

The Lonely Strategist: Who but the High Representative and the EEAS Cares About the EU Global Strategy?

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EU Member States have agreed on a grand strategy, the 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS). However, the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), where Member States define the EU's foreign, security and defence policies, has failed to fully implement it. In fact, neither the Member States nor the European Commission feel ownership of the EUGS. However, the need to leverage the internal competences of the Commission in order to maintain the EU's position in the competition between the great powers, may forge more grand strategic unity. Nevertheless, introducing majority decision-making remains imperative – but unlikely. What the EU could and ought to do immediately, however, is to introduce a regular strategic review.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The European Union actively promotes its 2016 *Global Strategy* (EUGS),¹ just like previously it effectively used the 2003 *European Security Strategy* (ESS)² to signal to its partners and competitors, and to its own Member States, how Brussels understands international politics and its role in it. The EUGS operates at the level of grand strategy: starting from the collective vital interests of the EU, it formulates five priorities that ought to guide action in all dimensions of the EU's external policies – political, economic, and military. Specific thematic and regional strategies translate the EUGS into more operational decisions, which are then put into action by the EU institutions and the Member States. Or that is the theory. In reality, although the EU has shown itself effective in formulating grand strategy, and continuously refers to the EUGS in its public diplomacy, it has not yet managed to act upon its grand strategy in a consistent and systematic manner.

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¹ High Representative, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels, June 2016).

² High Representative, *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy* (Brussels, Dec. 2003).

The main reason is self-evident: unlike today's other global players (the US, China, and Russia), the EU is not a state but a composite actor; it is at most a state-like organization.³ The EU has supranational authority in key parts of the economic dimension of grand strategy, notably foreign trade. But in the political and military dimensions, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) remain almost entirely intergovernmental: Member States decide all, by unanimity. Practice has shown that even though the EU institutions and the Member States have found agreement on a grand strategy such as the EUGS, it is nearly impossible to continuously uphold that agreement between all relevant actors during all phases of its subsequent implementation. Those who drove and drafted the EUGS, then High Representative Federica Mogherini and her closest collaborators, all too quickly found themselves to be its lonely keepers.

This article will assess why the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), where Member States define CFSP/CSDP, has failed to fully implement the grand strategy that those same Member States agreed upon (§2). It will then demonstrate how, in fact, neither the Member States nor the European Commission feel ownership of the EUGS (§3). However, it will then be argued that the need to leverage the internal competences of the Commission in order to maintain the EU's position in the competition between the great powers, may forge more grand strategic unity (§4). Nevertheless, the article will conclude that introducing majority decision-making remains imperative – but unlikely. What the EU could and ought to do immediately, however, is to introduce a regular strategic review (§5).

2 FOREIGN AFFAIRS, BUT STRATEGY?

The FAC could drive the implementation and further development of EU grand strategies in the area of CFSP/CSDP, but that is not what has transpired. The foreign ministers of the Member States meet at least once per month. As required, they are joined by the defence ministers, or the latter have an informal meeting back-to-back with the FAC, since they do not have their own formal Council configuration. Every month, the machinery of the CFSP goes into overdrive to prepare the conclusions of the FAC. If necessary (and it often is), officials from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and diplomats from the permanent representations of the Member States will negotiate well into the night, until success is achieved: a unanimous decision. But FAC decisions do not amount to a consistent and systematic implementation of the EUGS.

³ S. Biscop, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words – A Guide to 21st Century Great Power Politics* (Policy Press, forthcoming in 2021).

One can divide the grand strategy-related issues that the FAC discusses into two broad categories. First, foreign ministers discuss regional or thematic sub-strategies and action plans linked to the EUGS. Second, they define the EU position, and often take operational measures, with regard to specific crises and developments within the areas that the EUGS has defined as priorities.

Discussions on sub-strategies typically take place over several months, and tend to lead to bulky conclusions. That is natural, because an effective operational sub-strategy needs to go into sufficient detail. And of course, the conclusions represent a compromise between twenty-seven Member States; one cannot always express a nuanced deal in a short and sharp statement. However, conclusions are often put together with building-blocks of 'agreed language', so the same lengthy phrases recur in successive texts. Moreover, Member States have their priorities and red lines, which they want to see reflected in the conclusions – not just once, but every time a specific issue is raised. And if one Member State gets its line in, then so must the others ... Conclusions on the CSDP well illustrate this phenomenon. Whenever the slightest ambition in the field of defence is expressed, one cannot omit reminding that NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence. That, in turn, must inevitably be off-set by mentioning that the United Nations and the OSCE are partners as well. And, while one is at it, why not add a reference to Security Council Resolution 1325 and the importance of gender. The consequence of these ritualistic incantations is that very often it takes an expert to carefully read through (and between) the lines to discover what actually are the new decisions, if any.

As a result, not all Council conclusions on sub-strategies are as operational as they should be. The November 2016 Implementation Plan on Security and Defence (IPSD), which followed up on the EUGS in the field of CSDP, is a case in point.⁴ At first sight, the IPSD appears to prioritise the EU's tasks in the field of defence, but it is actually far from clear who has to initiate what in order to implement the Implementation Plan. Nor does the IPSD set very precise targets with deadlines attached. Another paper has been added to the hierarchy of documents, but it has not necessarily resulted in more action.

This illustrates two other characteristics of CFSP/CSDP in general. One is that the EU rarely abolishes documents; rather new decisions often have to be read together with existing texts. Inevitably, small (or sometimes large) discrepancies sneak in, and eventually doubts emerge as to what exactly is the policy. Another, really debilitating characteristic is that over time a culture of non-compliance has emerged in CFSP/CSDP: it is perfectly normal for states to sign up to all kinds of commitments in the full knowledge that they have no intention of paying more

⁴ High Representative, *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence*, 14392/16 (Brussels, 14 Nov. 2016).

than lip service to them. This is particularly obvious in the field of defence: time and again Member States, with a lot of fanfare, announce new initiatives to promote cooperation and integration, which then quietly fizzle out. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is the latest in this series of defence initiatives, and might yet go the same way. This stands in stark contrast to Member States' behaviour in the supranational areas of EU policy: here they act as if they mean it, rather than pretending to be committed and forgetting to act.

Discussions on the EU response to a specific crisis or development ought to take place whenever the EU interest is at stake. The FAC regularly adopts operational decisions, such as applying sanctions, or (less often) deploying military operations or civilian missions. Often, the fact in itself that the EU condemns an election as fraudulent, for example, or refuses to recognize a territorial claim, constitutes an important policy decision, and has consequences on the ground. For example, protest had already started before the obviously rigged re-election of president Lukashenko in Belarus on 9 August 2020. But the EU's immediate condemnation of the election as 'neither free nor fair'⁵ encouraged the opposition and constrained Lukashenko's options, even before in October 2020 the EU eventually adopted sanctions: there could be no business as usual.⁶

But oftentimes as well, the EU declares success when the Member States agree to urge parties in a conflict to end hostilities, to call on the great powers to abide by the rules of the international order, or to condemn human rights violations in a country – and there the thing ends, until next month's FAC arrives and updated conclusions must be drafted. Meanwhile, little or no active effort is made to convince the parties concerned of what the EU has agreed. How often, for example, has the EU called for an end to the violence in the various wars in North Africa and the Middle East without following this up with an actual diplomatic initiative? In too many cases, it is as if the primary purpose is to forge or maintain consensus between the Member States, rather than to convince anybody outside the EU of the validity of its position. The fact is that although negotiations in the FAC are conducted by foreign ministries and are about foreign policy, the goings-on in the FAC themselves are not foreign policy but rather a special form of domestic politics, in the state-like organization which is the EU. Actual foreign policy only begins when the negotiations in the FAC end: then the EU positions must be promoted and implemented in the world outside the Union.

⁵ *Belarus: Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the European Union on the Presidential Elections* (Brussels, 11 Aug. 2020).

⁶ *Council Implementing Decision (CFSP) 2020/1388 of 2 Oct. 2020 Implementing Decision 2012/642/CFSP Concerning Restrictive Measures Against Belarus* (2 Oct. 2020), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020D1388>.

3 WHO OWNS THE STRATEGY?

Ultimately, the foreign ministers do not really seem to feel ownership of the EUGS, nor do they regard it as driving the agenda of CFSP/CDSP. Consequently, the translation of the EUGS into more detailed sub-strategies and, finally, action, has been very uneven. If the area of defence has actually seen a lot of decisions adopted (which is not the same as saying that a lot of effective progress has been made), other areas have seen but very little follow-up. The EUGS also prioritized effective global governance, for example, but there has not been a systematic EU effort to defend and to deepen multilateralism, the nascent ‘alliance for multilateralism’ notwithstanding – and that is a Franco-German rather than an EU initiative. Nor has the EU acted on the call in the EUGS to promote cooperative regional orders, notably in the Gulf.

Furthermore, the FAC does not systematically and comprehensively address all crises and developments in areas considered a priority by the EUGS, even when the security of the EU is clearly at stake, because Member States are divided or do not consider that it is up to the EU to play a big role. Ever since the 2011 military intervention in Libya, for example, EU involvement with the security situation in the country has been rather hands-off, leaving a vacuum which other powers have filled. At the January 2020 Berlin conference on Libya the EU, with Germany in the lead, tried to regain the initiative, but to this day other powers are driving events on the ground. Even when an issue is on the agenda of the FAC, the need for unanimity can prevent the EU from acting resolutely, or even from acting at all. A prominent example was the tepid EU reaction when in 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favour of the Philippines and against China’s claims to the South China Sea. Although the EUGS defines upholding the rules-based order as a vital interest in itself, one or two Member States assumed a blocking position, and prevented the EU from doing more than ‘acknowledging’ the Court’s decision.⁷

Paradoxically, perhaps it is precisely because the Member States do not feel much ownership of EU grand strategy that the EU can produce a document like the EUGS in the first place. As Member States feel no obligation to let the EUGS determine the agenda of CFSP/CDSP, let alone their national foreign and defence policy agenda, they are less reticent (though certainly not entirely without reticence either) to accept a strategic document that makes some clear choices. Member States did not formally adopt the EUGS – the June 2016 European

⁷ *Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on the Award Rendered in the Arbitration Between the Republic of the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China* (Brussels, 15 July 2016).

Council only welcomed its presentation by the High Representative – and thus do not regard it as a document that is in any way binding upon them.

Member States are not the only ones to blame, though. In most of the economic dimension of EU grand strategy, and in some political and even security aspects as well, the Commission plays the main role. But many Commission directorates-general feel little enthusiasm to align their policies and activities with what most see as an ‘external’ document that does not concern them. And as in many instances the Commission controls the budget for its policies, there is little incentive for it to change its position.

This leaves the High Representative and his or her team, with the EEAS, as the only actor who fully owns the EUGS. The current incumbent, Josep Borrell, decided to continue with the 2016 EUGS rather than advocating for a strategic review. In 2020, Member States have decided to draft a Strategic Compass, but contrary to what its novel name might lead one to believe, this does not concern grand strategy. The Strategic Compass concerns only the CSDP and would thus be more aptly described as a security and defence strategy, or a politico-military strategy, which upon adoption (envisaged only for 2022) will be one of the sub-strategies of the EUGS. The EUGS will thus remain the EU’s grand strategic framework for at least the ongoing legislature (2019–2024).

4 A SYSTEM FOR STRATEGY

The question must be asked whether the EU can ever be a more systematic and consistent strategic player if ownership of its grand strategy is not shared more fully between the Member States, the Commission, and the High Representative and the EEAS. Some positive developments have occurred, however.

Pushed by the worsening Sino-American rivalry, which threatens to overshadow international politics in its entirety, Borrell and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen together have started to craft a grand strategic discourse. They are positioning the EU as an international player at the same level as the US and China, which even though it is much closer to the former than to the latter (so this is not a question of equidistance) is aligning with neither.⁸ Rather the EU seeks the capacity to always defend its own interests, and to maintain relations with other powers according to its own assessment, rather than becoming a battleground on which Sino-American rivalry plays out. In this context, the Commission is notably leveraging its internal competences with regard to the single market as well

⁸ J. Borrell, *The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU Should Deal with the US–China Competition* (Brussels, 27 Aug. 2020), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/84484/sinatra-doctrine-how-eu-should-deal-us%E2%80%93china-competition_en.

as its competence on trade to strengthen the position of the EU vis-à-vis the other powers – and it has been pushed in this direction by key Member States, in particular Germany and France. Introducing investment screening, for example, is a way of protecting the single market from unfair competition and from foreign presences that risk to become a platform for subversive activities. At the same time, it is a way of signalling to China that if it does not show more reciprocity in its economic relations with the EU, Brussels is quite capable of introducing further restrictions.

Member States' positions on future relations with both China and the US continue to vary significantly. Nevertheless, the externalization of the EU's internal instruments, by way of safeguarding the Union's economic position is also defining its overall strategic position, especially in relation to the great powers.⁹ And it has made the Commission into an active player in the realm of grand strategy – as von der Leyen envisaged when upon taking office she announced that her Commission would be a geopolitical one. The China strategy that the Commission and the High Representative jointly announced in 2019 exemplifies this evolution.¹⁰ Designating China a partner, competitor, and rival all at once, this strategy had a strong impact in Beijing, and has set the tone for the EU's China policy as well as for its position in Sino-American rivalry.

In the future, therefore, one might expect (and hope for) a much more permanently integrated external agenda between the Commission and the EEAS, driven by the President of the Commission and the Vice-President/High Representative, in the fields of foreign policy, economic relations, and even defence (in which the Commission is also becoming a key player through its newly established European Defence Fund). The President of the Commission could thus gain an overview of all three dimensions of EU grand strategy, and gradually assume the central driving role, with the High Representative as her right-hand man for diplomacy and defence. Naturally, the European Council also ought to come on board. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, could take the EUGS as a guide in order to stimulate the Member States and ensure that all of its priorities are systematically followed-up.

Perhaps, in order to support the two Presidents and the High Representative in this role, the EU needs a capacity for formulating strategic analysis and recommendations analogous to the National Security Council in the US. A single body that directly advised the President of the European Commission on

⁹ T. Gehrke, *What Could a Geoeconomic EU Look Like in 2020?*, Egmont Institute, Security Policy Brief No. 123 (Brussels, Feb. 2020).

¹⁰ *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook. Joint Communication by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council*, JOIN(2019) 5 final (Strasbourg, 12 Mar. 2019).

all aspects of external strategy would carry a lot more weight than the current fragmented advisory capacity within the system: the Strategic Policy Planning unit in the EEAS, the Commission President's IDEA unit (Inspire, Debate, Engage, and Accelerate Action), the EU Institute for Security Studies, and others.

5 CONCLUSION

The main handicap of the EU remains its intergovernmental nature in the field of diplomacy and defence: the need for unanimity will continue to hamper EU strategic actorness. Changing this does not require treaty change: Article 31 §3 of the Treaty on European Union, the 'passerelle clause', allows the European Council to extend decision-making by qualified majority-voting (QMV) to any area of the CFSP, with the exception (§4) of those with military or defence implications.¹¹ Apart from this legal obstacle, there is no objective reason why even the decision to deploy a military operation could not be taken by QMV. Only the decision whether or not to contribute troops to a specific operation must remain a national one, as long as those troops are on the payroll of the state: no government can be forced to put its citizens' lives at risk against its will. Very few Member States seem willing to make concrete steps in this direction, however, although some ostensibly are in favour. Unfortunately, the national sovereignty that most Member States cling to is but an illusion: on any issue of grand strategic significance, individual Member States have long lost the capacity to have any real impact. In the realm of grand strategy, the choice is not between national policy or an EU policy, but between acting together as EU or not acting at all.

There is one very 'simple' but necessary and effective step that the EU could take right away, however, and that is to systematize the review of the EUGS. It took the EU thirteen years to move from the ESS to the EUGS. Like every state with a sound strategic process, so the EU should update its grand strategy for each legislature. After the European elections, a strategic review should be conducted and a new edition of the EUGS published. While the EUGS 2016, after the 2019 elections, was not followed by an EUGS 2020 (the European elections take place in May and the Commission takes office in the autumn, so a new EUGS can realistically be expected in the spring of the next year), the EU should definitely envisage an EUGS 2025. In order to render the 'geopolitical', or perhaps better grand strategic, orientation of the Commission permanent,

¹¹ L. Schuette, *Should the EU Make Foreign Policy Decisions by Majority Voting?*, Centre for European Reform, Policy Brief (London, May 2019).

perhaps the next edition of the EUGS ought to be drafted under the aegis of the President of the Commission – only she or he has the remit to cover all dimensions of what an EU grand strategy should address. But rather than a lonely strategist, the President of the Commission would be the head of a strategic ‘Team Europe’.

