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EU Grand Strategy: Optimism is Mandatory

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The Arab Spring, the American pivot, and the global crisis: these affect all of EU external action, but also present opportunities for EU action. A debate on grand strategy remains necessary.

INTRODUCTION: A QUESTION OF STRATEGY

Should the European Union have a new *European Security Strategy* (ESS)? The correct answer is yes. But perhaps the question is wrong. Or we have focussed on the wrong side of it. The question has generated a bit of a debate – but really only a bit – about the pros and cons of revising the 2003 text.

Is a revision worth the effort if in decision-making Member States do not even refer to the existing document? That they have stopped doing so proves that the ESS has reached the age limit – relevance requires revision. Would the exercise not have too divisive an impact? Again, it is precisely because Member States are divided that a real strategic debate is all the more urgent. But should this be a priority in the midst of a financial and economic crisis? Exactly: the scarcer the resources, the more important the strategy – one wants to spend the means one does have in the most relevant way.

Should one not focus first on consolidating the European External Action Service (EEAS)? That is a great tool indeed, but no more than that: a tool, a means – which can only be meaningful if it serves clear ends. And involving the EEAS staff, with their various backgrounds, into a strategic exercise would help forge the shared culture that they need to function effectively. Just hypothetically then, if one would embark upon this endeavour, should one start from a blank page or amend the existing document? Definitely the former, if one wants some creative ideas. And would it be possible to produce such a concise and readable text again? If one keeps the number of drafters below the number of pages, sure.

Pushed most vocally by Sweden (which formally proposed a review in 2011) and Finland, the “aye” camp got the explicit support of Poland and Italy, plus the large majority of the small number of academics who care about the ESS. Intellectual weight does not equal political power though. Having managed to have “strategic priorities” included on the agenda of the March 2012 informal Gymnich meeting of EU foreign ministers, the coalition proved insufficiently grand to tip the balance. Rather than a negative decision, the Gymnich saw a non-decision. That was perhaps even more effective in removing the

ESS from the agenda again.

But perhaps the most important side of the question never made it to the agenda in the first place. The debate mostly focused on form and process: does the EU need to produce a new ESS-type document? That obscured the much more fundamental debate on substance. The Arab Spring, the American strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific, the crisis: all denote major geopolitical change. *Does the EU have a strategy able to cope?* Put that way, answering with a straightforward yes is overly optimistic (even though optimism is mandatory, as we shall see). This is easily proved: ask anybody working on, for, or with the EU whether he/she sees the Union as a game-changer in international politics today, or even simply as a strategic actor. At best, the response will be hesitation; most will simply say no. Nobody, in comparison, would hesitate for a second to respond positively were they asked the same about the United States or China.

There is a most urgent need to debate EU strategy therefore, not about in what form it should be written down (if at all) and by whom, but about *what it should say*.

THE ARAB SPRING: FOUR SEASONS IN ONE DAY

The Arab Spring is happening in spite of the EU, not thanks to it. That fact calls for a serious reappraisal of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). *More for More* is a start, but to shape a positive outcome that appears less and less certain it might not be sufficient.

Be there new regimes, or just old regimes in a new guise, old regimes clinging to power by every means, or old regimes seeking transition without too much instability: there will be new alignments within and between the States in our southern neighbourhood. Not to mention the involvement of great and would-be powers from outside. There is no need for alarmism: in

military terms, there is no threat to Europe's territory from the region. (The crisis in Syria shows the limits of what we can do *in* the region though; on the other hand never before was there a call for European intervention *from* the region, as in Libya). But the possibility of a "ring of the indifferent" or even of a "ring of the openly hostile" to Europe and its values substituting for the hoped for "ring of friends", is real enough. The impact on our leverage to shape and work with our neighbourhood will be enormous. Safe trade routes, a secure energy supply and manageable migration are but the most obvious interests at stake.

Leverage starts with legitimacy. Public opinion throughout the region mostly sees the EU as a status quo power, whose commitment to reform was never sincere. With those found to be willing (for whom we should be actively searching) as well as palatable (which we should be actively stimulating), a much more profound engagement must now be sought in order to retain (or regain) influence and safeguard our vital interests. This is not about building an EU sphere of influence (no need for our neighbours to look up to us) but about a new chance to build a balanced partnership (we do hope that our neighbours will not look away from us).

The extent of cooperation with each regime is a most delicate decision. Are all citizens physically safe from their own government? The answer to that question determines the red line for partnership. With other regimes a careful balance will have to be sought, working with religiously inspired parties without promoting sectarianism, working with existing regimes without consolidating their more authoritarian traits, and nudging them towards transition without causing chaos. Finding a regional arrangement also that involves all outside actors, rather than supporting one against the other in their bid for regional hegemony.

The EU has major instruments and expertise to give substance to partnership, in the economic, social, political, and security field. Large-scale infrastructure projects, e.g. in the energy and transport sector (linking up our southern neighbours); university scholarships; training and educating armed forces, police and judiciary; deploying in theatre to help neighbours secure their borders and combat security challenges emanating from within the region and further south (as the EU is starting to do with the new CSDP operations in the Sahel). These are just a few examples of real engagement.

THE AMERICAN PIVOT HINGES ON EUROPE

The Arab Spring highlights what should be an obvious truth. Critics of the EU's lack of engagement in Asia have a point, but they do tend to overlook that unlike the US, the EU simply cannot afford to shift the thrust of its strategic engagement to the Asia-Pacific. The Arab Spring, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the struggle for dominance over the Gulf, the frozen conflicts, the *Zwischeneuropa* of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine: our broader neighbourhood is simultaneously one of the world's most strategic and most volatile. If the EU were able to stabilize its periphery, that would make it far from a peripheral power.

Meanwhile, the American pivot *is* happening. Washington expects that every European will do his duty: henceforth peace and stability in our neighbourhood is first and foremost our responsibility. That cannot even be considered illogical, whether seen from Washington or Brussels. Inadvertently or not, the US is now demanding European strategic autonomy, at least regionally, for its pivot is partially dependent on Europe's ability to take care of its own business. If Europeans would prove unable to contain a crisis that poses a serious threat to the continent, the US would have no choice but to intervene because of its own vital interests. In that sense the US

remains a European power. Washington might just decide to make its point though by withholding support in a crisis that is important to Europe without threatening its vital interests – like Libya.

The Libyan crisis has shown once again that today Europeans have no common view on which types of crises in which parts of the world they feel responsible for. Europe's level of ambition as a security provider remains undefined. The American pivot not only forces Europeans to think about this, but to do so collectively, in an EU framework even.

First, Europeans have to invest in the capabilities which the autonomy that is forced upon them requires. They will notably have to acquire their own strategic enablers (air-to-air refuelling, targeting, strategic transport etc.) for crisis management operations, so as to allow American means to be diverted elsewhere (whereas for the 2011 Libya campaign 90% of enablers were American, which means that without US support Europeans would still have been able to flatten a substantial part of the country but not in a militarily, legally, politically or morally acceptable way). No single European country is capable of generating such capabilities on its own: the only feasible solution is a collective European one.

Second, such collective decisions on the future capability mix (as well as intelligence-gathering and contingency planning) require that first Europeans agree on functional and geographic priorities for the most likely deployments, in function of their common interests and foreign policy. Third, the American pivot implies a less pronounced role in NATO. The eternal EU-NATO debate has lost all meaning, for NATO minus the US push factor simply equals those same internally divided Europeans again. The way to keep NATO viable is to reinforce European ownership of it, which starts with reinforcing Europe – the EU.

In a way, the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) is being revived. But where the original 1990s concept saw the ESDI as a mere technical European pillar firmly anchored in and subservient to NATO, today an “ESDI Plus” is needed: anchored outside NATO and receiving its strategic guidance from the EU. Let us simply call it the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) therefore. Europeans would collectively define a strategy for crisis management. They would collectively develop capabilities through “Pooling & Sharing” in the framework of the CSDP, double-hatting it as the European pillar of NATO in order to guarantee interoperability and incorporate their collective aims as such in the NATO Defence Planning Process. And they would collectively deploy for crisis management, under the political aegis of the EU, making use of the most suitable national or NATO headquarters (or its own Operations Centre) according to the case at hand.

THE CRISIS AND THE SCRAMBLE FOR EUROPE

Just as the Arab Spring and the American pivot force the EU to step up its strategic engagement, the financial and economic crisis puts a great limit on the means for doing so. There is less money, and also less bandwidth available for foreign policy. The world does not stand still, but as the Heads of State and Government have to devote summit after summit to the rescue of the Euro, EU foreign policy inevitably loses out.

The crisis also has geopolitical implications. For one, the prestige, legitimacy, and attractiveness of the EU have been greatly damaged. The fundamental decision to maintain the Euro and, by extension, the European project by deepening financial and economic integration has been taken (to be followed, hopefully, by fiscal and social integration). But the painfully drawn-out decision-making creates the image of a weak Union paralyzed by dissent

and unable to take resolute action. The vaunted European model appears not to work so well after all. That appearance is most probably wrong (optimism remains mandatory) but it does create a real loss of soft power that handicaps any foreign policy initiative from the start. *Schadenfreude* is a powerful emotion.

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The loss of hard power is real too. As Europe is hit much harder by the crisis than the emerging powers, its relative position in the world continues to decline. The “scramble for Europe” has not quite begun yet, but China is not the only one on the lookout for strategic acquisitions. Giving substance to the so-called strategic partnerships with the BRICS and others becomes even more challenging than it already was as they sense Europe’s loss of confidence. This is also evident in the various multilateral forums, where the voice of the EU (and the US for that matter) is often drowned out.

Grand strategy starts at home therefore. The first step towards success in external action is rapid and resolute internal action to finally create the deepened economic, financial, fiscal and social union that already at the start of the crisis, and after years of procrastination, still today everybody identifies as the way ahead for Europe. Let us now *do* it then.

The crisis, the American pivot and the Arab Spring also lead to an even more basic conclusion: grand strategy is necessary. The Arab Spring e.g. cannot be discussed only within the box of the ENP, because it might necessitate the decision to reallocate funds from other policies to the ENP, or to shift the focus of other policies (such as development) to the region. Furthermore, events in the real world don't respect the confines of EU policies: developments in the ENP countries cannot be dissociated from what goes on in the Sahel, the Horn and the Gulf. All three factors have major implications for EU foreign policy overall and therefore demand a debate on strategy overall, rather than just a debate at the level of sub-strategies and individual policy areas.

“Ten years on, a 2013 ESS can deliver a strong and credible message: Europe has an idea and will set out to promote it.”

Organizing a review of the ESS is one *means* of provoking the real debate, on grand strategy, hence this author's consistent plea in favour of such a review. It is an obvious means of doing so – but not an end in itself. If the grand strategy debate can be launched in a different manner, by all means let us go ahead.

A POWERFUL IDEA

But, if and when the EU does chart its strategic course, it also needs a strategic narrative. It needs to explain and legitimize its grand strategy to citizens, parliaments, and the world, especially if it claims a “distinctive European approach to foreign and security policy” (as in the 2008 *Report on the Implementation of the ESS*). For that purpose, an ESS-type document is an ideal vehicle, as the persistence of the 2003 edition in the EU discourse (even though not in actual

decision-making) and in the public debate has proven. In that sense, reviewing the ESS does constitute an end in itself.

A new ESS should not start from the threats and challenges (which Europe does face) for that would be too negative, defensive, and reactive, and hence self-defeating. Europe's strategic narrative should confidently set out a *positive* agenda: what does the EU set out to achieve in this world? Optimism is mandatory therefore.

Optimism is justified too. If there is a tendency to be defensive, it is because Europe has a lot to lose. Europeans have constructed a very distinctive society, through a combination of democracy, capitalism, and strong government (intervening at EU and Member State level to ensure the fair functioning of the market and to provide the public goods which it does not generate). As Tony Judt states in *Postwar* (Penguin, 2006, p. 793), there is a “European Social Model”. Representing “an implicit contract between governments and citizens, as well as between one citizen and another”, it is not so much a set of uniform rules and practices across Europe (for there are many local variations) as “a sense – sometimes spelled out in documents and laws, sometimes not – of the balance of social rights, civic solidarity and collective responsibility that was appropriate and possible for the modern state”.

That model works: Europe is one of the regions that is the most successful in providing the greatest security, prosperity and freedom to the greatest number of citizens. Put differently, it is one the world's most *equal* regions. And only where governments equally provide all citizens with security, prosperity and freedom are lasting peace and stability possible. The *idea* and *fundamental purpose* of Europe itself should also be at the core of EU external action. Because where governments don't provide for

their citizens, tensions will arise, instability, repression and conflict will follow, and citizens will eventually revolt and regimes implode, violently or peacefully. The best way therefore to guarantee peace and stability around the EU is to stimulate governments outside the EU to similarly provide for their citizens, to the mutual benefit of all: this is a positive agenda. *A Secure Europe in a Better World* – the 2003 ESS already said it.

In its southern neighbourhood, the EU until recently ignored the core idea of its own strategy, working with any regime willing to cooperate on terrorism and illegal migration, regardless of its record in providing for its citizens. Thus when the Arab Spring happened, the EU found itself in a very bad position. The negative lesson is that focussing on short-term interests is short-sighted. In the long term, interests coincide with the values on which the European idea is founded. The positive lesson is that the aspiration to security, prosperity, freedom and equality is universal. Much more than before the Arab Spring, there is momentum today to advance that agenda.

Ten years on, a 2013 ESS can deliver a strong and credible message therefore: Europe has an idea and will set out to promote it.

No need to change the *way* of doing things: the preventive, holistic and multilateral approach remains valid. But it should be emphasized which common *vital interests* that method will guarantee: defence against any military threat to EU territory; open lines of communication and trade; a secure supply of energy and other natural resources; a sustainable environment; manageable migration; the maintenance of international law and universally agreed rights; the autonomy of decision-making of the EU and its Member States. Then *what* is to be achieved can be defined more clearly, mapping out the new strategic course in the *priority* areas of external action where Member States agree there is

added value in collective action: the broader neighbourhood, strategic partnerships, the multilateral architecture, and the EU's role as a security provider. On that strong and clear mandate for EU external action across the board, the President of the European Council and the High Representative can act with the Member States.

CONCLUSION

There is one major caveat however. Grand strategy starts at home, but can also end at home. A strategy founded on promoting an idea outside the EU cannot be credible if the idea is no longer adhered to within it: that would kick the feet from under the EU's strategic narrative. If obsessed with austerity the EU would save the Euro the wrong way, it would by extension not save but destroy the European project. Citizens would no longer feel committed to a Union or a national government that mistook the Euro for an end in itself, to the detriment of the Union's fundamental purpose – their security, prosperity and freedom. Great internal instability would be the result – hardly a base for decisive external action. Fortunately it has dawned on Europe's leaders what the fundamental purpose of the Union is, and that jobs and growth are more likely to contribute to it than any golden rule.

If that realization is now quickly translated into decisive action, the EU will soon also realize that the Arab Spring, the American pivot and the crisis all present opportunities, that it has all the means to be one of the poles of this multipolar world – to be in effect a great power – if only it wants to be. Being a power does not necessarily entail playing classic power games. EU strategy has been and will continue to be distinctive, seeking to further its interests without harming the legitimate interests of others. But it does imply action. That means more than reacting to events: the EU must simultaneously try to shape events in function of its strategic priorities. And it means

more than “normative power” (showing good manners in the hope that they will be emulated): the EU must also be seen to act upon its strategy. That means proactively promoting the values on which its model is based.

Judt concludes his masterwork in that sense (p. 800): “America would have the biggest army and China would make more, and cheaper, goods. But neither China nor America had a serviceable model to propose for universal emulation. [...] it was *Europeans* who were now uniquely placed to offer the world some modest advice on how to avoid repeating their own mistakes. Few would have predicted it sixty years before, but the twenty-first century might yet belong to Europe”.

Optimism is mandatory.

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