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## The EU Global Strategy: Realpolitik with European Characteristics

Sven Biscop

On 28 June 2016 High Representative Federica Mogherini presented the *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (EUGS) to the European Council. Many pundits will present it as another example of Brussels' otherworldliness to table an external strategy just a few days after the UK created a huge internal challenge by voting to leave the Union. But would it have demonstrated a better sense of reality to pretend that because of the British decision to put a stop to its EU membership the world around Europe will come to a stop as well? The EU needs the EUGS and that "is even truer after the British referendum", as Mogherini rightly says in the foreword. Many will also gladly find fault with the document, looking for the deficiencies. But it is the strategy now. Therefore the question is not what it could have said that it doesn't, but whether it gives us something to work with to render EU foreign and security policy more effective. The answer is: yes, and quite a lot. Having gotten that out of the way, we can move on to the substance of the EUGS.

First of all, the EUGS introduces a new overall approach to foreign and security policy, which can be read as a correction on the 2003 *European Security Strategy* (ESS) that preceded it. "The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states", we said in 2003. Unfortunately, spreading good governance and democracy proved more difficult than expected, and when their absence provoked crises, we did not always muster the will and the means to respond. Where the ESS proved to be overoptimistic (and optimism is

a moral duty, as Karl Popper said), the EUGS is more conscious of the limits imposed by our own capabilities and by others' intractability, and therefore more modest. It charts a course between isolationism and interventionism, between "dreamy idealism and unprincipled pragmatism", as I put in a 2014 policy brief,<sup>1</sup> under the new heading of what the EUGS now calls "principled pragmatism".

This represents a return to Realpolitik. Not Realpolitik as it has come to be understood, the end justifying the means, but Realpolitik in the original sense of the term. As John Bew usefully reminds us, Realpolitik as coined by the German liberal Ludwig von Rochau in 1853 meant a rejection of liberal *utopianism*, but not of liberal *ideals* themselves. Rather, "it held out a vision of the future and a guide for how to get there", for how to achieve those ideals in a realistic way.<sup>2</sup> Or, as the EUGS has it, "responsible engagement can bring about positive change". This, says Bew, is the "real Realpolitik"; given that other actors still pursue the Machiavellian version, let's call it Realpolitik with European characteristics.

The fact that for the first time ever an EU document lists our vital interests (which is a breakthrough in its own right) is a reflection of this new approach. Policy is about interests; if isn't, no one will invest in it. That applies to the EU as much as to a state, and: "There is no clash between national and European interests". The vital interests that the EUGS defines are vital to all Member States: the security of EU citizens and territory; prosperity (which, the EUGS states, implies equality – otherwise we would indeed not be talking about the prosperity of *all* citizens); democracy; and a rules-based global order to contain power politics. Setting these interests off against the analysis of the global environment that Mogherini presented to the European Council in June 2015,<sup>3</sup> the EUGS identifies five priorities: (1) the security of the EU itself; (2) the neighbourhood; (3) how to deal with war and crisis; (4) stable regional orders across the globe; and (5) effective global governance.

## Priorities for Principled Pragmatism

The way to pursue the first three priorities especially clearly reflects the modesty or realism imposed by "principled pragmatism", by emphasizing our own security, the neighbourhood, and hard power, and by no longer emphasizing democratization.

First, there is a strong focus on Europe's own security (which was much less present in the ESS) and on the neighbourhood: "We will take responsibility foremost in Europe and its surrounding regions, while pursuing targeted engagement further afield". Following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, and the refugee crisis that is visible across Europe, addressing our internal and border security was indispensable for the EUGS to be credible with citizens and Member States alike. The focus on the neighbourhood is justified by the range of our capabilities. It is defined very broadly though, going beyond what Brussels now often calls the "neighbours of the neighbours": "to the east stretching into Central Asia, and south down to Central Africa". Stabilizing this part of the world is no mean task, yet the EUGS achieves the right balance for it does not ignore the challenges in Asia ("There is a direct connection

between European prosperity and Asian security”) and at the global level (such as the freedom of the global commons).

Second, there is much less emphasis on democracy. In line with the November 2015 Joint Communication on the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (though the EUGS looks at a broader region),<sup>4</sup> democratization no longer is a compulsory part of the package. The EU will support democracies where they emerge, for “their success [...] would reverberate across their respective regions” – but in our broad neighbourhood it only mentions Tunisia and Georgia as positive examples. As many others don’t wish closer relations with the EU, the EUGS puts the emphasis on reducing the fragility of these states rather than on changing their regimes, for which we have but limited leverage. But since many of our neighbours are “repressive states [that] are inherently fragile in the long term”, that requires targeting civil society instead. The aim is to increase the resilience of people and societies, notably by fighting poverty and inequality, so that over time home-grown positive change can emerge. Just like in the Joint Communication, it is not entirely clear where the funds for this will come from.

Lowering the level of ambition in terms of democratization is but the acceptance of reality. This is all about being honest with ourselves. The EU cannot democratize Egypt, so it should not pretend to. At the same time, it should then also not feel obliged to pretend that the Al-Sisi regime is a great friend – it is not. But we maintain diplomatic relations with (nearly) everybody, not just with our friends, and we work with (nearly) everybody where interests coincide. As long as they are there, we can indeed be obliged to work with authoritarian regimes in order to address urgent problems; the anti-IS coalition is a case in point. The EUGS doesn’t say much about this dimension: how to work with regimes, in line with “principled pragmatism”, without further strengthening their hold on power?

This question demonstrates that resilience is a tricky concept to be used in this context. Increasing the resilience of a state against external threats can easily lead to increasing the resilience of a repressive regime. While we have to be modest about our ability to change regimes, we should not be propping them up either. It makes sense therefore for the EUGS to simultaneously advocate capacity-building and the reform of the justice, security and defence sectors, as well as human rights protection. The strong emphasis on human rights (which is indeed to be distinguished from democratization) is indispensable, for it is often against their own governments that people have to be resilient. But can we deliver on that promise? Perhaps fighting inequalities would have been a better heading for the new strategy towards our eastern and southern neighbours than resilience (the meaning of which is not really clarified by the introduction of “energy and environmental resilience”).

By the way, if the EU wants to be more honest with itself, then (the Balkans excepted) “a credible enlargement policy” does not really have a place in the section on the neighbourhood, for enlargement no longer is a credible project, least of all for Turkey.

Third, there is a much stronger awareness of the indispensability of a credible military instrument. “Soft and hard power go hand in hand”, Mogherini rightly says in the foreword. The EUGS has not rediscovered geopolitics per se – the ESS already stated that “even in an era of globalisation, geography is still important” – but more than the ESS it recognizes that some powers don’t hesitate to use blackmail and force in what they consider to be a geopolitical competition. Hence the ambition “to protect Europe, respond to external crises, and assist in developing our partners’ security and defence capacities”. Furthermore, our efforts “should enable the EU to act autonomously while also contributing to and undertaking actions in cooperation with NATO”. This can be read as the EU constituting the European pillar that allows its Member States to act with the US where possible and without US assets when necessary (which could actually also be through NATO, the UN or an ad hoc coalition as well as the EU itself).

The ends to which the EU should apply this “strategic autonomy” (as Mogherini calls in in the foreword) are spread throughout the text. First, “this means living up to our commitments to mutual assistance and solidarity”, i.e. Articles 42.7 TEU and 222 TFEU. Second, where conflict is ongoing, the EU should “protect human lives, notably civilians” and “be ready to support and help consolidate local ceasefires”, presumably in the broad neighbourhood as a matter of priority. This is an ambitious undertaking, for it entails deploying troops on the ground, with serious firepower, who are backed up by serious air support and ready reserves, and who don’t necessarily seek out and destroy an opponent but who will fight when the civilians for whom they are responsible are threatened. Third, the EU “is seeking to make greater practical contributions to Asian security”, including in the maritime area. Finally, the EU “could assist further and complement UN peacekeeping” as a demonstration of its belief in the UN as “the bedrock of the multilateral rules-based order”.

These are more than sufficient elements to translate the EUGS into a revised military level of ambition in “a sectoral strategy, to be agreed by the Council” – into a white paper, in other words, that should kick-start more cooperation and even integration in defence. The EUGS also offers guidelines on how to do that: “an annual coordinated review process at EU level to discuss Member States’ military spending plans”. Or, as an earlier draft had it, a European semester on defence.

## **An Ambitious Diplomatic Programme**

Of the remaining two priorities, the focus on “cooperative regional orders” also reflects the awareness of ongoing geopolitical competition between different global and regional powers. The intention to ensure a coherent response to China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative not just through the EU-China Connectivity Platform (to create the link with the EU’s own investment plans) but through ASEM and the EU-ASEAN partnership as well could signal the start of a sophisticated diplomatic initiative. In the same vein, the aim to deepen dialogue with Iran and the GCC countries ought to be the beginning of a new vision on the future regional order in the Middle East, though the EUGS itself could have offered more guidance already. After all, there is not one but several wars ongoing in an area that clearly falls within the neighbourhood

in which the EU ought to assume responsibility. This will also be one of the issues (though it is not among the examples explicitly listed in the EUGS) on which the EU will have to cooperate with Russia, while making “substantial changes in relations” dependent on Russia’s respect for international law. On Russia, the EUGS basically advocates strategic patience.

The fifth priority puts global governance firmly back on the EU agenda, after “effective multilateralism” (as the ESS phrased it) had more or less disappeared from the radar screen. Now the EUGS ambitiously sets out “to transform rather than simply preserve the existing system”, which will indeed be necessary to prevent “the emerging of alternative groupings to the detriment of all”. Under this heading as well, an ambitious programme on free trade (envisaging FTAs with the US, Japan, Mercosur, India, ASEAN and others) and on the freedom of the global commons could herald a creative diplomatic initiative – and a more strategic use of EU trade policy, which ought to be as embedded in overall strategy as it is in the US.

Of course, the EUGS does also show some deficiencies. Most eye-catching is the curious lack of diplomatic ambition when it comes to dealing with conflicts and crises, the third priority. In contrast with the ambitious (though perhaps not fully realized) military implications of the goal to protect civilians, the EUGS appears rather reactive on the diplomatic front. When peace agreements are reached, the EU will support them and provide security, but when they are not, the EUGS seems to prioritize the local level. To take the case of Syria: brokering local ceasefires will save people (if they are guaranteed militarily), but ultimately only diplomatic success in Geneva will end the war. The EU actually is good at diplomacy, and the EUGS refers at several instances to the successful example of the Iran nuclear negotiations, so it could have been more ambitious in this area.

## **Conclusion: To Work**

The EUGS is a strategy, and strategies have to be translated into sub-strategies, policies and action to achieve their objectives. Unlike in 2003, the EUGS itself already provides the linkage to what should become a systematic process of implementation and review. First, it calls for a prompt decision on “clear procedures and timeframes” for the revision of existing and design of new sectoral strategies. Second, it announces an annual reflection on the state of play, “pointing out where further implementation must be sought”, though not a systematic overall review. “A new process of strategic reflection will be launched whenever the EU and its Member States deem it necessary”, so not automatically every five years, for every legislature.

For this scheme to succeed, it is crucial that it be firmly anchored institutionally, not just within the EEAS but in the Commission as well. Of course, the High Representative has the main ownership of the EUGS and will assure overall coordination and initiative. But which body, including Commission and EEAS officials, will monitor implementation and prepare the annual state of play? (Analogous to the National Security Council in the US, which not only coordinates the drafting of the National Security

Strategy but also monitors whether all relevant subsequent documents comply with its approach). And, most crucially, will the Member States feel ownership of the EUGS? Mogherini will obviously drive implementation, but if it is only her, it cannot work. And implementing this ambitious Strategy will demand a serious drive.

This is where the Brexit will have the most impact on the EUGS. Not on substance: the analysis of the environment, the definition of our vital interests, and the identification of our priorities do not change because we will be one Member State fewer. But, unfortunately, it will have a negative impact on the capacity for delivery. For one, the EU has quite simply lost face – and face is important in diplomacy. The credibility and persuasiveness of any EU initiative will be undermined by the fact that one of the three biggest Member States has just decided to leave. And, unlike the High Representative in her preface, I am less confident that “we are the best in this field” of soft power. Furthermore, the UK can no longer directly contribute its impressive diplomatic and military clout to EU foreign and security policy. What options there are to bring it to bear indirectly will have to be explored.

Nevertheless, Federica Mogherini is absolutely right when she says: “A fragile world calls for a more confident and responsible European Union”. Even though the EU itself is somewhat more fragile now than in 2003. Hiding inside for fear of the world around us will not solve anything however, whereas “responsible engagement can bring about positive change”. Hence: to work.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Sven Biscop, **EU Foreign Policy Between the Revolution and the Status Quo**. Policy Brief No. 9. Brussels, Institute for European Studies, 2014, [http://www.ies.be/files/2014\\_9\\_PB.pdf](http://www.ies.be/files/2014_9_PB.pdf).
- 2 John Bew, **Realpolitik. A History**. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 28.
- 3 Federica Mogherini, **The European Union in a Changing Global Environment. A More Connected, Contested and Complex World**. Brussels, EEAS, 2015,
- 4 European Commission & High Representative, **Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy**. Joint Communication JOIN (2015) 50 final. Brussels, EU, 2015.