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EUROPE



What Europe badly needs is a "Grand Strategy"

Autumn 2009
 by Jolyon Howorth
 ★★★★★

The accelerating uncertainties of the last 20 years have yet to prompt a major strategic re-think by Europe's national governments, says Jolyon Howorth. He sets out the steps that must be taken if Europe is to adapt the changing world order and safeguard its interests

The world has been in furious flux since the fall of the Berlin Wall. A host of factors has driven it into this ever accelerating "fast forward mode": bipolarity's end, emerging powers, the first vestiges of a "post-Westphalian" system of international law and human security, more and more non-state actors, environmental politics on climate change and resource scarcities, regional regimes like the EU, AU, ASEAN and UNASUR and escalating demographic and migratory pressures, to name but a few.

Within this maelstrom, the EU has painstakingly developed the instruments of a definable security and defence policy (ESDP) based largely on crisis management. It may not correspond to what europhobes or even europhiles might like, but it is real, it functions, it is relatively effective and it is growing. Most commentators are agreed ESDP still has a long way to go before the EU can be considered to be a key actor on the international stage, but most also agree on what needs to be fixed: greater institutional and political integration, greater military and civilian capacity, more focused and appropriate resources, autonomous and reliable intelligence and better working relations with key partners.

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There have at the same time been growing calls for the EU to move beyond what is widely perceived as a reactive ad-hoc tactical response to global crises. The need is keenly felt for a more strategic approach, in which the Union's interests and objectives, values and identities, capabilities and capacities are proactively weighed. American international relations experts have long referred to such an approach as a "grand strategy", most succinctly defined by Yale historians John Gaddis and Paul Kennedy as "the calculated relationship between means and large ends".

Many Europeans, unused to thinking in terms of "large ends", may well feel that such an ambition is beyond the capacity of a Union which is currently struggling to re-define itself in the wake of the constitutional impasse, the global financial meltdown, enlargement fatigue, democratic deficits and all the other headaches. In any case, many believe, the EU's big beasts – particularly France, the UK, and to a lesser extent Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain – will continue to prioritise their national strategies and interests before those of the EU as a whole.

Nevertheless, there are five reasons why an EU grand strategy is becoming both urgent and indispensable. The first is that, in the unstable multi-polar world we are entering, the EU's assets are increasingly sparse. Demographic decline,

energy dependency, lack of key natural resources, geographical exiguity and lack of military clout are just some of the handicaps which hobble the Union. If member states deliberately add to that list political divisiveness, they might be suspected of having some sort of death-wish. Only a collective political approach to the rest of the world can to some extent compensate for these natural handicaps.

The second reason is that the world's other major players all act in a clear strategic way. The U.S. has always relied on a robust quadrennial statement of its strategic interests and objectives. China, Russia, India and Brazil are similarly pursuing clear-cut and long-term strategic goals. Even some of the second-tier rising powers such as Indonesia, South Africa and Australia are increasingly behaving like strategic players. Although the EU now possesses a "Security Strategy" document, this hardly amounts to a grand strategy. Yet precisely because the EU (unlike its main competitors and partners) is not a unitary nation state, it is even more urgent to develop a strategic approach. Why make do with a single European strategy if you can field five or six national ones? The answer is obvious: size matters.

The third reason why a grand strategy is needed is that historical events are moving with ever increasing speed, and the other global players are all negotiating multiple strategic partnerships with one another, based on perceived long-term interests. The EU talks a lot about strategic partnerships, but for the most part these are based on trade and economics rather than on politics or strategic vision.

Fourth, from a purely security perspective, the lessons of the past 10 years suggest that regional stabilisation and global governance will require a far more comprehensive, subtle and coordinated approach to the world's trouble spots than has been forthcoming to date. The overwhelmingly military response to crises which characterised the policy of most Great Powers between the treaty of Westphalia if the mid-17th century, which led to the concept of sovereign states and the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is increasingly perceived not simply as misguided but actually counter-productive. Stabilisation and reconstruction require, above all, the deployment of a vast range of governance and nation-building instruments that only the EU countries can collectively muster. No single EU member state can hope to change the world for the better, but together the EU 27 can

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Fifth, the apron-strings are no longer available. The most significant consequence of the end of the Cold War – the relative military disengagement of the U.S. from the European strategic space – dictates that Europeans, whether they like it or not, can no longer rely on Uncle Sam to bail them out. The opposite is in fact more likely. NATO was originally devised as an alliance for delivering American security guarantees to Europe, but it has gradually transmogrified into a body geared to delivering European support for U.S. global strategy. Europeans increasingly need to know what it is they are attempting to achieve, either in Europe or in the rest of the world. They cannot discover that if they remain at sixes and sevens, each trying to outdo the others in quasi-slavish – and sometimes semi-hostile – attitudes towards the U.S. More often than not, European objectives will probably mesh with American ones, and its strategic partnership with the U.S. will be the most important of all the EU's relation. But the formulation of European strategic objectives should follow European logic, and European logic alone. NATO's current problems derive from confused attempts on both sides of the Atlantic to pursue a “transatlantic strategic logic” which may quite simply not exist.

It is also time to recognise openly that among the current EU member states there are two very different visions of the Union itself. One sees the EU as a project that is explicitly political, with clear strategic objectives, that requires the application of serious political will, the designation of definitive borders and a discernible finalité. The other sees it as essentially a process that is primarily commercial and is explicitly apolitical, that is focused on regulatory frameworks and progressive enlargement, with no definitive borders and no sense of finalité. These two visions suggest very different readings of what an EU grand strategy might involve. Unless they can in some way be reconciled, the strategy may have to be implemented solely by those who belong to the former camp. Some argue strongly against “flexibility” in EU politico-institutional procedures on the grounds that only unanimity can produce real international influence. But time is not on the EU's side; the international environment is becoming more ominous by the day. In any case, Europe's founding fathers didn't wait until everybody came on board but steamed ahead with strategic lucidity and eventually the others jumped aboard the moving train. The same will happen with the shift to a genuine grand strategy.

So what might an EU grand strategy boil down to? There are four key enablers: the first is both political and procedural. It requires a minimal alignment of the principal EU actors around a single vision of what the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) actually amounts to. Those countries that perceive CFSP merely as a tactical facility to be resorted to if national strategies prove inadequate should be invited to settle for an “opt-out, opt-in” status with regard to CFSP. This would mean that those countries wishing to help the EU genuinely to speak and act with one voice can pursue CFSP unhindered by national obstructionists elsewhere. The latter can opt in, as constructive supporters, to initiatives undertaken by the core group with which they agree, and in practice this will happen with increasing regularity.

The second is strategic, in the strict sense. Last year, the UK, France and Germany all published national “security strategy” documents, and the extent to which national strategy was seen to be co-terminus with a collective European strategy varied enormously between the three. It would therefore seem logical, in the first instance, for these three countries to convene (preferably without media presence) a high level tri-partite conference to examine the extent to which they could agree on the contours of an EU “Strategic White Book”. Those contours would thereafter be discussed more widely within the EU framework to generate a clearly articulated EU strategic long-term vision – in other words, a grand strategy paper. This would clearly state a common appraisal of the medium to long-term term threats to the EU's collective security, sovereignty, way of life and territorial integrity, together with appropriate measures and instruments with which to respond, and also their inter-connectedness. This demands bold vision concerning the EU's direct partnership with (but also strategic autonomy from) the United States, lucid inputs to NATO's strategic concept process, and clear thinking on other strategic partnerships. If some member states wish to opt out of that process, they should be encouraged to do so.

The third requirement is institutional, and assumes that the institutional acquis of the Lisbon treaty can be fully, rapidly and optimally activated. Appointments to the key new institutional positions should be based on only three criteria: leadership qualities, political competence and strategic vision. In addition to the new institutions called for in the treaty, the EU will need some form of European Security Council, backed by an autonomous high level intelligence and strategic analysis service, a formal Council of Defence Ministers, a permanent high-level EU Defence College and a seriously upgraded European Defence Agency.

The fourth requirement is organisational and material. Beyond the institutional innovations already referred to new procedures will be essential to generate greater military and civilian capacities based on rationalisation, pooling, sharing, specialisation and best practice. The laborious bottom-up processes adopted so far have led to the virtual paralysis of all the capabilities improvement processes, and they must be replaced by top-down strategic guidance. Strategic implementation of permanent structured cooperation, geared to maximum inclusiveness, could help generate every last drop of EU capacity, even from countries with comparatively little to offer. Budgetary rationalisations rather than increases will be a necessary corollary. Fully equipped operational headquarters for both military and civilian operations, and above all for synergising them and integrating them effectively (the “comprehensive approach”) will be unavoidable.

Not a few people are likely to say that this is all cloud cuckoo-land, an impossible dream. But that would be to miss the fact that the world is changing fast and other players will not wait for the EU to sort out its internal problems. We are witnessing the start of a period of intense re-orientation and re-positioning of strategic resources around the globe. The world is being re-ordered in terms of relative power assets and the stakes are very high. The EU's assets in the traditional terms of natural resources, territory, demography, military force and so on are comparatively weak. The comparative advantages which allowed certain European nation-states to dominate international relations from the mid-16th century onwards (trading, banking, navigational, technological and military advances) had by the late 19th century already been overtaken by other factors. Europe has for over a century been living on historical capital. The creation of the EU was a visionary attempt to adapt to the new world order of the post-1945 world, and further adaptation to the very different world order emerging in the 21st century demands far-sighted strategic vision. Without it, the historical experiment that is the EU will progressively unravel.



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