Biscop and Jo Coelmont (138 pages)
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