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A New External Action Service Needs a New European Security Strategy

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No strategy lasts forever. The time has come to review and to complete the European Security Strategy. The necessity is evident; so is the opportunity, with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. A new External Action Service needs a clear mandate: a new strategy.

Necessity

The *European Security Strategy* (ESS) needs revising.

Adopted by the European Council back in 2003, it has lost its flair. That is not a criticism of the ESS, the contents of which remain valid, but an unavoidable reality. After a while, any strategic concept reaches the "best consumed before" date and no longer serves to inspire and, most importantly, to drive policy and action. The 2008 *Report on the Implementation of the ESS*, being insufficiently concrete and prospective, did not rectify this.

The ESS is incomplete though, so more than reviewing, it needs completing. It operates at the grand strategic level, "connecting large means and large ends" (Gaddis, 2009). On the ends it remains vague however. The ESS mostly gives us a method: the EU deals with foreign policy in a preventive, holistic and multilateral way. In other words, the ESS tells us *how* to do things, but not really *what* to do. The choice for this particular method is a crucial strategic decision, but because the EU and the Member States have not translated it into clear priorities, it has not generated sufficient action. Nor has it had a real impact on the development of means and capabilities, on which the ESS remains vague as well.

That is not to say that the EU is inactive – far from it. But without clear strategic objectives connecting its actions, it underperforms. Its actions have less effect than they could have – strategy functions as a multiplier. Without a more complete strategy, preventive action and rapid reaction especially, two of the key aims of the ESS, are virtually impossible, witness the initial improvisation on Libya.

By contrast, other global powers often have a much clearer idea of their interests and objectives and thus act in a much more purposive and resolute manner. In interaction with these powers, the EU is bound to come up short if it retains it current mostly reactive outlook.

Opportunity

Fortunately, there now is an ideal opportunity to revisit the ESS. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty has generated great expectations both within and outside the EU. What will the EU *do* with its enhanced foreign policy machinery? A new ESS adopted by the Heads of State and Government in the European Council would provide the answer. The priorities it sets should then steer the next EU budgetary cycle. In times of financial constraint, prioritization is more necessary than ever.

Engaging in a comprehensive and thorough strategic reflection involving all components of the European External Action Service (EEAS) would be an excellent way of forging the beginnings of a shared culture and outlook in the new service. The review process in itself is essential, as Robert Hunter (2009) proves: "following the conclusion of the exercise, everyone has a better idea of where each ally stands, what the agenda […] is likely to be, and, in general, a set of overall aspirations […]".

The current ESS was born out of the intra-EU divide over Iraq. Today's frustration with the Union's divided stance and lack of strategic insight and action on Libya could be transformed into positive energy by directing it to a revision of the ESS.

Desired Outcome

The process is important, but what really counts of course is the result: a new ESS. That should definitely confirm the preventive, holistic and multilateral outlook of the Union, but ought to complement it with much clearer objectives and thus priorities. Furthermore, it should provide more guidance about the required means and capabilities, civilian, military and institutional. The European Council is the only body carrying sufficient weight to provide a real impetus for *collective* capability development.

The end result will be an ESS constituting a strong, clear and broad mandate for EU external action across the board, in the areas of competence of the Council/EEAS as well as the Commission. That will strengthen the opportunity and legitimacy for the key EU-level actors to take to the initiative: the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy; the High Representative (HR), Catherine Ashton; and the relevant Commissioners. Only when they, each at their level, act early to initiate policy and stimulate the Member States is effective *preventive* action possible.

The outcome need not be limited to a new ESS though. The European Council can further give a *tasking* to develop specific sub-strategies and take action in policy areas that are prioritized in the new ESS. One very useful tasking would undoubtedly concern the means and capabilities, notably the implementation of the "Ghent Process" for military capability development.

Drafting Method

The open debate about the original ESS, through seminars involving a wide array of stakeholders, was an important innovation that should be preserved, in order to create the widest possible sense of ownership of its successor, whilst avoiding the mistakes of the 2008 debate. A real strategic review requires an incisive debate that does not shy away from difficult questions and constructive criticism.

This means:

- Seminars involving all stakeholders in the implementation of the ESS (the President of the European Council, the Member States, the HR, the EEAS, the Commission, the European Parliament) as well as all external actors that can make a substantial contribution (academia, NGOs, the media, the most significant partner countries and organizations).

- Setting specific questions for debate in parallel working groups rather than vague plenary discussions.
- Producing incisive discussion notes to launch the debate, by the President of the European Council, the HR, and the Commission.
- Inviting external speakers to offer constructive criticism and specific recommendations.
- Doing the final drafting in a small team, led by the HR, and integrating the advisors of the President of the European Council and the relevant Commissioners.
- And, most importantly, starting from a blank sheet of paper so as to invite creative thinking, even if the basic philosophy of the current ESS is to be preserved.

In 2013 at the latest, ten years after the original one, this process should produce a new ESS.

Substance of the Review: Values and Interests

The ESS starts from the philosophy that durable stability can only be guaranteed where security, prosperity, democracy and equality are guaranteed to all citizens. Promoting those four core values in the rest of the world is the best way therefore to safeguard them for ourselves. To that end, the Union pursues a holistic, preventive and multilateral foreign policy: putting to use in an integrated way the full range of instruments of external action, to address the root causes of instability and conflict, in partnership with others. That *method* is still valid and should be preserved.

To translate this method into clearer objectives and *priorities*, the review process should start from the EU'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.

Taking into account values and interests, and preserving the method, priorities can then be outlined in key areas, notably:

- Revitalizing the European Neighbourhood Policy, fostering democratization, and rendering conditionality more consistent, effective and credible.
- Developing a horizontal view on the strategic partnerships, instrumentalizing them in function of horizontal foreign policy priorities, and developing a view on the reform of the multilateral architecture (see Renard 2011).
- Defining priority regions and issues for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), as a tool to guide decision-making on operations and capability development (see Biscop and Coelmont 2011b).

Indeed, more specific implications for the necessary means and capabilities can be defined, notably in the area of intelligence gathering, and the planning and conduct of preventive action and rapid reaction.

Although not everybody recognizes it, already the current ESS and the Report on its implementation have a much broader scope than CSDP and even CFSP – they really concern the whole of EU external action. The scope of the new ESS should be unambiguous: it is the guiding framework for all areas of external competence of the EEAS and the Commission, with the HR at the head, who will coordinate with the relevant Commission competences, under the overall guidance of the European Council and its President. This broad scope can be reflected in a change of title: from ESS to *European Global Strategy*.

Follow-Up of the Review

One reason why the current ESS has lost its inspirational function is the lack of follow-up: no reporting or review mechanism was created, hence there was no bureaucratic necessity to continue to refer to it in the decision-making process, in spite of its continued presence in the discourse of the EU. And as the specific objectives and means were left undefined and no action plan to generate them was adopted, no benchmarks to assess implementation existed. It was also forgotten that once adopted and disseminated, the ESS acquires a life of its own: whether the EU likes it or not, others (the public, but also third States) *will* see it as the benchmark against which to judge EU action.

Therefore clear reporting and reviewing mechanisms are required so as not to lose the link between the grand strategic framework and day-to-day decision-making.

Annual reporting and debate on the effectiveness of EU external action, i.e. *policy evaluation*, should take place through the lens of the ESS that guides it, in the European Council as well as in the European Parliament. Policy evaluation at this strategic level will inter alia allow to identify in which areas there is a lack of translation into sub-strategies and implementation, and in which areas EU policies are overlapping or contradicting each other. Identifying the de facto sub-strategies is an important part of the reporting mechanism.

Such annual policy evaluation could be combined with a forward-looking "European Security Estimate", assessing the international environment. Together, they can inform an annual "State of the Union's Global Strategy" in which the HR outlines priorities for the coming year.

Finally, reviewing the ESS itself should not be accidental but systematic, e.g. at least every 5 years or at least with every start of a new or renewed mandate of the HR.

Conclusion

The EU has at its disposal many of the instruments, tools, means that it needs. But means only acquire *meaning* if they serve an end. That, unfortunately, is less clear today. As Joseph Nye (2011: 10) emphasizes:

> "Power-conversion strategies turn out to be a critical variable that does not receive enough attention. Strategies relate means to ends, and those that combine hard and soft power resources successfully in different contexts are the key to smart power".

If asked what EU foreign policy is about these days, no answer readily comes to mind. The EU lacks clear foreign policy priorities. Europe does invest a huge diplomatic, economic, military and civilian effort in many important issues. But in spite of that, few see the EU as the game-changer on the key issues of the day. Its efforts are not focussed enough and it lacks a clear strategic narrative.

The EU and the Member States need to decide therefore where collectively they want to make their mark. Only that can generate the necessary drive and sense of purpose that will give meaning to the External Action Service.

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