



From Global Strategy to Strategic Compass: Where Is the EU Heading?

Sven Biscop

Does the EU need a “Strategic Compass” to guide the implementation of the security and defence dimension of the *European Union Global Strategy* (EUGS)? Does it need a military strategy perhaps? And what about a review of the EUGS itself? As Josep Borrell has assumed the post of High Representative, various proposals by Member States and EU institutional actors are being discussed in Brussels. The wish for more strategic documents may reflect the complexity of the challenges that the EU is facing. It may also result from the inability to fully implement existing strategies. Producing new documents can be a way of forging a deal between Member States on foreign policy priorities for the next five years. But it could also be window-dressing, occupying the machinery and deluding ourselves that we are active. How to take EU strategy and its implementation forward?

For the record (though I know it is unlikely to happen today): ideally, the EUGS itself should be systematically reviewed and a new edition adopted after every European election. The EUGS 2016 should be followed by the EUGS 2020, and so on.

A strategic review is a way of forcing ourselves to think about grand strategy at least once every five years. Remember that thirteen years elapsed between the 2003 *European Security Strategy* and the EUGS, because Member States could not agree on the need for a review; rendering it systematic would avoid such a deadlock. Sometimes one may review the EUGS and decide that not that much has to be changed – I would argue that is the case today. But then one doesn’t change things because one has thought about them; not because one has refused to think.

Furthermore, a strategic review at the start of the term would be a way for each High Representative to craft his/her own mandate and set the priorities on which he/she will take the lead during the next five years.

A MID-TERM REVIEW OF IMPLEMENTATION

If, as it now appears, there is no willingness to review the EUGS itself, a second-best solution would be to assess its implementation.

Care should be taken to avoid the mistakes from the past. In 2007, for lack of consensus on a full strategic review, the European Council also tasked the High Representative with such an assessment, but the resulting *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy* (December 2008) ended up fumbling the issue. The report's relation to the ESS was never quite clear. Formally it did not replace but supplement it – which document had priority then? Most importantly, the report did not actually offer any operational conclusions to take implementation forward. Add the fact that the report was badly written, and one understands why it was quickly forgotten – and the effort wasted.

A “Mid-Term Review of Implementation” of the EUGS, as I would propose to call the exercise, should be clear in its purpose: not to replace the EUGS nor to supplement it, but to assess its implementation so far, in all dimensions, and to decide on actions to be taken for its implementation during the term of the new Commission, ideally with an eye to a full strategic review of the EUGS itself after the 2024 elections.

The aim should not be to create a permanent new layer of strategy in between the EUGS, our grand strategy, and the various existing geographic and thematic strategies under the EUGS (on cyber, terrorism, maritime security, connectivity, the Sahel etc.). There is little added value in complicating the hierarchy of documents, but a great risk of confusion, for an additional layer would inevitably end up deviating from the EUGS itself and blur our priorities. The job at hand therefore is to make sure that all the current

specific strategies fit within the choices made in the EUGS, and that all of the EUGS is translated into specific strategies and, finally, into action.

A TRIPLE TASK LIST

A “Mid-Term Review of Implementation” should do three things, therefore.

1. Honestly assess implementation of the EUGS to date. This is not an exercise for public consumption, like the June 2019 report *The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years on, Moving Forward*, which (understandably, from the point of view of communication) paints a positive picture. This internal assessment, however, should focus on the shortfalls: what have we not done?
2. Decide on specific objectives and ways of achieving them during the coming five years for each of the five priorities of the EUGS. Through this exercise, the High Representative can craft a package deal with capitals and create his own mandate for a proactive role. In setting specific objectives, the existing broad priorities can be centred on the most pressing challenges and finetuned in accordance with how the environment has evolved since the EUGS was presented.
3. Identify horizontal issues that have to be taken into account when taking action to implement each of the five priorities. This is the way, short of a full strategic review of the EUGS itself, to put new concerns on the agenda or to give more prominence to issues that the EUGS did address but which have gained in importance since. A prime example is the need to position the EU in the rivalry between the great powers (the US, China, and Russia) as an independent actor that forges its own relations with each of the others. This view is implicit in the EUGS but needs to be rendered more explicit in view of the

intensification of great power rivalry (as in the March 2019 communication *EU-China: A Strategic Outlook*). Another example is the 2018 *EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy*, which also affects all five priorities of the EUGS.

As the aim is to foster action and kick-start implementation, a “Mid-Term Review of Implementation” cannot be too time-consuming. It ought to be completed no later than by the June 2020 European Council. To take more time would be to defeat the purpose of the exercise.

A “STRATEGIC COMPASS”?

One outcome of the third step could be the conclusion that for a certain thematic or geographic area, a specific strategy is missing. I certainly agree that the EU needs more politico-military guidance. Over the years, political guidance for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has become confused while remaining incomplete, and the EU has assumed security tasks beyond the CSDP, notably in response to hybrid threats.

The Treaty lists the expeditionary tasks of the CSDP, to which the EUGS has added the protection of Europe itself, even though the Treaty does not provide for CSDP operations on the territory of the Union. Based on the EUGS, the November 2016 *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence* lists three tasks (crisis response, capacity-building, and the protection of Europe), but the EUGS also emphasises maintaining free access to the global commons as a military task. Within the task of crisis response, the EUGS prioritises the protection of civilians in armed conflict, but in reality, Member States undertake military operations primarily to safeguard their security and economic interests. It is not always clear what the purpose of certain tasks is, therefore, and the task list itself is confused and inherently contradictory.

Nor is it clear at which scale the EU would be willing to implement these tasks, because Member States have refused to open the debate about the Headline Goal. It is obvious, however, that the stated aim (since 1999) of deploying and sustaining up to a corps (50 to 60,000 troops) is insufficient to implement all the tasks set by the EUGS concurrently. At the same time, the EUGS has introduced strategic autonomy as an objective, but the debate about what that might mean in the area of defence is so far inconclusive. Simultaneously, in the area of capacity-building, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) actually looks beyond the CSDP, addressing the entirety of participating Member States’ armed forces with the aim of achieving their national, NATO and EU targets.

Germany has proposed to write a “Strategic Compass” to clarify this conundrum. At the same time, the EU Military Staff is working on a military contribution to EU strategic thinking.

What is needed is a clear expression of which security and defence responsibilities the EU must be ready assume, through the CSDP and other policies, for which purposes, through which types of operations (high and low intensity), at which scale and with which concurrency. That means answering some sensitive political questions and (for the CSDP part) translating the answers into precise military objectives. Such a politico-military “Strategic Compass” should be co-authored by the civilian and military side of the EEAS together, therefore.

In order to really have an impact on the CSDP, the “Strategic Compass” should subsequently lead to a new Headline Goal. There is no point in clarifying the tasks if one is not willing to revisit the means accordingly. This new Headline Goal can then steer the next iteration of the various strands of the EU capability process (Illustrative

Scenarios, Progress Catalogue, Capability Development Plan etc.) in order to decide which “coherent full spectrum force package” we are building (to use the term from the November 2017 PESCO Notification). A package that allows EU Member States both to play their role within NATO and to act autonomously when necessary.

When producing new documents, it is important to make clear which old documents they replace. If a “Strategic Compass” is adopted, the 2016 *Implementation Plan* becomes void.

CONCLUSION: KEEP AN EYE ON THE NEEDLE

“Strategic compass” is not an established term in the field of strategy, hence its meaning is not intuitively clear. A compass tells you where the north is, which is useful – if you know in which direction you are heading. In that sense, the EUGS itself is our compass, which tells us where to go. Many, when they hear the term “Strategic Compass”, logically assume that it refers to the full scope of the EUGS rather than just security and defence.

If Member States would agree to produce a politico-military document at the level below the EUGS, on a par with the existing thematic and geographic strategies, perhaps instead of “Strategic Compass” they should simply call it for what it is: a “Politico-Military Strategy”.

A “Politico-Military Strategy” below the EUGS is a necessity, but I argue that a full strategic review of the EUGS itself or, if that is now not possible, at least a “Mid-Term Review of Implementation”, is equally important. Both exercises can be run simultaneously, and they are obviously closely interlinked – but distinct.

Whatever documents Member States now agree to produce, the most important thing is that they focus strictly on what they are really willing to do. There’s no point in producing new guidelines that capitals are not actually intending to apply. We need good strategy and we need it to be implemented.

Prof. Dr Sven Biscop, an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College, lectures at Ghent University and directs the “Europe in the World” programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels.

His latest book is [European Strategy in the 21st Century](#) (Routledge, 2019).

The author warmly thanks the EU and national officials, diplomats and military officers whose insights have made this paper possible.



The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

www.egmontinstitute.be

© Egmont Institute 2019. All rights reserved.