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# Does the EU Need a New Foreign Policy Strategy?

Daniel Keohane is convinced that the European Union needs to develop a new and cohesive foreign policy strategy. But what are the chances of this happening? Pretty slim, especially when you take into account the deep divisions that exist between France, Germany and the UK over defense priorities.

By Daniel Keohane for ISN

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The future success or failure of EU foreign policy will in large part depend on how the Union emerges from the current economic crisis. In many respects foreign policy starts at home. There can be no doubt that the EU's credibility on the world stage has been damaged by its sluggish response to the economic downturn, especially the Eurozone's economic travails. However, the Eurozone has not broken up; indeed there are currently some optimistic signs for future economic growth, partly because EU member-states have taken a number of steps to bind themselves closer together economically.

The EU's main international selling point is that it is the thickest form of regional integration in the world, predicated on peaceful inter-governmental cooperation. The EU shows that the force of law can overcome the law of force, and that cooperation can supersede competition. However, although it is unique, the EU is nevertheless a collective international actor in the making, not a super-state, and still depends on the ability of its member-states to agree and implement common decisions.

Looking to the future, therefore, the EU would benefit from devising a new foreign policy strategy for at least three reasons: its existing strategy is both outdated and too narrowly-focused to connect the full range of EU policies with external challenges; the world order is changing since economic power is rapidly shifting from the West to the rest; and the United States, Europe's oldest ally, is becoming less and less interested in European security at the very moment that Europe's neighbourhood is becoming more and more turbulent.

Plus, even if it emerges from the current economic crisis as a more integrated Union, the EU's collective weight in the world (let alone that of individual member-states) - in terms of economic output, scientific research, demography, and military spending - will continue to decrease relative to others, especially rising Asian powers such as China and India. For example, according to the [International Institute for Strategic Studies](#) in London, Asian defense spending surpassed European military expenditure in 2012. China's defense budget is expected to surpass NATO-Europe spending

before 2020 (and perhaps US spending by 2030).

The most obvious official document to consult, when trying to develop foreign policy priorities for the EU, is the [European Security Strategy](#) (ESS) of 2003 (and the 2008 [review of its implementation](#)). As its title suggests, the ESS is more a vision for international security than a broad foreign policy strategy, having identified five threats to European security: the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), terrorism, regional conflicts, state failure and organized crime. The 2008 review added three further challenges: cyber security, energy security and climate change.

Geographically speaking, the ESS is not short-sighted. It points out that security challenges in South and East Asia, such as North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, matter for Europe. But it adds that "even in an era of globalisation, geography is still important". The ESS further prioritises efforts to build security in Europe's neighborhood, which is listed as one of three strategic objectives in the 2003 document, along with addressing the security threats listed above and supporting an international order based on "effective multilateralism" – perhaps the phrase the ESS is best known for. This is not simply a question of values and of upholding international law; it is also in the EU's interest to support the development of global governance and regional organizations. However, the guidance contained in the 2003 ESS is weakest on how the EU should navigate a more multipolar world today, and on the geostrategic consequences of the rise of Asian powers for Europe.

Since it is now a decade old, many observers of EU foreign policy have called on EU governments to revise and update the ESS (see, for example, Sven Biscop's [Raiders of the Lost Art: Strategy-Making in Europe](#)). Some governments, such as France, have also called for an EU White Book to guide European defense policies (see, for example, [the 2013 French Livre Blanc on Defence and Security](#); and in 2004 the EU's foreign policy analysis agency, the [European Union Institute for Security Studies](#), published a proposal for a [European Defence White Paper](#)).

This year four EU governments – Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden – went further than proposing a new security strategy or defense white book, sponsoring four national think tanks to produce a [European Global Strategy](#) (EGS). The EGS is an excellent attempt at reconciling the full range of EU foreign policies, from trade, climate and development assistance to defense and security, with Europe's global and regional interests. However, the EGS proposal is unlikely to inspire a new formal EU foreign policy strategy document just yet. This is because, to use diplomatic parlance, 'the politics are not yet there'.

In particular, the big three countries, Britain, France and Germany, do not agree on their strategic outlooks for EU foreign policy, each currently having different priorities. In a nutshell, Paris supports the idea of a new EU strategy, but Berlin is unsure while London is against. These divisions are most visible over the military aspects of EU foreign policy – the most costly external action, both politically and financially. Even though they share similar military cultures, the UK has regularly blocked French attempts to bolster EU defense policy, such as a plan to create an EU operational headquarters during the French presidency of the EU in 2008, partly because of concerns it could undermine NATO.

France has flirted with teaming up with Germany to revive EU defense policy, but with little progress. For Germany the issue seems to be not so much the EU and/or NATO, but the use of military force. Even if it is one of the largest troop contributors to NATO peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo, it is no secret that Berlin is uncomfortable about using force to solve international problems. This split in Franco-German strategic cultures explains why, alongside its efforts to re-invigorate EU defense, Paris has vigorously pursued bi-lateral defense cooperation with London since 2010. In sum, France is caught between German reluctance to use force and British reluctance to use the EU.

These Franco-British-German divisions help explain why deeper EU political integration in the future,

as a result of further economic integration, may not result in a more strategic EU foreign policy. Even if the Eurozone became a more coherent political bloc within the EU, France and Germany (and/or others) may still not agree on foreign policy priorities, while European external actions would lack credibility without UK involvement (which seems extremely unlikely to join the Eurozone anytime soon). Unlike some other policy areas, EU diplomatic and military policies have to be agreed unanimously by the 28 governments, meaning each member-state has a veto, for instance over military deployments.

Given the political divisions, which seem currently unbridgeable, perhaps what is most missing at EU level is not a new strategy document, but an inter-governmental strategic debate. The good news is that EU heads-of-government may debate their strategic priorities as part of their planned discussions on EU defense policy at a summit in December – their first such discussion in eight years. EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, has already outlined Europe’s changing strategic environment in [her recent preparatory report on EU defense policy](#) for the December summit. And the President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, has indicated that he may include this subject in his report on [‘the state of defence in Europe’](#) for the 28 heads-of-government at the summit.

Van Rompuy’s report on defense in December could become a reference point for the next President of the European Council to hold an annual strategic debate with EU heads-of-government (the EU’s leadership will change during 2014). Having annual debates may not quickly lead to a new EU foreign policy strategy, but there is no hope of having a useful new document without such discussions. It is only through dialogue on their different strategic perspectives that EU governments can develop a better sense of their common European – not only national – interests; and only then can they develop a truly global strategy for EU foreign policy.

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Daniel Keohane is Research Director at FRIDE, which he joined in 2012.

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland