



SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

Message to – and from – the European political leadership: Agreeing to disagree on strategy is a luxury the EU can no longer afford

Jo Coelmont

“We, the political leaders of the EU member states, in order to ensure the security of our citizens and to resolve more effectively and more efficiently the common problems we face at present do agree on a global EU strategy that couples unity of vision with unity of action.”

Not that long ago, pretending that such a sentence could capture the emerging consensus between Europe’s political leaders would have been considered an illusion. But times are changing. We are entering into a new geopolitical era. The post-Cold War intermezzo is over. Quo vadis EU, now that it is at a crossroads? Are we heading towards disintegration, fragmentation, the EU shrinking away into some sort of European commonwealth? Or does the future still hold “ever closer union”? Analysing recent European Council meetings reveals which political orientation has a gain momentum.

At first glance the European Council meeting on the EU-UK deal was only of importance to the UK. Many commentators saw only a fabricated drama created around some *tactical* issues and a search for some (predictable) *technical* solutions. However, the quest for a

“special status” for the UK provoked a debate on the desired “common status” for all member states, regardless of whether the UK will stay in or leave. The drama that indeed surrounded the meeting may very well explain why key positions taken by several political leaders on this *strategic* matter got lost in translation at the moment the European Council conclusions were rendered public.

Similarly, at first glance the many European Council meetings that took place, soon after, on migration demonstrated but disagreement among the member states. Yet, after long discussions, it became clear that the latitude to further disagree on a common strategy is gone and that additional national policies are de facto on their way to getting more “Europeanised”. The recent terrorist attacks in Brussels underlined, if needed, the urgency of sticking together.

However, before probing into the real significance of these recent European Council meetings, we must analyse how our European project has so far adjusted itself whenever a new geopolitical era emerged.

A HISTORICAL REFLECTION

During so called historical EU meetings the focus invariably was on issues of war and

peace and collective security, on sovereignty and the principle of subsidiarity. On *la finalité politique* also or, in other words, “ever closer union”, and on a way of working: *la méthode Monnet*.

At the start, the founding fathers had in mind the hard lessons from both World Wars: a system of absolutely sovereign national states leads to absolute competition among them and is therefore absolutely the shortest avenue to crisis and even war. Henceforth they would focus on collective security and on restoring sovereignty at a level consistent with the magnitude of the *common* problems that need to be resolved. They agreed on strategy. They agreed on *la finalité politique* – and on two strategic building blocks: the principle of subsidiarity and *la méthode Monnet*.

The geopolitical era at time was the one of the Cold War. This allowed the member states to outsource their collective defence to NATO, while their respective foreign policies towards third countries were barely touched upon by the European project. All member states were to develop, on a bilateral basis, a *preferential* relationship with the US, if not a *special* one.

And it worked pretty well, until the crisis in Yugoslavia made clear that once again a new geopolitical era was looming and that the Union had to adapt accordingly.

THE POST-COLD WAR INTERMEZZO

At the Helsinki European Council of December 1999 it was decided to “strengthen”, in fact to launch, a European Security and Defence Policy. The taboo on all things military as part and parcel of European integration was lifted under the impulse of France and the UK. The common ambition was to restore sovereignty at the EU level by enabling the member states to launch a military crisis management operation of the magnitude that was needed in Yugoslavia. The

principle of subsidiarity pointed not towards some bilateral or multilateral arrangements among some member states, but to the Union to develop CFSP and ESDP and to ensure the availability of the required resources and capabilities to underpin these policies.

At the same European Council meeting it was decided to also launch a new stage in the enlargement process *and* to deepen of the Union. The Union as such would henceforth be more outward-looking, in particular in the areas of security and defence. A strategic shift was taking place by Europeanising some security and defence issues, in particular crisis management.

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The objectives were ambitious. But the EU instruments put in place soon proved to be far from effective and efficient. In 2003, deep political divisions rose among members states about the war in Iraq. It provoked a deeply *shared* political frustration. It allowed, in extremis, to add two additional working groups to the European Convention. The results are well known. And Javier Solana was to publish the first ever *European Security Strategy* (ESS). The taboo on writhing down the words security and strategy in a single EU document was finally lifted.

Alas, the enthusiasm and dynamics one could witness during the Convention evaporated during the long and bumpy process to ratify the Lisbon Treaty. Many of its clauses on security and defence were never put into practice and the ESS remained just “a document” that never inspired any action at the EU level (nor any inaction, for that matter).

During the Post-Cold War era it was mainstream thinking that, in Europe, we had the privilege to live in a post-modern world. And that all other countries, continents and global actors would follow, sooner or later. In this context, for the EU and the member states, it was all about exporting security through enlargement and (economic) partnerships.

During that very particular geopolitical era, in retrospective a short one, being a global actor was in fact the privilege of countries the size of a continent – or of a solid political construction representing a continent. At the additional condition, that is, of possessing a security strategy and the required capabilities to act accordingly. Within the EU we seemed convinced that, given the circumstances, fulfilling but one of these three preconditions would be sufficient to be considered as global actor as well.

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As to enlargement, the EU objectives were reached swiftly. As to the deepening of the Union, it was a fiasco. In particular in the area of security and defence. On generating the required military capabilities the hailed bottom up approach led but to some bilateral or multilateral arrangements to pool and share those tactical military capabilities that the member states had in abundance anyway. Apparently the main objective was to save some money. EU-wide cooperation aimed at addressing the *commonly* identified shortfalls qua strategic capabilities was not on the radar screen. The net result of this bottom up approach, without any top down steering, was

a steep dropdown of tactical military capacities while the strategic shortfalls, identified back in 2000, remained all intact.

In the mean time CSDP evolved towards modest *Crisis management Sine Defence Policy*. And CFSP apparently turned into a policy whereby it is *Common to Forget Supporting Defence*. Was this just a temporary *strategic distraction* at a time when Europe was never “so prosperous, so secure nor so free”, as the ESS stated?

However, it cannot be denied that throughout the process of enlargement, the “we agree on strategy” voiced by the first generation of European political leaders turned slowly but surely into “we agree to disagree on strategy”.

THINKING STRATEGICALLY

At present we are entering once more into a new strategic era. Geopolitics are on the move. Balance of power is back. And the borders between external and internal security are evaporating. A new strategic era, yet without a name.

The balance of power implies that now, more than ever, it is essential—and for Europeans, even vital—to be able to forge solid and durable partnerships with other global actors. Today, the main threat to the EU and the member states is to lose Europe's partners, in particular the US, and to lose NATO, because of Europe's persistent reluctance to develop a credible security policy and forge coherent and effective defence forces.

Given the nexus between external and internal security and the magnitude of the common problems member states are facing—such as migration, terrorism, and cyber threats, to name just a few—the challenge is to explain why, based on the principle of subsidiarity, security policy is the next area in line to be Europeanized. This policy, as a sub strategy will have to be part and parcel of

“comprehensive” overall EU strategy – in concrete terms of the EU Global Strategy that is in the making. It is to ensure that unity of vision is coupled with unity of action.

Are we, within the Union, at the brink of taking that avenue?

WHAT FUNDAMENTAL MESSAGE STEMMING FROM THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON THE EU-UK DEAL?

During the prolonged meetings on the EU-UK deal the fundamental concepts of sovereignty, subsidiary and even of “ever closer union” all entered into the discussion. Clarifications have been given on how to read and how not to read them. In straightforward language the résumé reads as follows.

First, it has been pointed out that the EU-UK deal is more about an interpretation of the existing treaties than it is about treaty-change. This includes the *political* interpretation of “ever closer union”, which never entailed any legal obligation for member states. At the condition the UK is to stay in the Union, this will be stipulated a bit more explicitly in a next treaty-change.

Secondly, it is getting clearly stated that if in future a smaller group of member states decides to go further down the path of integrating their policies within the Union, they will be allowed to do so. Member states who prefer to abstain from such initiatives will have the option to join later, or never, but: with no rights to block, let alone to veto such endeavours.

Thirdly, should the result of the UK’s referendum be for it to leave the EU, all special arrangements made to respond to the requests of the UK will cease to exist. This is a rather unique political signal that will resonate long after.

Fourthly, this deal has clearly not set any credible precedent for other member state to

force the Union to set up any special deal at their convenience. The drama around a potential Brexit had way too many elements and actors that were unique.

TALKING REAL

More important is to evaluate the longer term impact of this European Council meeting. Yes, there was an agreement among all to offer Prime Minister Cameron political capital for his campaign to avoid a Brexit. But there was also a strong political will to preserve the *acquis* of the Union, whatever the outcome of UK’s in/out referendum. For several member states the “drama” surrounding the UK deal provoked a catharsis, an opportunity to get rid of ways of working within the Union that had proven to have reached their limits. A quest on how to resolve more efficiently the ever growing common problems was put on the table. Even existential questions on how to ensure that national governments could remain relevant at home and abroad were voiced.

Reading between the lines of the Council

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conclusions we learn that *à la méthode Monnet* the EU is about to circumvent yet other stumbling block without losing track of its fundamental course. Room has been created for a kind of “structured flexibility” within the Union. There clearly is a political will emerging among to install a system of structured and permanent co-operation among those member states willing to further integrate some specific policies. Various clusters may arise. A central core group will probably emerge. But a union that is entirely *à la carte* is clearly not on the table. A clear and loud political signal has been voiced by a majority of member states: henceforth overall political and financial solidarity across all EU policies is required. No burden-sharing, no benefits.

At this memorable European Council meeting the crises in Syria and Libya were on the agenda as well. The outcome of the discussions was disappointing. The lack of any common strategy once more was all too obvious. Not that different from 2010, at the outbreak of the Arab Spring. However, at present the direct impact of these crises on the security of our European citizens at home is now of quite a different magnitude.

The “drama” surrounding the UK deal provoked a catharsis. Room has been created for a kind of “structured flexibility” within the Union.

Migration was on the agenda as well. It cannot be denied that during the discussions some strong centrifugal forces came to the fore. There was indeed a fundamental discussion between protagonists in favour of a *repli sur soi*, back to national “sovereign” decision-making, and strong believers of the opposite: *repli additionnel sur l’Union*. The outcome: steps were taken to safeguard Schengen and even to give room to the Commission to develop new initiatives, directly related to migration issues. This made it possible for the Commission to announce, one week later, that henceforth the EU funds for humanitarian assistance can also be provided to assist member states of the Union, with Greece to be the first beneficiary. Clearly another taboo in the EU construction had evaporated. Furthermore the project to create a “European Border and Coast Guard” was stimulated. Yet another *national* policy that is about to become Europeanised.

The meetings on migrations held during the following weeks, at the level of ministers or heads of state and government, all went further down that path.

BACK TO BASICS: THE UNION AS A SECURITY PROVIDER TO ITS CITIZENS

The discussions on Syria and Libya also brought back to memory the origins of the Union. One could argue that the military is not

part of EU’s DNA. At the time it was indeed about “no more war among European countries”. Fortunately, today our internal differences are settled at the negotiation table. But our European peninsula is part of a global world and unable to escape from taking up its responsibility. There are indeed no military solutions to war or other violent conflicts. However under certain circumstances the military is called to act as *the indispensable catalyst* to ensure that the political objectives of the Union can ultimately be met. At times the political and diplomatic chemistry will not work without a catalyst, able to operate preventively as well as during and after a crisis. And this indeed brings us back to the origins of our European endeavour. What kind of a security strategy is needed now that we are entering a new geopolitical era?

THE EU GLOBAL STRATEGY: A COINCIDENCE OR JUST IN TIME?

The European Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) that High Representative Federica Mogherini will present shortly couldn’t be more timely. This EU global strategy is in the first place about forging “unity of purpose”, to be coupled with “unity of action” throughout the whole range of EU policies dealing with external and internal security. The focus will be on identifying the required resources, capabilities, institutional coherence, and ways of working. Defence and in particular military capabilities will be prominently dealt with. It is also to present an attractive narrative to European citizens. Will the EUGS guide the Union as a “comprehensive” security provider, or will it turn into just another EU document: that is the question.

IN THE END

For this author, there is no doubt. The EU is heading towards a security union. His conviction is not based on the blind optimism of a lifelong believer in ever closer union. He

has grown steadily more fatalistic about the future of the Union, having observed how and when the principle of subsidiarity is invariably applied within the European construction.

Time has come to again present the EU as a unique attractive narrative.

National policies are indeed only then Europeanised when the reluctance to do so has already created damage of a magnitude no one can hide any longer, nor in political circles nor from public opinion, and when the political leadership at all levels gets desperate after having tried all other options. This explains why each and every policy that eventually got Europeanised went through a very slow process of transfer, bit by bit, so far however always just in time to prevent total disaster.

Is it a given that this principle will always preserve the Union just in time? No. But as demonstrated, on internal and external security, there are presently clear signs out there that were not there before, at least not as explicit. We can see more and more European heads of state and government who are no longer pointing to the EU as a scapegoat to hide their inability to provide national solutions, and who openly rebuff, more than ever, cheap populism.

Apparently time has come to talk real. Ambiguity is becoming lethal to internal cohesion within member states as it feeds populism. The message that is now gaining traction is that within the EU “agreeing to disagree on strategy no longer is an affordable luxury”.

The only mystery the auteur cannot explain is why, at this particular moment, so many commentators get carried away by doom-saying about the EU’s future. There always was heat in the EU’s internal kitchen. But in the end, it always comes down to restoring sovereignty at a level consistent with the magnitude of the common problems that need to be resolved. Time has come, now the fog of drama has gone, to again present the EU as a unique attractive narrative. Partisans of abolishing the EU are indeed, as in the past, doomed to oblivion. Time has come to spread this message.

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