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A Global Strategy for a Global Player? Shaping the EU's Role in the World

Domhnall O'Sullivan

Executive Summary

> For the first time since 2003, the EU is set to launch a Global Strategy. To achieve a strong and coherent document, several strategic dilemmas need untangling.

> Under pressure from nationalism and migratory flows, Europe must avoid turning inwards and building new walls, and rather face the world with renewed openness and confidence.

> In its neighbourhood the EU is surrounded by conflict and competing narratives. In dealing with this reality, it must finally achieve a clear balance between interests and values.

> In a competitive world, the EU should neither abandon its commitment to a rules-based multilateral system nor fear using its economic muscle to make a real difference.

> Ultimately, the Global Strategy should avoid becoming too much like either a long compendium or a toothless constitution – it needs to outline clear, concise and concrete objectives.

Times of crisis are not usually associated with deep reflection. Yet, at a moment when it is assailed by a range of concrete problems – from managing migration to a possible Brexit – the European Union (EU) is finalizing a wide-ranging 'EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy'. As it was for its predecessor, the 2003 European Security Strategy, the very process of drafting such a document is a welcome exercise in strategic cooperation. However, too much consensus can risk dilution, and the EU should aim for a strong guiding document. In order to achieve this, three strategic dilemmas at the heart of Europe's foreign policy personality need to be untangled.

Borders – 'fortress' or open Europe?

The first strategic dilemma is the direction of European focus and ambition. To some extent the inward focus of recent years has been understandable. After the optimism of the Lisbon Treaty, Europe was rocked by financial crisis, social uncertainty, and (more recently) terrorist threats. It has spent a considerable amount of time and political capital addressing these issues, often to the detriment of global engagement. Notwithstanding efforts to boost diplomatic activity – the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its involvement in the Iranian nuclear negotiations, for one – Europe's presence in the world continues to be compromised. In his last State of the Union address, President Barack Obama mentioned Europe just once; a telling sign not only of US priorities but also of European visibility.

Of course, foreign policy does begin at home. According to US political strategist William Martel, the first rule of global power is to ensure 'strong domestic foundations including fiscal discipline, functioning domestic infrastructure, a strong education, and a culture that encourages innovation'. Similarly, to promote values abroad one must practice them impeccably at home, or risk losing credibility. This is all the more important for Europe, a normative actor historically focused on 'leading by example' rather than imposing on the world stage. As some member states scramble to revoke foundational agreements such as Schengen and others slide towards illiberal tendencies, they risk eroding the very foundations which have enabled the EU to develop a global identity in the first place.

But if getting one's house in order is an imperative first step, a blinkered focus can also lead to problems. The first is the danger of becoming overly fixated on the perfection of internal processes to the detriment of external vision and proactive engagement. Values are definable, but in a complex world institutions and processes need to be increasingly flexible. And despite constant predictions of demise, the web of institutions which run the European structure have 'muddled through' and have even proved surprisingly resilient and adaptable in some difficult situations. Ever-shifting conditions and crises mean that European rules will never be perfect, and it would be misguided to spend undue energy on their endless critique and revision while the world moves ahead obliviously.

The second danger is allowing this inward focus on processes to influence the open values which helped shape the continent. If the 1980s warned of the risk of an *economic* 'fortress Europe', the current threat is more of an *actual* 'fortress Europe' in light of the migration crisis. Rhetoric routinely calls for the closing and tightening of borders, both external and within the EU itself. This erection of walls runs counter to both European values and interests of a liberal international order. If irregular migration is clearly a significant problem for internal institutions and social stability, the solution does not lie (only) in tougher border patrols; it involves a more muscular diplomatic, economic and cultural engagement with the sources of instability themselves.

Ultimately, any consolidation of home 'values', processes, institutions or societies is a necessary step. But the EU needs to be wary that this does not happen at the expense of external vigilance and engagement. No nation or organization is ever perfect – rather it is the prospect of improvement that spurs it ever forward. Europe can neither revert to a collection of nation-states nor forcibly impose the integrative vision of its founding fathers. Rather, it needs to ensure that its ambition of refinement is used constructively, rather than counter-productively rowing against the current into the past.

The neighbourhood – values or interests?

Despite global interconnectedness, geography remains a fundamental driver of international relations. The very foundations and evolution of the EU lend currency to this logic. From the economic interlinking of France and Germany in the 1950s to the enlargement and later the neighbourhood policies, Europe has progressively expanded in concentric waves of regulatory and normative influence over time.

However, in 2016, it is obvious that the current turmoil to the East and South means that this expansionary project of EU governance has reached a limit. Around the Mediterranean, many state structures have either collapsed or been re-focused around authoritarian tendencies, with both scenarios playing out badly for European security and values. Democracy has stagnated; so have economic links between Europe and North Africa; and the refugee and migrant influx, especially from Syria, is testament to both a humanitarian and security quagmire in the Middle East and North Africa. Meanwhile, to the East, hopes of exporting European norms to Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and the Eurasian Economic Union have been blocked, sometimes with force, by Russia.

The reasons for the impasse are numerous and two-sided. From the implementation and aspiration side, the ENP put the technical cart before the political horse; neglecting the cultural singularities of the Arab world, it consistently favoured regulatory and elite-driven policies which had previously worked in Eastern Europe. When the uprisings of 2011 exploded, heralding an unprecedented shift on the 'demand' side, such an approach left Europe understandably flat-footed. And even after the Arab Spring, although the EU made an admirable effort to be more responsive to local demands, the bewildering rate of change in the region only led to policy schizophrenia. Similarly, to the East, the EU failed to recognize how its soft expansion would provoke a response from Russia, who defended its competing narrative in the region with a force unthinkable several years ago.

In essence, the benign expansions which had proved so successful in the US-led decades of liberal hegemony have met with the harsh reality of spheres of influence, power relations, and messy conflict. Now, with the realization that much of its neighbourhood is neither destined for nor desirous of the European way, the question of balancing values and interests becomes vital. Many call for Europe to take a more robust, *realpolitik* approach and prioritize first things first: stable states, energy security, and counter-

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extremism policies in the South; an end to ideological posturing over Ukraine and a pragmatic return to relations with Russia in the East.

There is logic to these calls, especially in the short term. And to some degree, signs from Brussels indicate that the shift has already begun. Both the 'strategic review' prepared by the EEAS as well as the revised European Neighbourhood Policy of November 2015 place strong emphasis on the security of the neighbourhood, particularly to the South. Values such as human rights and democratic reform read almost as afterthoughts, while technocratic language has been eschewed for more forceful objectives. The EEAS even admits that all cards are on the table in 'rethinking' the Middle East, including dropping the ENP altogether.

In the longer term, whether this shift in rhetoric will herald a shift in strategic action remains in question. History and institutional constraints mean that the EU is simply unable to act as a 'classic' geopolitical actor on the international stage; it lacks the military and political power. However, in maintaining an agile stance *vis-à-vis* all of the *actual* powers in the region, it can play a role in guiding and brokering strategic advantages. This means strategically coordinating the actions of its member states, who have capabilities and diplomatic ties throughout the neighbourhood. It also means 'suspending' some of its more idealist values in talking with the regional powers which really have an influence in the region: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Russia.

Ultimately, it will mean a reset of the strategic vision of what the neighbourhood actually represents. The idea of the neighbourhood as on a benign road to Western-style reform is moribund, and any solutions will need to be both realistic and inclusive of all major local and regional powers. To the East, this will mean coming to terms with how Russia sees the region. To the South, the EU is well-placed to facilitate broad dialogue around some sort of regional security architecture similar to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Europe needs to reject the idea of *the* neighbourhood and move towards the rhetoric of *a* neighbourhood – a shared space where its sphere of influence overlaps with several others; where it may like to see its values extend but only when reciprocal interests of peace and security are confirmed.

Global action – strategic or multilateral?

Thirdly, the question of how the EU behaves itself in an increasingly competitive global environment is being explored. Various trends over the past decade have led to a dilution of the multilateral system espoused by the EU, and it must take stock accordingly. Shifts in relative economic power imply less global consensus around existing 'Western-centric' institutions; the increasing unwillingness of the US to act as 'global policeman' has removed some of the impetus for complying with a rules-based system; and the manipulative use of economic tools as weapons, although not new, has led to 'geo-economic' power struggles. The net result is, presumably, what inspired the 'more contested' and 'more complex' sections of the EEAS assessment.

Multilateral values in this context will be difficult to uphold. The EU may have to accept that sowing a seed requires fertile land, and currently the terrain is quite barren. As in the case of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the 'success' of normative expansion throughout preceding decades was arguably more influenced by external factors than by EU power as such: neighbouring states wanted access to the lucrative European market, while in the United Nations (UN) the EU could promote its brand of 'effective multilateralism'. This has changed, and until a significant level of reform is brought to the antiquated structures of bodies within the UN system and the International Monetary Fund, they will likely remain ineffective.

This said, the EU could in theory be somewhat well equipped in the new environment. It remains the wealthiest and best educated region on the planet, giving it ample economic and trade clout. Its targeted use of sanctions in recent years, an internal coordination success, has been touted as a strategic model to build on in the future. And more in keeping with its own internal values of dialogue and consensus, its diplomatic links and capabilities are unrivalled. The 28 member states have many hundreds of embassies and missions around the globe; together with the coordination efforts of the 139 EU delegations and Europe's historic global footprint, this represents an unparalleled level of presence and soft power capabilities. The standout success of recent years, diplomatic stewardship of the Iranian nuclear talks, built on

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this and bodes well for future European involvement in sensitive regional dialogues.

However, the EU may have to realize that one of its greatest advantages could also be its biggest stumbling block. The EEAS claims that the 'specifically complex nature' of the EU construction itself is a key added-value in navigating the complicated layers of governance in the modern world. This has indeed given the EU a valuable foundation in complex governance and consensus decision-making; and despite accusations of centralization, it seems almost 'anti-fragile' in its diffuse institutional structures. Yet, as business and individuals are increasingly discovering, the key traits of the 21st century are speed and agility, not cumbersome introspection. European history has bequeathed a valuable heritage of philosophical humility and consensus to its current generation; but its structures, particularly horizontal structures of cooperation between member states, the Commission and the EEAS, need to be leaner and more agile in order to react and best manoeuvre.

Conclusion – compendium or constitution?

A major challenge when drafting a foreign policy strategy is knowing when to stop. Unlike regional or thematic strategies dealing with specific challenges, the ambitious title of 'Global Strategy' naturally tends towards an assessment of every region, every threat, and every opportunity around the world. This tendency is even more pronounced for the EU, with interests and stakes in every corner of the planet. Add to this the multiplier effect of differing member state priorities and the risk could be to create a document which aggregates rather than distils, resulting in a long list of 'priority' regions and issues. Some saw this as the fundamental flaw in the 'strategic partnership' initiatives of the past decade; too many partners and not enough thought around what it meant to be strategic with them.

On the other hand, falling into the trap of vague generalities is also a temptation. Member states have already signed up, in the Lisbon Treaty, to the core European values of democracy, freedom and respect for human rights. Even if some of these values are currently under threat within parts of the continent itself, any renewed call for them should be firmly anchored around

clear external interests rather than listed simply as values in themselves. Similarly, every nation and most people are in favour of 'prosperity' and 'security'; although they are useful foundations for such an exercise, they should not be the rhetorical lowest common denominator which supplants concrete objectives.

Rather, the challenge is to be concise, clear, and concrete. In an era of more complexity, 'the trick isn't adding stuff, it's taking it away', according to Mark Zuckerberg. Strategies are in this sense simple – a clear enumeration of main goals, the principal means that will be used to get there, and a vision of the end state. Rather than a White Paper of priorities and processes, it should be a long-term and foundational vision of where the strategy should lead; a 'foreign policy playbook' which outlines what kind of power and role will be aspired to, and how it will be achieved.

For various reasons, but most notably internal inconsistencies, this is a mammoth task for the EU. Differences between member states – particularly pronounced in 2016 – mean that it lacks a common understanding of what its core strategic objectives are in the world. And due to its institutional set up, it lacks the power and capabilities to force through and implement an executive version of what it believes its strategy should be. Yet these precise difficulties should not prevent a proactive and ambitious document. The very 'invented' nature of the EU construction should allow for a certain level of ambition and imagination in 'inventing' its role in the world, limitations notwithstanding.

Progress and an extensive consultation process since the publication of the 'strategic review' seem to point in the right direction. The challenge is finally for the EEAS to find the common threads and put its own stamp on it; 'refin[ing] the art of orchestration of the polyphony of voices around the table and the panoply of instruments at our disposal', as the review rather grandly concluded. In doing so, it should avoid getting dragged toward either extreme of day-to-day compendium or aspirational constitution in favour of clear policy guidelines outlining key interests: a stable but open neighbourhood, a fair but functioning multilateral system. Simply drafting the Global Strategy is already an intellectual and collaborative step forward; ensuring a tangible outcome is now paramount.

Further Reading

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About the Author

Domhnall O'Sullivan is a visiting fellow with the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). He is an alumnus of the College of Europe (Václav Havel promotion, 2012-2013) and has previously worked with the World Economic Forum and the European Union Institute for Security Studies. His research interests are focused on EU relations with the Middle East and North Africa, particularly the nexus of media, knowledge and policy-making in this space. While at the GCSP he is also undertaking a project on external perceptions of Europe's global role.