



## 2014: a centenary and a discovery

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**It is almost as if engaging in war is easier than thinking about war. In the year of the commemoration of the First World War, Europe is facing several wars on its borders, and European forces are actively engaged in Iraq and Mali. But is anyone thinking about the strategic objectives?**

You cannot be half strategic. Either you know what you want and you act accordingly, or you do not. Having a strategy does not guarantee success, for other actors will obviously be pursuing a strategy of their own that may be at odds with yours. Nor does not having a strategy guarantee failure, as others may act even less soundly than you. And you can simply get lucky, of course. ‘I know he’s a good general, but is he lucky?’, asked Napoleon. Bad generals rarely stay lucky for long though.

### **FACING WAR**

Through the European Union (EU), the countries of Europe were pursuing a somewhat vaguely defined grand strategy, with, as the 2003 European Security Strategy has it, its ultimate aim being ‘a world of well governed democratic states’. For its own part

abroad, the EU translated this into a regional strategy: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This sought to stimulate the neighbouring governments to provide equitably for the security, prosperity and freedom of all their citizens, in return for aid, market access and visa facilitation. The EU had already appraised the intransigence of many regimes to these aims (not helped by its own inconsistent implementation).

What it had not counted on was that others would actively try to halt and reverse its strategy by force of arms. This possibility was simply not part of the collective worldview of the EU. It was part of the national thinking in some of the capitals, but that tended to be one-dimensional. Some member states had their eye on Russia, others on jihadism, many on migration. Taken all together, these national views could have been the building-blocks of a comprehensive collective outlook. But the opposite happened: national views negated rather than reinforced each other. Consequently the EU as a whole did not adapt its strategy to the real situation surrounding it and in 2014 simply carried on with the ENP as before, even after the upheaval of the Arab Spring and in the face of dire warnings about Ukraine.

This was bad strategy and so Europe's luck ran out. As 2015 arrives, the EU is facing war in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Mali. If the EU cannot be blamed for these wars, its policies did not do much to prevent them either; now it is a matter of whether they can stop them. The experiences of 2014 engender a major question: is Europe capable of thinking about these vital geopolitical matters collectively?

### ENGAGING IN WAR

With regard to the Ukraine crisis, the shooting down of flight MH17 forced the EU's hand. Thanks also to German leadership, the EU displayed unity and resolve in adopting sanctions that are seriously hurting the Russian economy. That is tactics though. Has the EU debated which end-state it is seeking to achieve both for Ukraine and for its long-term relationship with Russia? What are the conditions for the sanctions to be lifted? If the EU does not know for itself, then how does it imagine the sanctions will send the right message to Putin?

Furthermore, to the extent that a strategic debate is taking place, it is split between two forums: the EU and NATO. This artificial separation of the diplomatic and defence dimensions of the same strategic issue is completely at odds with all principles of strategy – and with the comprehensive approach that both organisations like to vaunt.

If European actions in the east could at least constitute the beginning of a strategy, its engagement in the Middle East is anything but strategic. It is also much less united; e.g. just a handful of countries have joined the US-led air campaign against the so-called Islamic State (IS). That campaign was probably inevitable in order to at least contain the IS and create some breathing space, but that should then be used for some urgent strategic reflection. *Bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble*, Americans, Europeans, Saudis, Iranians and others are all fighting the IS, but this coalition of

opportunity will not last long if the political end-state that it is fighting for is not defined. Certainly no Iraqi army, no matter how well trained or lavishly equipped, will fight if it does not know what for.

At least Iraq and Syria are on Europe's radar screen – is anybody still thinking about Libya, where for lack of political and economic follow-up the results of the military intervention that Europeans initiated have been completely undone? The EU's truly strategic engagement is that with Iran: more than anybody else Europe has been the driving force of the negotiations that could lead to a normalisation of relations and the involvement of Iran in a new regional arrangement; without Iran no stable arrangement can be imagined.

Fortunately things are looking up in the Horn of Africa and in the Sahel, where EU engagement is framed in a more or less thought-through regional strategy. Progress is slow and engagement on the ground limited, for neither European nor regional governments like to see boots on the ground, so it will have to be sustained for a long time to come, but at least things are moving in the right direction.

### THINKING ABOUT WAR

These enormous challenges bring us back to the question: who is thinking about them? Rather frighteningly there does not seem to be any service or body in the EU where the inconvenient strategic questions outlined above are being asked, possible responses elaborated and choices made.

One reason is that many member states do not want to have this debate. Many seem to think that as far as the east is concerned, it is a matter for NATO. That betrays a limited grasp of strategy, for nothing that NATO as a military alliance can do makes sense without an answer to the question of how Europe envisages its future relations with Russia and

Ukraine – which can only be answered through the EU. When it comes to the south, many capitals are merely waiting for the US to come up with all the answers. That does not seem very wise when Obama himself has as much as admitted that actually he does not have a clue.

Another reason is however that EU institutions are ill-adapted to this kind of debate. At the administrative level, the European External Action Service (EEAS) collects and processes a wealth of information and intelligence. But this situational awareness is then not being translated into long-term analysis, feeding into strategic choices, nor into permanent prudent planning, providing continuously updated policy options for the short and medium term within the strategic framework that has been chosen. Both functions require much more capacity than they are currently being allocated. Both should be directly attached to the High Representative, to prepare her to put these difficult questions on the agenda at the political level, in the Foreign Affairs Council that she chairs, or if necessary in

the European Council, via its President.

### CONCLUSION

Making strategy in collective decision-making bodies with twenty-eight member states will never be self-evident, but with the right strategic and planning support a driven High Representative can at least force the capitals to acknowledge the questions. Pretending not to see them will not make them go away and ultimately will put Europe at risk. A hundred years after the First World War, Europe has discovered that as long as not all nations have joined the community of ‘well governed democratic states’, geopolitics still matter, and strategy will be required to deal with the challenges that the unfortunately less peaceful world around Europe poses.

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