

A progressive European global strategy

Giovanni Grevi

>> The foreign ministers of Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden launched an informal reflection process on a 'European Global Strategy' (EGS) at the end of July. They entrusted four national think tanks with the implementation of the initiative. Almost a decade since the adoption of the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003, their purpose is to take a step forward and help define a broader agenda for Europe on the global stage. The process will entail an inclusive debate leading to the delivery of a report in May 2013, possibly paving the way for progress at the official level towards the adoption of a new EU strategic document. This contribution argues that the EGS initiative is a timely one notwithstanding the crisis testing the political resilience of the European Union (EU) and can help bolster the response to it with a new statement of purpose for the EU. It also calls for a progressive global strategy that aims to anticipate and shape change as opposed to resisting it and seeking to preserve the status quo.

THE CASE FOR RESOLVE

The EGS project starts at a time of serious political crisis within and outside the Union. The latter is facing an existential challenge. Its member states are struggling to define a new balance between political legitimacy and effective economic governance by pooling adequate shares of sovereignty while showing corresponding levels of solidarity. Beyond the EU, geopolitical instability is mounting from the vicinity of the Union to East Asia, while power grows more diffuse and responsibility for global public goods more dispersed. The crisis within the Union has been detracting focus and resources from pursuing common interests in a changing world.

HIGHLIGHTS

- At a time of political crisis, the EU needs a statement of purpose outlining its interests and priorities in a more competitive international environment.
- The EU should adopt a progressive global strategy aimed at co-shaping change with other global actors and avoiding the conflation of power transitions with power clashes.
- The EU strategic debate should overcome the sterile distinction between hard and soft power since the capacity to both attract and coerce will be critical to Europe's influence.

»»»»» To be sure, a strategic conversation cannot be extrapolated from the political and institutional context where it takes place. The crisis shows that there cannot be a strategic Europe abroad without a more cohesive Union at home. Politics is indivisible and all the more so when the going gets rough. The jury is out as to whether the EU will be able to overcome its current pains and will do so in one piece. But, faced with the danger of the EU unravelling, most European leaders have stated that failure is not an option. A realistic strategic conversation can and should accompany the arduous shaping of a new phase of integration.

Current adversities invite resolve. This is not about reiterating complacent slogans on Europe's past achievements but about starting a common assessment of the Union's purpose today and tomorrow. The political heritage of European integration holds great potential but it can only be suitably mobilised by setting this distinctive experience in the global context and looking ahead at upcoming challenges and opportunities.

The very pertinence and purpose of the EU in a polycentric, competitive international environment is the core question for the pan-European strategic conversation. The answer is not a given. Both EU citizens and the international partners of the Union openly ask what the EU is for and stands for. The EU needs a new statement of purpose, which would enable the identification and prioritisation of the common interests of a collective international actor. The Union needs a positive, inspirational message about its objectives on the global stage and not a reactive or defensive one. A message that builds on what the Union is and that says what the Union does, and should do.

STRATEGY IN CONTEXT

The question of the EU's pertinence and purpose in the world can only be addressed by setting strategy-making in context. This is where much discontinuity strikes the eye compared to the strategic environment of 2003, when the European Security Strategy (ESS) was produced. The difference in the

global context suggests new parameters for the strategic debate and helps to distinguish the ESS experience from the current process.

The 2003 ESS stood the test of time better than many other strategic documents as a list of key threats and an outline of the preventive, comprehensive and multilateral approach required to address them. While lacking in guidance for its implementation, it worked as a broad security concept. However, the ESS took the context as a given: it did not debate the endurance of the Western-led global order and was in fact largely directed to confirming Europe's usefulness in dealing with asymmetric threats therein. With some simplification, the ESS was a security strategy for a hegemonic world of deliberate threats by non-state actors.

Ten years on, following the rise of the BRICS and the global financial crisis, globalisation is fraying under economic imbalances, resource constraints and poor governance in fragile states and regions. The emerging world is a polycentric one where more and more diverse actors matter, and where different worldviews co-exist and compete. Power shifts present many of these actors with more options to pursue their interests. Conversely, deepening interdependence reinforces constraints on their room for manoeuvre, creating mutual vulnerabilities but also common interests.

The strategic environment is in flux and so are the power strategies of key actors, within a thick fabric of influential trans-national networks. The EU does not primarily need a new security strategy but a global one for a post-hegemonic world of diffused risks and creeping geo-strategic competition.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS, BUILDING DEALS

Strategy-making is set not only in a geo-political context but also in an intellectual one, which is less explicitly evoked but equally important. Starting a European strategic conversation offers the opportunity to scope the intellectual land-

scape as well, and challenge lingering assumptions. In particular, strategy-making in Europe should eschew two questionable assumptions. For one, the rather optimistic expectation that so-called rising powers would eventually subscribe to the liberal global order as we know and quite like it, with relatively minor adjustments, if anything for want of better options. John Ikenberry is an authoritative proponent of this position. For another, the gloomy anticipation that the growing competition of ideas and interests in a more diverse world would irredeemably lead to their clash, with ensuing mutual alienation, zero-sum calculations or outright conflict. Bob Kagan and Gideon Rachman, among others, have been warning about this danger.

This synthesis does not do justice to the depth of these two theses, but it is in their simplified form that they permeate the political debate. It is argued here that the space for EU strategy making

and for EU external action at large lies precisely between these two readings of ongoing change. In short, the first order purpose of the EU strategic debate and of its outcome should be to avoid the conflation of change and chaos,

difference and conflict, power transitions and a power clash. In each of these pairs, the former does not have to entail the latter.

De-linking change from conflict does not amount to denying tensions or neglecting crises but rather operating in a number of ways, drawing on the set of instruments available to the Union and its member states, to defuse them. Defusing tensions, from territorial disputes in the South China Sea to the Iranian nuclear issue, from frictions on exchange rates and capital flows to barriers to trade and investment, is the condition for defining new deals on these and other challenges. Seeking new deals does not mean

surrendering the EU's interests but rather seeking ways to enhancing them in a different world. This approach entails pursuing mutual gains by locking them in durable arrangements and not scrambling for short-term, relative gains vis-à-vis Europe's partners.

This sets a tall order for Europe's global ambitions but provides a viable ordering principle for Europe's global action. It responds to the pressing need for a political posture that does not reject but manages divergence to reduce it and deliver effective solutions. New deals, whether on mitigating climate change, managing resources or implementing the responsibility to protect, will not be achieved overnight and may not take the form of binding rules of universal application, not least given the number of state and non-state actors involved. But the practice of dealing with difference and diversity – a core dimension of the EU's own political experience – requires a clear identification of the EU's interests and of how to leverage the wide array of its tools to pursue them.

A PROGRESSIVE GLOBAL STRATEGY

Drawing up a European global strategy cannot be about preserving a given global order or simply defending Europe's interests therein. The only sure thing when looking ahead is that the status quo is not an option, whether in terms of balance of power or normative paradigms. Liberal interventionism is hotly contested in the rest of the world and no longer warmly embraced in the West either. State-led industrial policies openly challenge market-led growth models. Ways of kick-starting domestic growth are regarded by emerging powers as a better option to promote development than traditional Western development aid. A 'conservative' global strategy would be outdated before its adoption. The goal is not merely to protect but to define and enhance the interests of the Union in ways consistent with a shifting context by assessing and anticipating change. Europe needs a progressive global strategy.



Power is defined by purpose and not by the means by which it is exercised

»»»»» Contrary to what Lord Palmerston said, not all interests are permanent (aside from broadly defined ones such as security against aggression or safe trade routes). Values may well be permanent, or at least are subject to much longer timeframes for their evolution, but interests can change, as can their relative ranking on the priority list. For example, the US of course has a core interest in the free flow of energy supplies, including from the Gulf region. But if, due to shale gas and technological advances, the US was to become increasingly energy self-sufficient, would its interests in Middle East geopolitical dynamics and crises remain unaltered, relative for example to domestic priorities or investment in East Asia stability? Perhaps not. The interest of China and India in the stability of the Gulf region, where most of their growing oil imports come from, is correspondingly escalating, with political implications that require focus and may hold opportunities for cooperation. To take yet another example, it was widely (if implicitly) regarded as in the interest of the EU and its member states to accept the rule of authoritarian leaders in the Arab world and do business with them, not least in managing migration flows and countering violent Islamic radicalism. Such an interpretation of Europe's interests would be less popular today, after the Arab uprisings.

In other words, Europe's global strategy should be about shaping change, and not countering or denying it, in ways that are consistent with Europe's core values and evolving interests. The catchword is therefore not containing (unadvisable) or driving (unachievable) change, but co-shaping it with other influential state and non-state actors by seeking new deals, promoting the reform of the international order and initiating cooperation on specific issues or crises.

Pursuing a progressive global strategy is very difficult but not beyond reach. Two macro-factors seem to offer a window of opportunity. For one, while in relative decline, the EU and the US remain predominant across most dimensions of power and have kept the political initiative, for example in managing the fallout of the financial

crisis or in dealing with Iran. For another, the heterogeneous constellation of other emerged, emerging, restored or aspiring powers does not add up to an alternative bloc. Global re-ordering does not start from scratch. This decade offers a window of opportunity for the EU to seek negotiated solutions to controversial issues from a position of considerable influence by adjusting, not breaking, the rules of the game.

A LASTING BUT NIMBLE GLOBAL STRATEGY

As stressed above, the European strategic conversation cannot isolate itself from the political crisis that is shaking the Union but it cannot be entirely subsumed by the crisis either. It needs a sober assessment of what the EU and its member states are willing and able to do today but it must outline a purpose that goes beyond the current difficult conjuncture. What is needed is a global strategy of lasting relevance but nimble application.

The strategic reflection should take a long term look at current and emerging trends. Foresight should inform this exercise and provide knowledge on the key factors and actors shaping the world as it will be tomorrow and not just as it is today. For example, the rise of the BRICS is yesterday's story: what counts for the future are their growth patterns, domestic challenges, evolving political culture and consequent priorities on the international stage. The impact of the so-called 'third industrial revolution' and of new technologies will be critical to future geo-economic considerations and to shaping respective growth models, as well as to addressing the challenges of energy security and climate change, among others. Upcoming middle-powers or swing-states such as Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria can prove significant partners for engagement in shaping regional dynamics where diplomatic alignments are changing, from the Middle East to South East Asia but also sub-Saharan Africa. The European strategic debate should adequately

draw from the wealth of foresight studies by the public and the private sector, in Europe and well beyond, to avoid the trap of short-termism.

Any resulting European global strategy should be seen not just as a point of arrival but also as a point of departure: it should be a living document. Continuity in the broad strategic posture should be reconciled with the capacity to adjust the focus, sense of priority and policy mix of EU external action depending on needs. Strategic agility could be supported by envisaging a regular process of testing and reviewing the global strategy or parts of it, which could take the shape of a yearly Strategic Europe assessment.

**CONCLUSION:
POWER IS DEFINED BY PURPOSE**

This brief has argued that the first-order strategic purpose and interest of the EU is to avoid the conflation of change and conflict and to co-shape the ongoing transition of the international system by seeking new deals with other important actors. Such a purpose would define Europe as a global power and also guide how the Union exercises its

power. The strategic debate should overcome the sterile but widespread distinction between hard and soft power, that is between coercion and attraction, and even more so the mistaken identification of hard power with military means. Just like trade can be a pretty coercive tool, so military assets can provide confidence, reassurance or humanitarian relief.

Power is defined by purpose and not by the means by which it is exercised. It is self-evident that both hard and soft power tools and capabilities will be critical to Europe's effort to face global and regional challenges and foster its interests. While the policy mix will change depending on different issues, no prominent international actor can rely solely on one of these dimensions of power. The EU will not set an exception to this rule, and should plan accordingly in shaping the tools for its influence on the global stage.

Giovanni Grevi is acting director of FRIDE.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**