

EU Foreign Policy Between the Revolution and the Status Quo

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by Sven Biscop

A new High Representative – that means it is time for a new European Security Strategy (ESS). Many academics will be dusting off their policy papers from exactly five years ago. It will be a big pile of papers, for it would be hard to find an academic who did not think that the foreign and security policy of the European Union (EU) was lacking in strategic guidance. And it will be a lot of dust, for the outgoing High Representative – Catherine Ashton – has studiously ignored all of them for the past five years.

Her successor, Federica Mogherini, has however received a “strategic” mandate from the December 2013 European Council. It reads: “in close cooperation with the Commission”, she is “to assess the impact of changes in the global environment, and to report to the Council in the course of 2015 on the challenges and opportunities arising for the Union, following consultations with the Member States”. This is the somewhat cryptic compromise resulting from the unresolved debate about whether or not to review the 2003 ESS. Many Member States remain doubtful as to the added value of a strategic review (and ironically those who have the most elaborate national strategic processes express the most doubt). So do most of the officials of the European External Action Service (EEAS) who were involved in the failed 2008 attempt at revision (an ill-timed exercise which resulted only in a rightly forgotten report on the implementation of the ESS).

Yet nobody can deny that the global environment is effectively changing – rapidly and dramatically. This was already the case in 2008, when it was clear to all that the rise of the BRICS and of China in particular had been much faster than expected, with enormous implications for Europe’s aim of establishing a rules-based global order. It is obvious today when turmoil on all of Europe’s borders has put the regional order in great peril. In many areas of external

When a new High Representative takes office, an opportunity presents itself to take a look at existing EU external policies and assess whether these are still sufficient to safeguard Europe’s interests in light of recent events. New strategic priorities have to be defined where necessary, not on each and every topic of foreign policy, but on those big issues that European nations can only deal with collectively, through the EU. How to pursue these strategic priorities is an equally important question. Looking for the right balance between a far-reaching reform agenda and a status quo policy, both of which can be detrimental to its interests, the EU can opt for pragmatic idealism as the new strategic concept for its foreign policy.

action it has become impossible for the EU to carry on with existing policies as if nothing had happened. Dare anyone still deny with a straight face the urgency of a strategic review?

Forget about Form

The question then is: how to go about it? Since 2008 the strategic debate has often been hijacked by issues of form: should a new ESS be drafted or is another type of document required? Who will

do the drafting? Who will adopt it? The new High Representative would be well advised to leave all issues of form aside for now. Instead, she has a great opportunity to use the European Council's mandate to launch a thorough debate on substance in order to generate a consensus on the broad priorities that she sees for her (first) five-year term. In effect she could thus generate her own mandate that would subsequently empower her to initiate policy.

After Mogherini has submitted the report to the European Council as the mandate requires, the "end product" to be aimed at for now could thus be a statement of policy intentions by the High Representative herself. This statement could be based on the European Council's endorsement of her report, rather than a document that is formally adopted by the European Council. For example, such a statement could take the form of a speech in the European Parliament. Just as national foreign ministers present their policy intentions after a few months in every term of office, so it is but logical that at the EU level the High Representative does the same for each term of office.

As a first step in implementing the mandate, Mogherini's report to the European Council could start with a brief analysis of recent events and developments at the regional as well as global level, in order to outline which existing EU policies have been the most affected and therefore require substantial reassessment. Three crucial areas immediately come to mind: (1) the regional order and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), including the multilateral forums of the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean; (2) the global order and the strategic partnerships including, of course, that with the US; and (3) Europe's role as a security provider and the state of defence in Europe. In order to involve the Commission and the Member States in this assessment, as the mandate requires, a seminar could be organised convening representatives from all relevant actors as well as academics. No drawn-out seminar series is necessarily required: a single two-day seminar, leaving time for profound discussion and including experts who think out-of-the-box in order to ensure creative reflection, can be sufficient.

As a second step, building on the European Council's endorsement of her report, the High Representative could then in a policy statement set out her views on which policies, as a matter of priority, she will seek to review and revamp. At a later stage, a formal new ESS (perhaps under a different title) could be

a third step, codifying the outcome of the High Representative's new orientation in a strategy adopted by the European Council. The High Representative's policy statement ought to be positively framed and express an ambition to achieve objectives, rather than a defensive reaction against threats. Pessimism has never been known to motivate anyone. A realistic yet optimistic policy statement will provide a narrative, explaining to citizens, parliaments and third countries the distinctive contribution of the EU to international affairs. At the same time it will offer a strategic impulse, giving a sense of purpose to the EEAS and the external services of the Commission, and guide day-to-day policy-making.

Such a statement would need to focus on just three or four big issues. The aim is not to address every item of external action, but to highlight which issues collective external action through the EU will bring the most added value. Such issues will be of vital importance to all Member States, yet too big for any single one of them to address them alone. In other words, it must focus on the issues on which the EU can prove that it is better at defending the Member States' national interest than the Member States themselves.

Remember the Revolution

Mogherini's task is not only to set priorities but also to review how, through which instruments, these priorities can best be achieved. Which type of strategy should the EU pursue or, in even bigger terms, which type of power does the EU seek to be?

It may not fit in exactly with how most European diplomats see themselves, but the ESS outlines an agenda for what in political science terms is called a revolutionary power. To state that "the quality of international society depends on the quality of the governments that are its foundation" is to say in very couched yet clear terms that we do not think that quality is now assured. To add that "the best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states" and that "spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order" is nothing less than a call for regime-change across the globe. Gradually and smoothly may be how we would like to see this happen, and certainly not by force of arms, but a revolutionary agenda it is.

Yet in contrast with its ambitious rhetoric, in practice the EU more often behaves as a status quo power. The clearest symptom is our addiction to partnership as a way of conducting international relations. It sometimes seems as if just about every country has a partnership of some kind or other with the EU. In reality of course partnership cannot be the beginning of a diplomatic relationship but is its desired end-state. For effective partnership is only possible if there is sufficient consensus on foreign policy objectives and the way to achieve them to enable systematic consultation and regular joint action. Even with many of our so-called strategic partners that is not the case – unless one counts the fact that Russia’s intervention in Ukraine has stimulated Europe’s defence efforts as an emanation of the strategic partnership. Rather than stimulating its “partners” to change (for why would they as they are on the list of the “good guys” already) the EU itself has become tainted by associating too uncritically with all kinds of unsavoury regimes. That is the consequence of something that happens rather too often in the EU: after a while it begins to mistake an aspirational notion in one of its policies for reality. Thus, Brussels ended up believing that all those which it had dubbed partners really were partners (or that the way its policies divided the world really reflected reality on the ground, as if there was “a line in the sand” marking the borders of the ENP). Our southern neighbourhood is a case in point: the EU gave up on its reform agenda in favour of a status quo policy that seemed to meet its concerns over terrorism, migration and energy supply. And then came the Arab Spring... The resulting image is one of a timid and reactive EU.

The easiest way to overcome this problem of double standards would be to simply give up on the high-flown rhetoric and pursue a status quo strategy in words as well as in deeds. That however is not an option for the EU. Why? Because the notion that “the best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states” is absolutely true. Only where governments equally provide for the security, freedom and prosperity of all of their citizens can there be lasting peace and security: this is the core idea of the ESS. The EU itself aspires to live up to these egalitarian values (which the Lisbon Treaty has enshrined in the Treaty on European Union), and is indeed the most egalitarian region on the planet (which is a greater source of legitimacy than many realise). Stimulating governments outside the EU to do likewise for their citizens effectively is the best way of ensuring our interests in the long term. The EU should not – cannot – give

up on this agenda of the ESS but it must find better ways of achieving it.

Therefore a middle way has to be found – neither dreamy idealism nor unprincipled pragmatism. The revolutionary agenda has proved to be far too optimistic. If change does not emerge organically from within a country, it cannot be engineered from the outside – all attempts to do so have ended in disaster. In such circumstances playing a reforming role is extremely difficult. But an external actor can still attempt to play a moderating role, aiming to curb excesses by exerting pressure (with the Responsibility to Protect as the ultimate emergency break in case of the gravest violations). However, a pure status quo policy has also proved to be harmful to our interests. Regimes that do not provide for the security, freedom and prosperity of their citizens are inherently unstable and will eventually implode or explode – one cannot count on long-term cooperation therefore. When change does occur, driven internally, we have to be on the right side of history.

The middle way could be an activist strategy of pragmatic idealism. To remain consistent with ourselves, we have to adhere to the long-term overall objective of “a world of well-governed democratic states”, but in the knowledge that it will only be reached through mostly incremental steps.

Where, for the time being at least, the situation seems impervious to change we should at least not do anything that puts even more obstacles in the way of achieving “well-governed democratic states”. Hence a pure status quo policy of cooperation with the powers that be is not an option. This does not mean that we cannot cooperate at all with them. On the contrary, we should seek to continuously engage all relevant actors in such countries, the opposition and civil society as well as the regime – but we cannot cooperate with any regime in ways that strengthen its authoritarian foundations. To put it very bluntly: rendition of terrorist suspects to be “interrogated” by the security services of an autocracy while preaching about human rights is not good for our credibility. But we definitely ought to engage economically: trade and even more so investment leading to job creation are the best ways of permeating a society. And while Europeans invest around the world, it is notably in our southern neighbourhood that investment has been lagging behind.

When a situation is unfrozen and change does occur it can be

for better or for worse, but then at least there will be a chance of improvement. This is when, building on the legitimacy that a policy of pragmatic idealism ought to have endowed us with, we can actively attempt to generate multiplier effects, and to steer change in a direction that is beneficial to our interests. While our preferred instruments are diplomatic and economic, military intervention is an option if change creates security concerns. A cost-benefit evaluation must determine, on a case-by-case basis, whether European military involvement is called for. If we do not intervene, will there be a threat against our vital interests? And what will be the humanitarian consequences for the population of the country itself? If we do intervene, what are the chances of averting the threat and creating the conditions in which change for the better can be consolidated? And what will be the risk of creating negative effects (such as escalation to other countries), of incurring casualties among our forces and collateral damage? In our own broad neighbourhood it will certainly increasingly be up to us Europeans to make that calculation, to take the political initiative to develop a response, and to forge the coalition that can deliver it – for the US will no longer automatically do that for us.

Conclusion

Trade-offs are inevitable. When choosing to intervene militarily against IS in Iraq and Syria, one cannot do without regional actors in the coalition, even if many of those countries themselves sustain practices (such as decapitating criminals and hanging homosexuals) that are absolutely at odds with universal values. Academics may try and develop elegant strategic concepts, but unfortunately elegance cannot always be preserved when conducting foreign and security policy. And yet these strategic concepts can help us to make decisions, to assess what is important for us and what is not, which responses are possible and which are not, and which resources we ought to allocate to them. It is of crucial importance therefore that Federica

Mogherini revives the strategic debate in Brussels and between Brussels and the Member States. Pragmatic idealism ought to ensure two things: that the EU remains true to universal egalitarian values and thus to itself, and that it plays an active, leading role. Sometimes taking the lead will lead to failure, but oftentimes it will lead to success – passively accepting the course of events will never.



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