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Tackling the big questions in little steps A process towards a comprehensive EU strategy

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Introduction

Discussions about a new strategic approach to the EU's external action have gained some momentum in 2012. In July, the Foreign Ministers of Sweden, Poland, Italy and Spain tasked think tanks of their respective countries to initiate a reflection process on a European Global Strategy. First results of the process shall be presented to the European public by March 2013. On September 17th, the eleven EU foreign ministers that form the Future of Europe Group presented their report on measures to be taken in order to strengthen the EU in the face of the Euro debt crisis. One of their key recommendations beyond immediate crisis reaction is to improve the setting of priorities in the sphere of external relations. The central question then is if the European Union needs a new strategic document in the area of foreign and security policy. If – as we argue – there are strong reasons to draft a new strategic document, the next question is how this would relate to the existing European Security Strategy and what would be the best process to arrive at this new document politically.

The reference point for this debate is still the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003. Its adoption stands out as one of the milestones in the development of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies. Agreed shortly after the internal divisions over the Iraq War, the document provided the Union for the first time with a comprehensive analysis on threats to European security and a broad set of aims for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP) as well as the now renamed Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Despite these achievements of the ESS, however, the EU is in dire need of a new strategic process to review its interests and priorities for two main reasons.

First, since the development of the ESS, which was firmly rooted in the experiences of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the external environment of the EU has changed fundamentally. Most of the large EU member states have updated their national strategy documents: Germany 2006 with the *Verteidigungsweißbuch* or France 2008 with its *Livre Blanc*, signalling its full return into NATO. The transatlantic Alliance has reviewed its Strategic Concept. Only the EU still works on the basis of the 2003 ESS. At the same time, the whole structure of EU foreign policy has changed with the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU has enlarged to 27 member states and the European neighbourhood is undergoing fundamental transformation in the wake of upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East. Secondly, the ESS itself was not without flaws even at the time of its writing. Concentrating on healing the rift of the Iraq War, the ESS focused on building consensus in regard to threat perceptions while giving little guidance in terms of

foreign and security policy objectives. In short, it was only a halfway strategy.

In particular in times when the EU is focused on the internal matters of the debt crisis, it is imperative for EU foreign policy makers to think ahead and re-evaluate the position and priorities of a changing European Union adapting to a changing international context. Based on this assumption, possible pathways towards a new foreign- and security policy strategy need to be set out more clearly. More specifically, how should the process of developing the strategy document be organised to ensure that it is more than an empty compromise but rather concise and ready for implementation?

1 Defining security interests - the development of "grand strategy" documents

In order to analyse how the European Union may develop a coherent and credible strategy for foreign and security policy, it is imperative to first disaggregate the functions such a document should achieve and how it is employed in other contexts. In general, strategy documents are today used both on the national level - e.g. as National Security Strategy (USA, UK, Poland, Spain), as White Paper on Security and Defence (France, Germany, UK) or as Strategic Defence Review (UK) - and by international organisations, such as the EU (European Security Strategy), the transatlantic Alliance (NATO Strategic Concept) and in parts also the United Nations with its 'Capstone Doctrine' (United Nations Peacekeeping Operations - Principles and Guidelines). Their main differences are their policy aim, as some focus entirely on security and defence policy (e.g. Strategic Defence Review, Livre Blanc) while others such as the national security strategies of the US or the UK employ a more broader foreign policy outlook, including even areas such as climate change or external energy policy. Besides this, the common aim of these documents is to set the normative and operative framework for the actor's foreign, security and defence policy.

Originating from the military context, in the classical sense "strategy" is defined as the art of using battles to win a war, in contrast to "tactics" as the art of using troops to win a battle (Clausewitz). On the level beyond an individual war or conflict, "grand strategy" is defined as "(...) a political-military, means-ends chain, a state's theory about how it can best cause security for itself. Ideally, it includes an explanation of why the theory is expected to work. A grand strategy must identify likely threats to the state's

security and it must devise political, economic, military, and other remedies for those threats (...)" (Posen 1984).

Following this definition, a grand strategy has to fulfil four main functions. *Firstly*, it has to perform a thorough analysis of the threats and challenges to the actor's security, which thus form the basis for the consequently developed policies. Given today's comprehensive view of security threats, in all of the strategy documents listed above this threat analysis goes far beyond the military realm and includes challenges like international terrorism, organised crime or climate change. Within the perceived international security environment, a grand strategy *secondly* needs to set the objectives of the actor's foreign, security and defence policies, including its geographical priorities, normative aims and political interests. These objectives *thirdly* have to be linked to the instruments that are to be applied in order to achieve them, ranging from economic over diplomatic to military instruments. For instance, in the British National Security Strategy (NSS), the aim to protect British citizens and fight international terrorism is linked to an extensive range of instruments to be used both internally and externally by various government agencies. Last but not least, a grand strategy is a way of legitimising and propagating said policy by *fourthly* communicating it both to the elite involved in implementing it (e.g. politicians, government officials etc.) and the general public. While the former is an important tool to ensure the implementation of the strategy in the day to day conduct of external policies, the communication to and with the citizens forms the necessary basis for a democratically legitimate foreign, security and defence policy.

2 Does the EU need a new strategic document?

Based on this definition, an EU strategy process is faced with a set of important questions. The first is whether the EU, in which foreign, security and defence policy remain the most traditional intergovernmental policy area, needs a comprehensive strategic document fulfilling all four functions mentioned above? The answer to this should be an uncontroversial affirmation: With CFSP, CSDP and its external economic policies, the EU and its member states command a wide range of external instruments that are used for various policy objectives within established decision-making procedures on the European level. With the establishment of the External Action Service (EEAS), the EU should have, at least in theory, an institutional focal point for setting priorities across external policy fields. To date, however, it still lacks the mission statement and political backing to actu-

ally fulfil this task. Acting in these diverse and challenging environments, the EU therefore clearly needs strategic priorities on where, and for what it should employ its various external instruments.

The more difficult question, however, is whether the EU needs a *new* strategy document compared to the ESS of 2003? The positions on this vary greatly both among academics as well as decision-makers in EU member states. On the one hand, rewriting the ESS carries obvious risks with uncertain benefits. The ESS remains a very concise document, plotting out a wide range of threats and risks the EU and its member are faced with. More importantly, it cannot be excluded that a new attempt to unanimously agree upon the strategic priorities among 27 member states might backfire and rather expose the differences than result in a common strategic outlook. The European debt crisis and the problem solving measures have created cleavages between the economically more competitive countries and those that are in fiscal troubles as well as aggravated the gap between continental Europe and Great Britain. Moreover, there is the risk that at the end of a painful re-drafting process there might be a new strategy document but less clear, less coherent and less substantive than its predecessor. Decision-makers, particularly in Berlin, are therefore wary of starting a new EU strategic process and want to keep the ESS as long as possible. It is also for this reason that writing a new ESS was postponed in 2008: the EU member states instead opted for a less ambitious 'implementation report' on the ESS.

Despite these risks there is still a compelling point in favour of reviewing the EU's strategic priorities. The EU created a European Security Strategy in the first place in order to become an international actor, not just a "structure" or a "form". A strategic document can only perform its intended function when it is regularly reviewed and adopted to new international circumstances. This holds true for strategic documents on a national level in France, Great Britain and Germany as well as for those written under NATO auspices. The strategy of the latter has already been revised three times since the end of the Cold War. It is for this reason that a majority of smaller member states are in favour of opening up the debate on the strategic priorities of the EU despite the obvious risks attached to such a process.

2.1 What kind of strategy document does the EU need?

Even if the EU and its member states were to agree on a process towards a new strategic document, the next question they would need to address is what kind of strategy the EU should develop. As showed in the short overview of national and international strategy documents in part 1, there are vast differences in the scope and ambitions of such documents. In terms of

scope, they range from being purely focused on the military side of defence policy (e.g. White Paper on Defence) up to broad external policy documents (e.g. National Security Strategy of the UK), while their ambitions range from providing summaries of established policy guidelines (German Weißbuch of 2006) to being a starting point for major policy changes (Livre Blanc of 2008 in relation to French NATO policy). In both terms, the ESS ranges at the low end of the spectrum, focusing mostly on CSDP and more on a joint threat perception than clear common policy guidelines.

For a new strategy process, it is important for the EU to set out the aims it wants to pursue with the strategy document from the outset. In comparison to the national documents, the EU could pursue three alternative approaches to such a process. The first, most cautious approach would be a second minor revision of the ESS building upon the 2008 ESS implementation report. Such a revision would be confined not only to CSDP proper, but also only update the threat perception of the ESS while the original document would remain valid. This option has the advantage of being the least costly in political and bureaucratic terms, as it could build on previously agreed policies while circumventing the hard foreign policy questions. Turned around, the expected outcome would be the least valuable providing little more than a new declaration on the joint threat perception and common values of the EU without any guidance or vision for the Union as an international actor.

The second option is a complete overhaul of the ESS with the aim of writing a new European Security Strategy focused mainly on the military and civilian crisis management within CSDP. In contrast to the current ESS, this approach would entail discussion and agreement on clear priorities in security and defence, particularly concerning CSDP operations as well as cooperation in military and civilian capabilities among EU member states. The EU and its member states would thus have to face up to the hard questions of CSDP, including the balance between national and European level, the relation to NATO and the priorities and intensity of EU external engagement. On the other hand, such a debate could restart the dynamic CSDP has lost since 2008.

The third option is a more comprehensive, general strategy document covering not only defence issues of CSDP proper, but also wider questions of all external policies of the EU, including relations to its strategic partners, EU neighbourhood policy, energy and climate policy, external economic policy up to development policy. With such an approach the EU would for the first time have to develop coherent priorities and coordination mechanisms between the disperse parts of its external portfolio, thus truly fulfilling the vision of the double-hatted High Representative and her External Action Service. If aiming at an ambitious EU foreign policy, this is the option the EU and its member states should opt for. However, it is also the

most demanding one in terms of coordination between the different actors and with the most difficult negotiations.

2.2 What are the major issues for a comprehensive EU strategy document?

Looking at the major factors influencing the EU's strategic position - its internal structure, its neighbourhood, transatlantic relations, the wider international security environment - it becomes clear that all of them have changed fundamentally since 2003. Against this background, a comprehensive strategy process and document would be the best option to fully realise the potential of its diverse range of external instruments that go far beyond the reach of CSDP. Based on this assumption, there are four priority areas the EU should address in addition to a threat perception in a new strategy document:

The structure of EU foreign, security and defence policy

The ESS was developed under the institutional set-up of the Treaty of Nice, which was altered significantly by the Lisbon reforms of 2009. Although the general features of EU external action still stand, with CFSP and CSDP being mainly intergovernmental policy areas dominated by unanimity in the Council and strong member states, the introduction of the double-hatted High Representative and her European External Action Service (EEAS) have changed the institutional dynamics in those areas as well. In 2013, the first revision of the EEAS is scheduled and should be used as an opportunity to evaluate the coherence, balance, effectiveness and legitimacy of the current structures. Based on this evaluation, one major aspect of the strategy process should be clear and definite rules for effective and coherent decision-making and implementation across all EU external policies.

The Arab Spring and the New European Neighbourhood Policy

Upheavals in the Arab world have initiated profound shifts in Europe's geopolitical environment. This means that the EU and its member states need to rethink their relationships in this region. A new approach to Turkey is crucial as this country does not only see itself as a possible blueprint for reforms to be undertaken in the Southern Mediterranean and Near East. Ankara is also becoming a key regional player and thus an important partner for the EU with regard to the Arab world.

The EU and its member states had lost much of their credibility in the southern neighbourhood even before 2011. The image of being a "status-quo" actor rather supporting autocratic regimes than democratic change has been reinforced in the course of the "Arab Spring". In May 2011, the European Commission and the High Representative Ashton jointly pub-

lished a document spelling out a new approach to the European Neighbourhood Policy. This new approach sets out to promote and demand political and economic reforms in a more forceful way, including support for civil society.

A comprehensive EU strategy document would have to address more clearly what lessons have to be drawn from the long-standing trade-off between regime stability and good governance in partner countries with autocratic governments. The drafting process would thus have to be accompanied by a debate about how the EU should in the future work with autocratic regimes in a more credible way and more effectively support democratisation processes in these countries. It should also address questions on the future role of the EU in the Middle East peace process.

Relations to the US and the Rising Powers

The transatlantic rift over the Iraq war in 2002/2003 was a major catalyst for the writing of the first ESS. Still, the document contains only relatively vague statements on the relationship with the United States. In the meantime, the foundations of the relationship have evolved considerably since 2003. In January 2012, President Obama presented the Strategic Defence Review of his administration. According to this review Europe and its neighbourhood will further decline in importance as the strategic focus of Washington shifts towards Asia-Pacific. The European Union cannot avoid facing this challenge and all the questions arising from this decision for the EU's future role in its neighbourhood. Particularly important is the question of how and when the EU and its member states should act in their neighbourhood and where they should cooperate with the US internationally.

Moreover, the ESS in its current form does not reflect the rising importance of emerging powers such as Brazil, India and China. While their influence on the international scene was just one of many scenarios in 2003, it has become a reality in all aspects of foreign policy in 2012. This is particularly important for external economic policy and areas like energy and climate, development aid or trade cooperation. One of the major future challenges will be to work towards a new international system and new institutions with these powers playing a stronger role.

The limits of European power

The debt crisis in the EU is likely to have a negative impact on the effectiveness of European foreign and security policy. Member states have already initiated significant cuts in their defence budgets. According to some estimates, EU defence budgets could decline by a third between 2006 and 2014. It is obvious that these problems cannot be solved in the short term. The European Commission estimates that austerity pressures on public spending will be felt for at least two more decades. At the same time, there

is the additional danger that the Union's soft power may be affected detrimentally by the crisis

Already today, conflict prevention and crisis management are subject to a new pragmatic thinking which follows much less ambitious goals than comprehensive state and peace building. The financial and debt crisis will also have an impact on the New European Neighbourhood Policy which rests on the three pillars of financial support, mobility and market access ("money, mobility, markets"). It also opens the question of how credible the EU and its member states are in demanding democracy and the respect for human rights in China while they are in need of Chinese financial support to deal with the European debt crisis.

In the face of the visible tendencies to 'renationalize' European foreign policy, a new public rationale has to be found in order to justify common European action in the foreign, security and defence domains. Without a new one, the EU will not be able to effectively deal with the international challenges summarized above. Member states will only be willing to pool their resources and to venture "more Europe" if the additional value of common European action is made fully clear.

3 The process towards a new EU strategy

The next issue to be faced on the way towards a comprehensive EU strategy document is the way it is written and negotiated. Having a well-written strategy document should be only part of the process. Much more important, especially for the EU, is to gain the ownership of all relevant actors in EU foreign policy, that is both, the member states as well as at the European level the High Representative, the EEAS and the respective Commission directorates. In consequence, neither a process focused only on the member states nor one solely driven by the High Representative could establish a successful EU strategy. For the EU, the worst outcome would be either a division between the member states or a thwarting of the ESS by the member states distrusting the strategy that they feel has been developed outside of their control.

The process towards a comprehensive EU strategy document should therefore be carefully structured to bring all actors to the table. First, the High Representative and the EEAS should take upon a coordination role while closely involving the member states at all stages in the process. Because the process of developing the first European Security Strategy has proven to be successful, the same procedure should be applied for the new strategic document. In a first step a series of expert workshops could be held. As a

second step a permanent advisory group ('Wise Pen Team') composed of member states representatives and chaired by the High Representative should be set up, reporting to the Council respectively the Political and Security Committee of the EU. Working closely with the European expert community, the Wise Pen Team could develop a draft EU strategy that would finally be presented by the High Representative to the European Council for adoption. Preferably, the European Parliament should also be involved in this process, e.g. by discussing the draft strategy in the relevant EP committees and asking the parliament to endorse the final document. This is important both for reasons of political legitimacy as well as effectiveness, as the parliament plays an important role in determining the budget for all EU external instruments except military operations.

Regarding the national level, member states should cooperate closely in their input and discussions within the advisory group. Paris and Berlin together could, for example, outline the way for states ready to lay the foundations for a defence union, willing to give up some sovereignty claims in favour of harmonized operational needs, willing to pool military capabilities and to create a European defence market.

Finally, Germany should offer Catherine Ashton its staunch political backing as well as practical support – such as the secondment of well-known experts – for preparing the new strategy. Because of its already exposed position in the management of the financial and debt crisis, Germany should strive for a rather supporting than driving position.

4 Ensuring the implementation of a new strategy

Finally, when embarking upon a new strategic process the EU should start with the implementation of the results in mind - in order to provide a strategic vision and guidance for the EU and its member states in foreign affairs. A new strategy document and its developing process need to fulfil all four core functions of a grand strategy: to analyse threats, risks and changes in the international environment, define policy objectives, link them with means and communicate them to officials and the public. By experience with regard to the ESS and its 2008 implementation report, the EU should significantly extend and enhance its strategy and thereby continue to underpin its ambition being as foreign and security policy actor. EU institutions and member states should focus on three measures with a view on subsequent implementation of such a strategy:

Firstly, developing a European security strategy has to be more than a European exercise. Due to the intergovernmental nature of foreign, security and defence policy in the EU, any implementation, be it in building capabilities or in conducting operations, requires the political support and the resources made available by the Commission and the member states. For a common European policy, the EU's foreign policy and security interests therefore have to be defined jointly on the national and European level. Hence, the process of formulating EU interests has to consider the complex institutional and political structures, bringing together the different actors on the EU level (e.g. the High Representative, the European Parliament, Commission and the European External Action Service) and on the national level. Especially in regards to the latter, much work has to be done in order to connect the national strategic debates with each other and the European level.

Secondly, the EU should establish an institutionalized review of its strategy. This should encompass a study of the implementation of the previous strategy as well as a revision of the threat analysis, the comprehensive objectives for all external EU policies and the means for their implementation. Under the current institutional structure, the review of the strategy could be coupled with the terms of European Parliament and the Commission. In each legislature, the High Representative should use the review of the EU strategy as a first exercise to coordinate her or his priorities with the other EU players, in particular the member states.

Thirdly, the new strategy should link policy objectives with credible and precise plans for implementation. The main weak point of the EU Security Strategy has been its vagueness about implementing its policies and the consecutive lack of implementation in many areas. Despite its name, the 2008 implementation report rather contains an enumeration of what had been achieved in EU external action in the last five years. For the future formulation of EU security interests, there should be a rigid and credible evaluation of the capabilities needed for implementing the defined objectives and an answer in what ways these capabilities can be aggregated.