

Europe's Strategic Dilemmas*

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Resumo

Os Dilemas Estratégicos Europeus

O lento progresso no domínio da cooperação militar reflete um problema mais profundo: a ausência de uma cultura estratégica europeia partilhada. Paralelamente, a presença de constrangimentos em matéria de recursos imprime à Europa uma maior urgência para cooperar. Na última década, o ambiente no qual a Europa opera mudou radicalmente – mudança esta que a Europa não conseguiu acompanhar. A evolução dos acontecimentos veio comprometer os pressupostos nos quais a Estratégia Europeia de Segurança, acordada em 2003, se baseou. Os europeus carecem de uma nova estratégia global, necessitando de fazer escolhas sobre o nível a que pretendem influenciar e como. Uma ilustração da tendência europeia para evitar realizar escolhas complexas reside no conceito de “parcerias estratégicas” – o quadro europeu de referência conceptual de relacionamento com potências líderes no século XXI. Se algo resta da aspiração da UE para se afirmar como “potência normativa” este conceito deve refletir uma distinção de política externa entre democracias e não-democracias.

Abstract

The slow pace of progress in military co-operation reflects a deeper problem: the lack of a shared strategic culture in Europe. At the same time, resource constraints make it even more urgent than before for them to co-operate. Meanwhile, in the last decade the environment in which Europe operates has dramatically changed – and Europe has failed to catch up. In particular, developments have undermined six of the assumptions on which the first European Security Strategy (ESS), agreed in 2003, was based. Europeans therefore urgently need a new global strategy. They will need to make tough choices about where in the world they want to have influence and how. One striking illustration of Europe's tendency to avoid making such difficult choices is the concept of “strategic partnerships” – the EU's key conceptual framework for its relations with the leading powers of the twenty-first century. If anything is to remain of the EU's aspiration to be a “normative power”, it must distinguish in its foreign policy between democracies and non-democracies.

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At the European Council in December 2013, European leaders discussed defence for the first time since the euro crisis began in 2010. They agreed to fill capability gaps revealed by the 2011 military intervention in Libya (in particular “strategic enablers” such as drones, air-to-air refueling and satellite communication), to improve the co-ordination of defence planning and procurement, and to enhance the role of the European Commission on research on dual-use technologies¹. They also agreed to discuss defence again – and in particular to assess progress on what was agreed in December – in June 2015. In this sense, the summit was “a modest success” (Witney, 2013). But even these baby steps towards greater European coherence were on defence infrastructure rather than on actual military co-operation, where Europeans continue to make even slower progress.

The slow pace of progress in military co-operation reflects a deeper problem: the lack of a shared strategic culture in Europe. Nearly all EU member states have published some sort of national strategic document in the last decade. But a review of these documents by Olivier de France and Nick Witney (2013) showed a “cacophony” rather than a shared strategic culture. The basic problem is that Europeans disagree profoundly among themselves about what armed forces are for and when and how military force should be used. But without a common answer to these questions, it is difficult to decide what capabilities Europeans collectively need and on what basis they should take decisions about “pooling and sharing” – the initiative to integrate European military capabilities launched in 2010. In the absence of such a shared strategic understanding, decisions are taken on an ad hoc basis.

A striking illustration of the problem is the way defence cuts have been made since the crisis began. Nick Witney wrote in 2011 that such cuts had been made “strictly on a national basis, without any attempt at consultation or co-ordination within either NATO or the EU, and with no regard to the overall defence capability which will result from the sum of these national decisions.” He went on to say that “such autism suggests a fundamental lack of regard for any wider strategic context – and recalls the longstanding concerns about how much of European defence spending is wasted through unnecessary duplication, or through the pursuit of objectives that have little to do with the primary aim of equipping and supporting effective armed forces”(Witney, 2011).

Thus Europeans face two related problems. Firstly, there is a lack of a shared strategic culture in Europe that makes it difficult for member states to co-operate. Secondly, however, resource constraints make it even more urgent than before for them to co-operate. As other powers beyond Europe overtake them in terms of defence spen-

1 On the December European Council, see Biscop and Coelmont (2013).

ding, they now face a choice of pooling what capabilities they have – or losing them. These two problems alone make it necessary for Europeans to agree a global or grand strategy as the basis for a coherent, effective foreign policy. But there is also a third problem that makes it even more urgent for Europeans to agree such a strategy: in the last decade the environment in which Europe operates has dramatically changed – and, in part because of the first two problems, Europe has failed to catch up.

A New Global Environment

It is now a decade since European leaders, searching for common ground after the Iraq debacle, approved a European Security Strategy (ESS), which was prepared by the then High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana (Council of the European Union, 2003). Produced in the heyday of Europe's post-Cold War confidence, it began with the memorable statement that "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free". But Europe and its environment have changed dramatically in the last decade – not least since Europe was engulfed by the eurozone crisis in 2010. As a result, many of the approaches that worked well for Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War now look somewhat outdated. In particular, developments in the last decade have undermined six of the assumptions on which the ESS was based.

First, much of Europe's approach to its neighbourhood was based on the use of soft power. In the era of enlargement, the EU was able to use the appeal of membership to shape the policies of its near neighbours in central and south-eastern Europe. It can still occasionally apply this type of leverage with a handful of countries in the Western Balkans such as Serbia. The promise of closer ties to the EU may still have an impact on some other countries in the post-Soviet space such as Moldova, though recent events in Ukraine suggest even there Europe's power of attraction is waning. Meanwhile the EU has struggled to gain any comparable leverage over its neighbours in North Africa and the Middle East. Thus the EU needs to think about how its values can best be promoted at a time when it has lost its power of attraction and faces soft power competition in its neighbourhood.

Second, the EU has also had to recognise the limitations of its financial tools for shaping other societies – in particular aid. EU member states pride themselves on being collectively the world's greatest donors of development aid and remain willing to use economic access to the EU as a political tool. But although the EU still has some economic leverage over some of its eastern neighbours, it has much less in the Middle East and North Africa. Against the background of the crisis, member states have made big cuts in development aid. Even when the EU tries to use its aid and remaining economic strength to achieve explicitly political goals, other big-spending actors are able to undermine it. Whatever the moral and economic case for aid, it offers European governments diminishing political returns.

Third, “effective multilateralism” – the central concept in the ESS – is becoming harder to achieve in a neo-Westphalian world. Since 2003, Europeans have sought “effective multilateralism” above all through the United Nations but also international financial institutions such as the World Trade Organisation. But Europeans have been increasingly frustrated by the readiness of rising powers to use the UN and other global institutions as a means to counter Western ambitions. Non-Western powers have increasingly blocked initiatives on human rights in the General Assembly and Human Rights Council, and China and Russia have refused to co-operate on a series of first-order crises such as Syria. There has also been a global shift away from the idea of a “responsibility to protect” since the intervention in Libya. The EU should not give up on its multilateralist aspirations, but it may need to use other forums and find other ways to legitimate the use of force than the UN Security Council.

Fourth, the prolonged economic crisis has exacerbated cutbacks in military spending and led to an erosion of European military capabilities, which has undermined Europe's ability to deploy military force. Major sustained engagement such as many member states undertook in Afghanistan and Iraq in the previous decade is inconceivable in the foreseeable future and it is even doubtful whether Europeans will even be able to undertake short, sharp interventions such as those in Libya and Mali. On top of the cuts in spending that have reduced capabilities, European populations also seem to be increasingly reluctant to back an interventionist foreign policy involving the use of military force. European leaders will therefore have to think hard about alternative instruments for securing their increasingly unstable neighbourhood and about how to co-operate with other partners such as the African Union when military interventions are absolutely necessary.

Fifth, the Transatlantic relationship is changing as the US cuts its own defence budget and “rebalances” towards Asia. Under President Barack Obama, the US is already taking a low-cost approach to leadership². This means that, at a time when Europeans are themselves under greater pressure than ever before, they will be expected to take more responsibility for sorting out problems in their own neighbourhood. American readiness to join Europeans in confronting problems that is increasingly seen as primarily European rather than American concerns will depend upon whether it detects any greater willingness on Europe's part to put more into NATO, and to fend for itself where it reasonably can. Europeans will therefore have to develop their own capabilities and, in particular, the “strategic enablers” they will need to manage crises in their own backyard – and which the US was forced to supply in the Libya campaign.

2 See Mandelbaum (2010).

Sixth, the emergence of Asia as the new fulcrum of international politics will have huge implications for Europeans. Even as tensions have increased in East Asia, Europeans have “mainly tended to seek markets rather than enemies” in the region (Keohane, 2012: 46). But it is short sighted for Europeans to view Asia through an economic prism alone. It is highly improbable that any confrontation between China and the US would involve any direct European participation, though France insists that it has a “strategic stake” in the Asia-Pacific and the UK would presumably be indirectly implicated with the US in any conflict due to their intelligence partnership³. But Europeans would have to take some sort of political stance and it is conceivable that they could split over how to respond, which would be disastrous internally. Alternatively, they might collectively adopt a position of nervous neutralism, which would have huge implications for the transatlantic relationship⁴.

Difficult Choices

Since the end of World War II, Europeans have lived in a world of institutions shaped by them and their allies. But unless they update their strategic thinking, they will likely find themselves the object of global developments in the coming decades rather than able to shape them. In the process of such a strategic rethink, Europeans will need to make tough choices about where in the world they want to have influence and how. The shift in the global distribution of power from west to east and shrinking political and military resources mean that the time has passed, if it ever existed, in which Europe can have it all. Europe’s ability to shape a common, coherent strategy that it can follow in the years ahead will depend on its ability to face choices that do not just make strategic sense but also address tensions between its different interests.

Firstly, a global strategy will have to acknowledge that there will be tensions between normative, economic and security interests in each of the regions with which Europe engages. Europe has to co-operate with undemocratic regimes in the fields of energy, trade and security, and as power shifts away from the West, we can no longer assume we will have the leverage to demand political reform of all of our partners. But unless it is prepared to abandon its role as a normative actor, there will be difficult choices between European values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law and economic interests such as market access and investment – at least in the short term. The aim of a European strategy is precisely to make it easier for Europe to make these short-term choices in a smart way.

Secondly, geography and history mean that there are tensions between the national interests of different EU member states. Decisions about how to prioritise between

3 On France’s “strategic stake” in Asia, see Le Drian (2013).

4 For a longer discussion of such an eventuality, see Gowan and Kundnani (2014).

these national interests will not be easy, but they will need to be taken. Part of the answer may be for different member states to take more or less responsibility for different regions, but there is also a danger that member states could use such “special relationships” to pursue their own national interests rather than the European interest⁵. There are also resource implications: France’s intervention in Mali in 2013 was generally held to be in the European interest, but other member states did not offer resources to support it. Any European strategy must therefore go further in defining the relationship between member states’ national interests and the European interest.

Thirdly, and connected to the different national interests that member states have, there will be tensions between the various different regions in which Europe engages and the different roles it aspires to play in the world: some Europeans think globally, others think locally; some look east, others look south; some are Atlanticist, others are less so. There is a tendency to think that European interests around the world are complementary. A good example is paper published in May 2013 by four European think tanks at the behest of the Italian, Polish, Spanish and Swedish foreign ministries. It urged Europeans to focus on the “strategic neighbourhood”, which would in turn be the basis for global influence and strengthen the Transatlantic relationship (The European Global Strategy, 2013). In practice, however, there may be tensions and possibly trade-offs between Europe’s roles as a regional power, a global power and a transatlantic partner.

These tensions are part of the reason why some Europeans – in particular the E3 – are reluctant to prefer to focus on agreeing concrete deliverables. These member states worry that a broader Europe-wide discussion about grand strategy would be protracted and pointless. But it is precisely because of the tensions between different member state interests that it is necessary to agree a strategy. In particular, it is in the interests of France and the UK to engage in a broader debate about strategy because it is the only way to stop other less ambitious member states free riding. The alternative is for them to continue to pay for European security themselves – which, however, they cannot afford to. The dilemma was illustrated by President François Hollande’s somewhat desperate call at the end of last year for a defence fund to pay for military interventions such as those undertaken by France in Mali and the Central African Republic (Carnegy, 2013).

“Strategic Partnerships” and Democracy

One striking illustration of Europe’s lack of strategic coherence and in particular of its tendency to avoid making such difficult choices is the concept of “strategic part-

5 See for example Kundnani and Parello-Plesner (2012).

nerships” – the EU’s key conceptual framework for its relations with the leading powers of the twenty-first century. As Thomas Renard showed in a report that was published in 2011, there has been an inflationary and ad hoc use of the term since it was first applied to Russia in 1998 (Renard, 2011). The EU now calls 10 countries around the world – Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States – “strategic partners”. But, as Renard and others have pointed out, there is a complete absence of strategic rationale behind the use of the concept.

In particular, there is little logic to the choice of the 10 countries designated as “strategic partners” and no definition of what a “strategic partnership” is. Some European policymakers have suggested that a “strategic partner” is simply a country that has the power to damage Europe’s interests – and with whom it therefore has no choice but to engage. But there is little logic to the list of the EU’s 10 “strategic partners” even in this minimal sense. After all, some of the countries that Europeans worry most about – Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Ukraine – are missing from the list. Others have suggested that “strategic partners” are those with whom Europe co-operates in relation to third countries. But only the US really fits into this category. In short, the EU’s “strategic partnerships” are not very strategic.

In particular, it is unclear what role, if any, shared values are meant to play in the EU’s “strategic partnerships”. Since the revolutions in North Africa last year, Europeans have talked a lot about getting on the right side of history. For decades, European leaders had cozy relationships with autocratic rulers in the region such as Zine el-Abidine Ben-Ali and Hosni Mubarak, which were justified in the name of stability. But the Arab revolutions forced Europe to rethink this realist approach based on the idea that stability and reform in the Arab world were opposing principles. The European Union is now committed to supporting democratic transitions in post-revolutionary North Africa on the principle of “more for more”. However, there is little evidence that Europe is applying the lesson of the Arab revolutions in its other relationships and in particular in its “strategic partnerships” with non-democratic countries such as China.

It is hard to see how it is possible to have a *real* “strategic” relationship – in other words, a comprehensive, long-term relationship that involves co-operation in solving regional and global challenges and in particular on strategic issues – without some shared values. This, for example, is the basis of the relationship the EU has with the US – in many ways its only real “strategic partner”. It may also be possible to develop real strategic partnerships with other democracies such as Brazil, India and Japan. But among the EU’s 10 “strategic partners” are also authoritarian states such as China and Russia. This terminology suggests that our relationship with democracies is not qualitatively different from our relationship with authoritarian states.

Many Europeans like to think of the EU as a “normative power”. This term is based largely on the model of enlargement, through which the EU sought to transform applicant countries in central and south-eastern Europe and in the process spread its norms – for a long time, the only foreign policy that the EU had. But while some argue that the EU is in effect too normative in its neighbourhood, it does not seem to follow this transformative, values-based approach at all in its foreign policy in general and in its strategic partnerships in particular⁶. European leaders often say that, as Herman Van Rompuy recently put it, “history is on the side of democracy” (Van Rompuy, 2012). But our actions beyond the neighbourhood suggest that we don't really believe that promoting our values is in our long-term interests. If anything is to remain of the EU's idea of a values-based foreign policy, the EU must apply its normative approach to its “strategic partnerships” by including democracy in the way they are defined.

In particular, “strategic partnerships” – as opposed to tactical partnerships – must surely involve some degree of strategic trust. An alliance or security community is impossible without strategic trust, which is usually based on shared values. A “strategic partnership” is not an alliance. But if the term is to mean anything at all, it must be thought of as something between a formal alliance and the kind of ad hoc, anti-ideological engagement that all powers have to undertake with hostile or difficult powers regardless of whether or not they share values. In other words, a “strategic partnership” must be based on *some* degree of strategic trust, which it is hard – and perhaps impossible – to develop with an authoritarian state. China is perhaps the best example of this: is it possible to have a real “strategic partnership” with a country to which one cannot sell weapons?

Robert Kagan has suggested the idea of a “league of democracies” as a way of showing commitment to the democratic idea and “a means of pooling the resources of democratic nations to address a number of issues that cannot be addressed at the United Nations and eventually providing legitimacy for actions that democratic nations agree are legitimate”⁷. The idea is associated with Senator John McCain, who endorsed it in the 2008 presidential campaign, although it has also been supported by liberal figures such as Princeton professor and former State Department head of policy planning Anne-Marie Slaughter and current US ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder. However, it may be too crude an approach that could undermine the United Nations – despite Kagan's insistence that it would “complement, not replace” the UN and other existing organizations (Kagan, 2008a: 97).

The EU should therefore explore other ways of distinguishing in its foreign policy between democracies and non-democracies. It should distinguish, in substance and

6 See for example Leonard (2011).

7 See for example Kagan (2008b).

ideally also in name, between three types of “strategic partner”: first, real strategic partners such as the US and other NATO countries; second, democratic countries such as Brazil and India with whom a real strategic partnership could and should be developed; and third, non-democracies such as China, with whom we must nevertheless engage and co-operate. In practice, given that it would hardly be smart for the EU to downgrade its relationship with China, that means somehow upgrading its relationships with other countries with whom Europe believe we share values and in particular emerging democratic powers – above all, given their size and geopolitical significance, Brazil and India.

Conversely, if anything remains of the EU’s aspiration to be a “normative power”, there is a need to think about how to promote values with authoritarian powers such as China on whom Europeans are increasingly dependent for economic growth. Europe’s approach to values is increasingly declaratory. For example, human rights dialogues with China are increasingly pointless processes that achieve little in practice and alienate the Chinese. But, instead of thinking creatively about alternative approaches, many European policymakers seem increasingly inclined to abandon the promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law altogether. Instead, they simply hope that economic integration will gradually but automatically produce democratization – despite the apparent resilience of China’s authoritarian model. One alternative approach may be to co-operate more closely with democracies in Asia such as India and Japan on policy towards China.

Conclusion

In addition to the concrete steps on European defence co-operation agreed in December, the European Council also invited the High Representative, “in close cooperation with the Commission, to assess the impact of changes in the global environment, and to report to the Council in the course of 2015 on the challenges and opportunities arising for the Union, following consultations with the Member States” (European Council, 2013). Although the wording fell short of what some had hoped for, this one sentence in the Council conclusions could be an important first step towards the development of an updated European global strategy. Since Catherine Ashton’s five-year term as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will come to an end at the end of 2014, it will be for her successor to produce and present this assessment of “changes in the global environment”. Indeed, a vision for European strategy should be a key factor in the selection of the new High Representative.

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