

## The voice of the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations

*Sven Biscop*

### **The ESDC: A Tool for Strategy-Making**

I just write about EU policy; the participants in the ESDC courses are making policy, and implementing it. That is why, for me personally as well as for the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations as a think-tank, lecturing for the ESDC is such a great opportunity.

It would be for every academic and think-tank, because academics and think-tanks must take care not to stray too far from the real world. It is our job to think out of the box and generate ambitious ideas, yet to stay relevant to policy one must be able to imagine those ideas being implemented. Presenting our ideas to an audience of practitioners from all EU Member States and institutions is an immediate test of their relevance. I am not just happy, but keen therefore to accept invitations to lecture for the ESDC. For me as an academic, speaking for such a varied audience is a humbling and a rewarding experience. The true academic speaks with assurance of the issues that he has studied, but always in a conditional mode, for new facts and insights from other people will lead him to continuously reassess his analysis.

In return, I hope that some of my ideas can contribute to the work of the course participants. Academics seek to stimulate thinking, by shedding a different light on events and developments, that practitioners had perhaps not thought of; by reminding them of the history that went before, which sometimes the practitioners have forgotten; and by proposing concrete recommendations for future action. It is, in my opinion, crucial therefore that there is a sprinkling of academics in all ESDC courses, to add some exotic spice to the solid fare provided by the institutional speakers.

The fact that some of the courses are held in interesting locations is, of course, a not unwelcome extra. Even so, this aspect, too, needs to be taken seriously: one thinks and writes differently about such places as Ukraine or Moldova or Azerbaijan (to name just a few locations I have visited through the ESDC) once one has been there.

In Brussels or on location, the ESDC is a forum where one meets military officers, diplomats and officials from the various allies and partners of the EU. From the US and Canada, to the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, to South America and ASEAN and even China: the ESDC reaches all of them.

In this regard, the ESDC is an instrument of EU diplomacy. Offering courses to practitioners from other countries is a most effective way of shaping their idea of the EU.

### **European Strategy**

For me, the main function of the ESDC, however, is to contribute to the making of European strategy. Nobody who has heard me lecture in an ESDC course will be surprised that in this article too I focus on the S-word.

Each EU Member State has its own history and strategic culture, geopolitical position, laws and institutions, so each brings its own distinctive national perspective on the world to collective EU decision-making. At the same time, the EU is a single market, and most Member States share a single currency and have abolished their internal borders. It no longer are the national borders, therefore, that determine national security: an act of aggression against any member of the single market, the Schengen zone or the Euro zone will immediately affect the politics, economies and security of all of its members. Just like a province of a state cannot dissociate itself from the security of the other provinces, so no EU Member State can dissociate itself from a threat against the security of a fellow member.

Therefore, even though as a consequence of its history or geography a state may traditionally focus on specific threats against specific territories, in reality all EU Member States have a shared objective interest in the protection of all of the EU against all threats. That does not mean, of course, that there is no more room for national perspectives. But they will have to be national views on European strategy – national strategy alone cannot provide security once one is a member of the single market.

Herein lies the role of the ESDC: to contribute to increasing the awareness of these shared interests, to promoting understanding of the different national perspectives, and to forging a collective European perspective on the world and how to deal with it. The aim, in other words, is to create a European strategic community: officers, diplomats and officials who know each other, who are familiar with each other's perspectives, and are therefore more able to think and to act together.

### **Flagship Courses**

The High-Level Course, the flagship course of the ESDC, serves exactly this purpose. Consisting of four modules in four locations, spread over the academic year, it creates an instant network of senior people. The Egmont Institute is proud to be a co-organiser, every year, of the first module, which always takes place in Brussels, in support



15th CSDP High Level Course 2019-2020 'Altiero Spinelli', in Brussels, jointly organised by The Royal Higher Institute for Defence and the Egmont Institute, between 23 and 27 September 2019.

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of our Belgian sister institute, the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). One of the fixed agenda items of the High-Level Course has become the lecture that Egmont provides on the EU Global Strategy (previously on the European Security Strategy). This big picture analysis of the strategic dilemmas facing the EU sets the scene for the rest of the module and for the three subsequent modules (which every year are organised in and by different Member States).

Egmont's contribution to the first module of the Advanced Course for Political Advisors, which likewise is organised in Brussels every year, can be seen in the same light. The second and third module take place at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and at the Landesverteidigungsakademie in Vienna. Egmont furthermore contributes a lecture on the EU Global Strategy to most Orientation Courses (which for the most part take place in Brussels) and to various other courses and seminars (in Brussels and abroad). In addition several Egmont senior research fellows and senior associate fellows speak on many other topics and chair panels and working groups in a variety of courses.

In order to take the forging of a European strategic community one step further, Egmont has taken the initiative, together with the RHID, the Institut d'Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale (IHEDN) from Paris and the Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik (BAKS) from Berlin, to launch a new course: the European Advanced Strategic Course on Security and Defence. The pilot edition will run in 2020, the fifteenth anniversary year of the ESDC.

The European Advanced Strategic Course aims even higher than the High-Level Course. On the one hand, it seeks to attract a more senior as well as a more varied audience: senior practitioners from Member States and the institutions, but also leaders from the security and defence industry, and selected academics and journalists. Just like the senior national courses organised by the four convening institutes bring together people from all sectors, public and private,

that contribute to national security, it seeks to do the same at the European level. On the other hand, it will look beyond the confines of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and address the level of 'grand strategy': the EU Global Strategy in all its dimensions (of which the CSDP is, of course, a crucial one).

The motivation for creating this new course is the fact that the changing balance between the great powers is altering the strategic environment in which EU external action, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the CSDP, but also trade and investment, is operating. Not only has Russia become more assertive and has China become a great power; our ally among the great powers, the United States, is changing its grand strategy. This demands a thorough questioning of all our assumptions and the courage to think about new and creative strategic directions. At the same time, the EU is implementing ambitious defence schemes, notably Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), which require close cooperation between the EU institutions, the Member States, and industry.

More than ever, we Europeans need to engage, to debate and to brainstorm therefore. Rather than as a classic course, this new initiative is indeed envisaged as a brainstorming, with the aim of creating a 'club' of people who all think about strategy and have the will to find European solutions. Bringing in academics and journalists is essential to the success of the exercise, for they will both contribute ideas and spread the European word afterwards.

### **The Link with Academia**

As a college needs 'students' (or course participants), so it needs academics. One role of the ESDC as I see it is to strengthen the link between academia (both think-tanks and universities) and the practice of EU strategy.

One initiative that Egmont has taken in this regard is the creation of an annual PhD prize (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/media/call-for-submissions-the-2019-global-strategy-phd-prize>). The Global Strategy PhD Prize is awarded conjointly by Egmont and the ESDC to a doctoral dissertation in one of the working languages of the CFSP (English and French), which addresses a policy-relevant topic related to the foreign, security and defence policy of the EU that falls within the remit of the EU Global Strategy, and which has been successfully defended in the previous academic year. The winner is selected by a jury that I chair, on which the Head of the ESDC sits, as well as representatives from the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission, the European Defence Agency (EDA), the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and academia.



The award criteria stress policy relevance. It is my firm conviction that academics are not paid by society to develop esoteric theories that only other academics can understand, but to say something useful for all those engaged with policy: the practitioners who prepare and implement it, the politicians who decide on it, and the citizens who vote on it. Vice versa, policy-makers are well advised to ground their decisions in scientific research.

The PhD Prize is a modest attempt to bring the two sides, academia and policy, closer together, by rewarding and thus bringing to the attention of the policy community a particularly salient dissertation by a distinguished young researcher every year. Every academic has sufficient papers from his own students to read, but the jury of the PhD Prize is an additional duty that I happily assume.

Because of the importance of this link between academia and policy, I salute the ESDC initiative to create a doctoral school. The annual summer school especially can become a central platform where promising PhD candidates working on EU foreign, security and defence policy can meet and discuss each other's work, and get in touch with the Brussels policy community. Without a doubt, this will greatly enhance the quality of their research.

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*IHEDN is a long-standing partner of the ESDC. From its creation, IHEDN have been actively involved in the ESDC activities*

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Luiss researcher, Antonio Calcara, won the Global Strategy PhD 2019 prize, from the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations and the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) for his thesis, entitled *The Decision-Making Dilemma of Arms Procurement Policy*

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### **Conclusion: The Europeans**

Every time I participate in a seminar or attend a meeting involving EU or Member State officials, I meet someone who I had the pleasure of engaging with in one or the other ESDC course. That is the strength of the ESDC: it creates a network of Europeans, who do not always agree on everything, but who do feel European. In my view, the ESDC has become an indispensable institution, forging and spreading a European perspective that the EU Member States definitely need.

Academics like to hear themselves talk – I do not betray any great secret in putting it in writing. And, as I stated at the outset, lecturing for the ESDC gives depth to my own research. But the most important reason why I happily contribute to the ESDC whenever I can, is that I believe in the project.