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ESS 2.0 – Establishing strategic hierarchy in Europe

The current debate within the European Union concerning the future of the European Security Strategy (ESS) is misleading. What the EU really needs is a conceptual hierarchy that helps it to develop and implement a strategic culture and identity. This would increase the EU's reliability as a global actor as well as consolidate security dialogues within the Union.

Europe in search of its strategic culture

When the Heads of State and Government of the EU member states approved the European Security Strategy (ESS) in December 2003 – a 21-page document, which had been prepared by Javier Solana and his Policy Unit at the Council General Secretariat – it was believed to be the initial event for the development of a genuine European strategic culture. For the first time the EU published a core document that defined major threats and challenges to European stability and security, as well as answers and solutions at hand to counter the identified hazards and which provided a long-term vision: “A safer Europe in a better world”.

But it turns out that proclaiming a more coherent, a more active and a more capable Union in terms of security and defence policy was more wishful thinking than preparation for concrete action. In reality the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in general and its implementation in particular are dominated by the individual interests of the 27 member states, a non-transparent and ineffective decision making process and the lack of political will from the member states to contribute to the difficult tasks. Moreover, there have been substantial changes in Europe's geo-strategic environment. Certain challenges have developed into real threats while at the same time new challenges have entered the stage. Experts as well as politicians therefore have been calling for a revision of the ESS, because the text no longer represents the reality of international relations. The objectives and means provided in the document are too abstract and leave too much room for interpretation. Even more importantly, the ESS lacks a prioritization of the main objectives and an assignment of clearly defined means to specific challenges.

Some of the aspects in the broader context of security are missing completely in the document. Although the security implications of climate change or energy dependence are mentioned, these aspects are still underestimated and not part of the paramount strategic framework. The same could be said about epidemics, poverty or ecological degradation. Thus, some of the challenges perceived as major risks to people and society are not fully acknowledged in the EU core document on security.

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But the real problem concerning the ESS is not the question of what and what not it should contain, but rather how it can enable and develop a sense of strategic culture and strategic dialogue. What do member states

and international partners expect from such a security strategy? There is no common idea of the objectives of the ESS within the Union. For some it is not ambitious enough, others criticise the militarized nature of the document. Indeed, the ESS is designed more like a guideline or an info-brochure for external partners of the EU than a strategy paper. Considering the basic EU documents and various reports by several EU bodies at hand a true strategic document in the field of security and defence policy would have to consist of the respective parts of the Lisbon Treaty dealing with the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which foster the profile as well as decision making structures of the EU on that field and introduce new forms of cooperation, relevant parts of the 2006 Long Term Vision (LTV) by the European Defence Agency (EDA), and certain aspects of a publication by the European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris from 2006 entitled “The new global puzzle – What world for the EU in 2025”. However, such an oddly assorted document still would not match the demands and objectives

linked to a strategic approach for defining and implementing political action adequate for contributing to stability and security on a global basis. The largest deficit of Europe's strategic culture is not to be found within the ESS, but rather in the non-existence of a conceptual hierarchy within Europe.

Nevertheless some member states in Europe have declared that they would prefer a revision of the implementation process of ESS than attempting to find an agreement on a whole new strategy document, which seems rather unrealistic to them. Therefore, it is expected that during the French EU Presidency of the second half of 2008 a set of new security documents will be published, which will add new aspects to the strategic debate. However, the ESS will more or less remain the same.

Preventing the EU from falling into the trap of unfulfilled high expectations

Although the need for an extensive revision of the ESS is obvious, the current debate more or less circles around the form of revision rather than the question of where on the multilevel architecture of strategy building and implementation the revised text or implementation guideline should stand.

There are two basic risks here for the EU concerning its credibility as a comprehensive international security actor. Firstly, international partners such as the United States might view the reluctance of some member states to draft a completely new security strategy as a sign of weakening support among EU member states toward fulfilling international obligations. This might lead to an overall reduction of the importance of CFSP and the Union as a whole for the international strategic approach towards crisis management and stabilization efforts. The moment the Union provokes scepticism over whether it is ready to step up to its obligations resulting from its economic power – a connection which has been stressed in the introduction of the ESS as well – international partners such as the United States or NATO might not take the political initiatives of the EU serious the next time urgent action is required.

Secondly, the danger of high unfulfilled expectations could lead to negative effects in relationship with the European public, as well. It would leave too much room for interpretation, also concerning the

strategic dialogue within the EU. The obvious gap between rhetoric and reality might question the EU's reliability as an actor in international security affairs. European citizens still would not have a distinct vision about how the EU will engage in global security.

Therefore, a mere review and increased efforts on implementation will not be sufficient to create a clear strategic framework for European security and defence policy. The ESS is on the one hand too abstract to serve as a pragmatic guideline for security measures and on the other hand too specific on several aspects to be a super-ordinated framework. Since the original ESS was adopted in 2003, twelve new countries have become EU members and the global security priorities and the fundamentals of a common European threat/risk perception have changed. The implementation process can only lead to a status report of the ESS follow-up documents. Neither any adjustment according to new challenges nor a higher level of conceptual clarity could be achieved thereby.

The need for conceptual hierarchy

The different and in some cases even diverging interpretations of the ESS and what to expect from the current revision process have to do with the lack of strategic culture in Europe. In order to define what should be in the document and what not, one needs to state first on which level of the strategic conceptual hierarchy it stands. One cannot define the deficits of the ESS if one is not capable of defining its relationship to other core documents such as existing strategies and political initiatives of the Union, for example the 2003 EU-strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD-Strategy), the EU Plan of Action on Combating Terrorism or the Draft European Pact on Immigration and Asylum. The same is true for the relationship of the ESS to those guidelines or doctrines, that the Union still lacks, e.g. a military doctrine or operational guidelines for civilian and military engagement. In addition to this, the multilevel structure of the EU creates papers and documents from various EU-institutions and -bodies, which need to interact with each other. This has led to some confusion and internal debates concerning the binding nature of nationally implementing European initiatives. This is not only the case regarding security and

defence issues. Another instance can be seen in the area of energy politics and global warming. Instead of an explicit top-level strategy on energy security and the security aspects of climate change, there exists a confusing set of proposals, action plans as well as green and white papers.

Prior to a new ESS or a new implementation process, the EU must therefore establish its own hierarchy of concepts in order to define and locate the strategies and their intent in an overall strategic approach, which deals with the complex and difficult task of responding to security challenges and risks on time and indentifying and implementing specific answers and solutions. Besides, flexibility on strategic threat and risk perception and necessary measures in response to them is given by the durability of the abstract document at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Thus long-term goals and values could remain untouched, while capacities, measures and geographic or thematic hot spots can be adjusted on a regular base.

Conceptual Hierarchy

What the EU therefore needs to establish is a hierarchical concept reaching from the big strategic overlook to focused and detailed political action. The introduction of four levels of ambition or aspiration could prove to be helpful for a future strategy development:

First, the EU might draft a document at grand strategic level, which could be named the European Globalization Strategy (EGS). Within this core document the Union could define its shared values and interests, such as effective multilateralism, good governance and the rule of law. The EGS should define the EU's role and profile in relationship to other international actors and organisations such as the United Nations, NATO, OSCE and WTO. Much of the current ESS could be introduced into this document, including the demand for a more active, more coherent and more capable Europe in terms of a broader international approach, not limited to traditional security or defence issues. It could also consist of principal statements concerning the use of force and the understanding of pre-emptive or proactive action. This document should be published under the authority of the new EU President when

the Lisbon Treaty comes into force and would be binding for the member states.

Second, a regular adjusted risk assessment report named the Quadrennial Risk Review (QRR), which could be published every four years. It should take a look at major dynamics on the international stage and analyse political, economic, ecologic and social developments affecting security and stability. The QRR could identify fields of primary interest to European action and also analyse changes in the geo-strategic environment that have occurred during the past four years. European actions could be evaluated and procedures for interventions or civilian/military missions adjusted to the new developments. The

QRR could be developed in a combined effort of the relevant bodies and agencies of the Council, e.g. the EUMC, the CivCom, the European Defence Agency or the European Union Institute for Security Studies in

Paris. It should be published under the authority of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy who will take office once the Lisbon Treaty enters into force.

Third, sub-strategies have to be introduced, which deal with specific policy fields and thus should be developed by the responsible Commission-DG or the Council Secretariat. Some of these already exist, e.g. the EU strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or the EU Strategic Energy Review. Others could be added, for example an ESDP-strategy. These sub-strategies would be prepared and approved within the Council. The sub-strategies, in contrast to the EGS and the QRR, would be more detailed and policy-oriented. The benefit of a structured strategic hierarchy would be the persistence of the paramount documents – the EGS and the QRR – while the sub-strategies could be adjusted to contemporary developments in international relations.

Fourth, the level of political action plans. Their objective would be to translate the sub-strategies into concrete political measures and a strict priority of action. They can include long-term targets and limited action on specific problems alike. As the general principles of EU action are defined in the supra-ordinated documents, more autonomy could be granted to the Commissioner in charge or the High Representative in devising these action plans.

This would, on the one hand, allow more flexibility and speed in responding to events on the international stage, while still assuring coherence with the leitmotifs of external action as formulated in the EGS and the QRR.

A new strategic culture

Of course such a conceptual hierarchy within a multi-level system as the European Union also demands a better way of coordination and consultation. This would relate to the objective of a more coherent European Union as it has already been stated in the ESS of 2003. Coherence must not only exist between the different levels of strategy documents, but also among different supranational and inter-governmental actors within the EU system. The two top-level documents could also stand as guidance for member states in bilateral action outside the EU context.

Next to the opportunity to revise the ESS, the idea of conceptual hierarchy provides several benefits. First of all the EU would become a more reliable actor in international affairs as the Union's partners would receive the possibility to understand what its motives for engagement are. Second, the EU finally would possess a comprehensive strategic framework that covers long-term commitments as well as guidelines for rapid response on various aspects of security.

Third, the member states would gain more clarity of what guides common action in different fields of policy – from migration to defence – and how national capacities and capabilities may be involved. And last but not least, citizens could see what the values and interests of the EU are and how much the Union already has become a security actor.

Conceptual hierarchy can be the nucleus of a new strategic culture in Europe. The EU has become one of the leading global security protagonists, more by chance than by intention. Now it has to come to terms with its strategic vision of comprehensive security and how the EU will be a part of it. The current development in the Caucasus, the question of missile defence for Europe, and issues such as energy-security demand the emancipation of Europe, not only rhetorically but also practically.

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