

17 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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The European Union adopted its first European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003, at a time when, for the most part, a seemingly sustainable and favourable status quo had come to prevail in its neighbourhood. Against the backdrop of the post 9/11 environment, the Second Gulf War and revelations about Iran's clandestine nuclear programme, the main threats to Europe were identified as transnational terrorism, failed states, regional conflicts, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, along with organised crime emanating from the Western Balkans. Although many of these threats still persist, their nature, as well as the security environment that Europe is facing, has altered significantly since then. The new EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), should therefore be shaped by the changing nature of the security challenges facing the EU.

A transformed security landscape

In the wake of the 'Arab Spring' the security order in the Middle East, which was based on a balance of power structure that had remained virtually unaltered for decades, virtually imploded with

the partial or total collapse of the state structure in Syria, Iraq, Libya (and counting). The competition among different regional and global actors now manifests itself openly in the form of proxy wars. Furthermore, when the first ESS was drafted, what radical Islam signified for Europe was a distant Taliban-backed al-Qaeda presence in the Af-Pak area with some operational capabilities and affiliated cells abroad. Today, in addition to a multitude of jihadist organisations operating throughout the Middle East and North Africa, one major actor, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is struggling to establish a caliphate straddling across Syria, Iraq and Libya. In sum, the threats of transnational terrorism, failed states and regional conflicts that were spelled out in the 2003 ESS have become realities.

For Europe the repercussions have been manifold. For one, the conflicts, as well as the global jihadist movement and threat posed by the 'foreign fighters' phenomenon, are now much closer to Europe. As such, European states are directly exposed to the fall-out from these conflicts – refugees, domestic religious and political radicalisation, transnational

terrorism and returning foreign fighters, among others. Thus for Europe, human security issues are being transformed into homeland security issues. Europe must strategise policies, formulate responses and develop tools to tackle internal and external human security issues. The first fundamental conclusion to draw from these developments is that the EUGS has to revisit and re-order the list of perceived threats and recommended responses with an emphasis on the issue of human security.

The EU's eastern neighbourhood has had to contend with a resurgent Russia that has annexed parts of Georgia and Ukraine, and is now in direct confrontation with transatlantic interests in Syria. In order to assert its influence over its perceived hinterland, Russia has utilised its military, economic, energy, cyber and hybrid resources and capabilities. Russia's aggressive political and military posture presents a direct threat to EU member states in eastern Europe and the Baltics. Compared to the early years of the previous decade, the EU is now compelled to think more in terms of hard security and develop responses to the perceived threat from its large eastern neighbour which for the foreseeable future appears to be intent on consolidating its presence in the region.

A third observation regarding the EUGS relates to the requirements of budget austerity. European austerity measures enacted after the 2008 crisis, which included the lowering of defence budgets in many cases, have limited Europe's military capabilities. These binding constraints are leading European policymakers to re-assess the future role of Europe in managing global and regional conflicts. Therefore a renewed and more realistic 'job description' should guide the new strategy. Equally important will be the agreed content on the transatlantic alliance.

A new (trans)Atlanticism

Due to the challenges emanating along both its flanks, Europe finds its security interests converging with those of the US. This represents another divergence from the 2003 ESS which was drafted and reiterated amidst harsh criticism of Washington's unilateralism and military interventionism – most egregiously on display with the 2003 Iraq War. Thus strengthened transatlanticism should underpin the EU's strategic thinking; furthermore, this emphasis on an improved security relationship with the US and NATO is clearly likely to be more acceptable to European polities in light of the security developments of the last few years.

Bearing in mind the ambitious self-perception of the EU as a global actor that was articulated in the 2003 ESS, the sobering lesson since then has been that while the EU may play a leading role globally in some affairs (such as the push for clean energy) its capability to influence the security environment is limited. The Union therefore needs to recalibrate its ambitions and its mission statement. By focusing on a limited number of key areas, the EU may actually have a more tangible impact on global affairs.

By scaling down its self-appointed goals, Europe would not necessarily abandon its other ambitions. The EU may and should develop ways of relegating responsibility, collaborating with external actors and other international organisations, or simply promote ways in which its members may find arrangements to work on a given task without involving the entire Union in order to push for the fulfilment of its foreign policy and security agenda beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

