



An EU Security Strategy: An Attractive Narrative

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In today's ever more complex world, a European Security Strategy (ESS) is needed to preserve our European values and interest, our European way of life – and the Union as such.

The EU is in dire straits. The European project has lost a lot of its appeal, in the first place in the eyes of EU citizens themselves. In the rest of the world as well, the process of European integration is no longer perceived as an attractive model. Yet not that long ago the opposite was true. At the time of the European Convention, politicians and experts showed great enthusiasm to revise the Treaties. Never before it seemed, was there such a strong momentum for integration. For the reasons we all know, that momentum was lost in a painfully drawn-out ratification process. That the eventual Lisbon Treaty is not actually that different from the draft Constitutional Treaty does matter – but only for decision-makers and technocrats directly involved in its implementation. Much more important is that a number of European politicians went into waiting mode, adopting a critical or even outright negative attitude towards the process

of European integration. In this they were followed by a share of public opinion. Indeed, a fertile breeding ground for cheap populism was created. The basic undercurrent remained untouched: the belief that step by step an attractive European project could yet be built, whether through supranational or intergovernmental means. But soon afterwards, this fundamental vision on Europe came under pressure as well as a result of the financial, budgetary and then economic debacle that Europe is now struggling with. Even worse, it has now become generally accepted that a systemic error in the process of European integration is part of the problem. Apparently, we did not follow the right strategy.

There is a systemic error indeed, and it has a fundamental cause. If in a number of areas the Union is failing, as it is now being suggested, the first question should be: what is its objective? Monetary union, economic governance, a central bank: these are mere instruments. A strategy can only be corrected if the objective is clear. For a *sui generis* actor like the EU, the answer to that question is not self-evident. European integration came into

being on the basis of a very general vision shared by a core of influential politicians. In order to give the process a chance of success, they chose not to define an end-state of cooperation and integration, let alone a clear strategy with explicit benchmarks and timing. They opted for the “Méthode Monnet”, to which they added one principle, that of subsidiarity. In practice that means that competence in a policy area is only transferred to the Union when the damage suffered by the individual Member States is too high and the responsible politicians have become desperate and have nowhere else to turn to. Just one objective was rendered explicit: “no more war between European countries”. That was a powerful signal to everybody, politicians and citizens alike. On this objective, there was a general consensus. In it, Europe had found its attractive narrative.

Looking back, it can be said that this simple construction has proved its usefulness. Apparently, it was fit for purpose – during the very specific, and historically seen atypical period of the Cold War. For four decennia the geopolitical balance remained nearly unchanged. The foreign policy of European countries was directed mostly at their neighbours – what now we would call internal European policy, matter for the European Council. Security and defence policy as well as most of foreign policy was left to the US via the intermediary of NATO. Europeans were requested to shoulder a fair share of the burden in terms of military capabilities. In terms of strategy, European input was negligible. In this distinctive international context the “Méthode Monnet” proved to be effective. Though integration had its ups and downs, substantial progress was made in many areas. At least in one area the EU became a global actor: foreign trade.

After 1989 suddenly a new globalized world came into existence. The crisis in Yugoslavia forced the Union to belatedly create a security and defence policy of its own. Through the well-tested method, step by step a new European policy area was elaborated. Again, without adopting any underpinning strategy – not doing that was a vital part of the consensus. The focus was on the creation of an additional instrument, by listing a series of limited (and imperfect) military capabilities. Thus were born the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy.

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Other policy areas which under the pressure of globalization gradually evolved towards the European level were dealt with in a similar way: ad hoc, tentatively, and imperfectly, without meeting any overall strategic objective. Energy and migration policy, or what passes as such, are just two examples. All of this does not go unnoticed by the European citizen. The attractive story of a Union that renders war within Europe impossible, has had its day. What does the Union stand for today, in this new world?

If one asks individual citizens in other parts of the world, the answer steadfastly is: its social and economic model. Many an economic refugee aspires to join it. Citizens in the new Member States rightfully aspired to enjoy a similar social model in their own countries as

quickly as possible. What keeps together the multitude of citizens that have now been living in the EU for many years, is their desire to safeguard their specific national social model in the face of globalization. If the EU is criticized by its citizens, it is because of the perception that the Union does not manage to achieve this, as a consequence of fragmented and imperfect policies, or even worse, that the Union itself is part cause of the downgrading of the European way of life. So, one need not look further to find a new attractive narrative for the EU. But in a globalized world all global actors operate in function of their national interests and a strategy based thereon, so as to position themselves advantageously on the global chessboard. In such a context, the Union can no longer allow itself to operate in ad hoc manner, to play just ping pong, if it hopes to achieve any strategic objective.

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In spite of its history, crafting a fully-fledged strategy need not be an impassable obstacle for the Union, because it already possesses all the required building-blocks. The Lisbon Treaty already refers to the norms and values of the Union, and specifically to its social and economic model. Furthermore, the notion of strategy is no longer taboo since in 2003 Javier Solana, the then High Representative, published the European Security Strategy. At the time, this was a daring initiative, with Solana estimating very astutely how far he could go, having in mind the history of the

coming into being of CSDP. The role of a High Representative is not to wait until, spontaneously, a consensus emerges between the Member States and to act only then. It is to take the initiative, in function of common interests, including in so-called taboo areas. In the end, the ESS at the time was welcomed by all Member States and, importantly, by the European Parliament. The ESS mostly outlines general principles about *how* the EU should respond to international events: preventively; holistically, using all instruments at its disposal, and multilaterally, working with partners. These principles remain fully relevant. But honesty forces to admit that the ESS is but the first step towards a fully-fledged strategy. It does constitute the foundation on which can now be built.

The ESS was crafted as a European response to the US doctrine which the Bush administration published after the invasion of Iraq. Since then, the US has substantially revised its National Security Strategy on several occasions. In Europe too, voices are now rising calling for the ESS to be completed. As yet there is no consensus. An earlier attempt, in 2008, to launch this strategic debate ended in complete failure. The political context, at a moment when ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was as yet incomplete, was simply not beneficial. It was probably for the better that with the adoption of the Report on the Implementation of the ESS the whole thing ended with a non-event. A real revision of the ESS under such adverse circumstances carried the risk of ending up with a lower level of ambition than in 2003. But 2012 is not 2008. It should come as no surprise therefore that the political will to revise the ESS is steadily rising. Yet in many capitals reluctance remains, which has led to the plea certainly not to be too ambitious. At most a limited series of sub-

strategies could be developed, on energy security for example, without revising the overarching strategy, the ESS. So, a return to the “Méthode Monnet”. This is an option, of course – but a suboptimal one. It runs contrary to the holistic approach on which the EU prides itself, and which is one of the core principles of the ESS to which all Member States have subscribed. And there is more.

A coherent foreign and security policy is indissolubly linked to domestic policy. Safeguarding and enhancing the social and economic model of the Member States requires that the Union takes the necessary flanking measures, internally as well as externally. The Member States, the Commission, and the European Parliament all have a crucial role to play in this. Only if there is clarity about the overall objective, can a coherent strategy be designed, and from there on sub-strategies adopted, such as on energy, migration, the neighbourhood, external trade, and even external action in general, including if and when necessary collective action for crisis management by the Member States and the Union as such.

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Such a strategy must go further than the current ESS. It is not sufficient to say *how* to act, it should stipulate the *why*, and then *who* does *what*, *when*, and by which *means*? This is no mere theoretical exercise. Practice teaches that collective action is only undertaken if there is a sufficient prior consensus about the overall objective, the principles, and the general way of

acting. In other words, if there is a consensus on strategy. Only then does a feeling of *ownership* emerge, and is every actor ready to effectively implement its part of the workload, to show solidarity.

And so we have come full circle. Only thus can an end be made to the *ad hoc-ery* that currently rules the Union and is the cause of internal tensions. Those who claim that the EU should now focus exclusively on the internal issues of the Euro, savings, and growth, and that a security strategy can wait, are seeing just one tree but are missing the forest. Without a consensus on the overall objective, any consensus on internal policies will be slow in the making. Meanwhile, any coherent external action is missing, as the reaction to the Arab Spring has made painfully clear. The short term impact of this situation we are already experiencing. The long term social and economic impact will be considerable. Crisis management in Libya also demonstrates the price of the absence of strategy, in very concrete terms. A limited number of Member States took the lead, but the Union as such was invisible, even with its timid attempt to mount a humanitarian CSDP operation in the margin of the military operations. The strength of a strategy is that it unites. Without it, one blunders. It is not sufficient to see the trees. The forest matters too.

How to arrive at a more complete strategy? Clearly, an intergovernmental conference or the formula of the Convention cannot work, as the building-blocks of such a strategy are already incorporated in the Treaties. What matters now is to provide horizontal guidance to the various European actors, in a matrix-like approach, in conformity with the Treaty texts. The most apt formula therefore is the one followed by Solana in 2003. But because this time the undertaking

has a broader scope, comprising both internal and external security, it seems wise to entrust the task to a triumvirate: the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the High Representative, together with the European Parliament also, where there is appetite for strategic debate, can start an intense dialogue with the Member States. It is not just about approving a document. The key is joint ownership and collective action.

The benchmark to judge the outcome of such a process is the following reality check: Is the Union capable of sufficiently supporting the Member States to build a national social model, without internal competition, strong enough to survive in a globalized world? Is the strategy credible, within the Union and globally? In other words, is there a new attractive narrative?

A sense of urgency is always required if one wants to introduce sensitive change in a complex environment. The world around us is moving

fast. The urgency is real, but the end product is more important than the timing. 2013, ten years after an audacious Solana: an equally audacious Ashton, Barroso and Van Rompuy?

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