EU Global Strategy: from design to implementation

Dick Zandee

It took a year to deliver it: the new Global Strategy to guide the European Union through an uncertain and challenging international environment. At the moment of delivery the European Council paid almost no attention to it: Brexit was dominating the agenda at the end of June. Nevertheless, the Global Strategy is important, although the real proof of the pudding will naturally lie in its implementation.

A year ago, in the summer of 2015, the EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini presented her assessment of the new international environment — a more connected, contested and complex world.[1] More connectivity through globalization offers opportunities and potential for economic growth, yet it also favors transnational crime, terrorism and trafficking — she wrote. The world is more contested as fragile states and ungoverned spaces are spreading. Particularly worrying for Europe is the instability in its neighborhood, from the East to the South but also further away in Asia. In an age of geopolitical power shifts and power diffusion the world is also becoming more complex. New players like China are on the rise. Increasingly a network of state, non-state, inter-state and transnational actors marks the diffusion of power. It became crystal clear: the changing environment was asking for a new strategy to replace the outdated 2003 European Security Strategy. The European Council acknowledged the call by the High Representative and tasked her to deliver an EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy by June 2016. She did this, but the EU Heads of State and Government had other problems on their minds: the Brexit vote and its consequences. They welcomed Mogherini's presentation — which took about ten minutes — and invited the High Representative, the European Commission and the member states "to take the work forward".[2] Not a very inspiring reaction by the Union's highest political decision-making level. However, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) is a fact[3] and the emphasis will now shift to its implementation. The questions to be answered in this article are: what are the main elements of the EUGS and which are the next steps to be taken, in particular in the area of security and defense?

The double Global Strategy

From the outset the High Representative made clear that the new strategy would deviate from its predecessor, the European Security Strategy of 2003 (updated in 2008). The so-called 'Solana Strategy' had become outdated, not only due to the changes in the security environment but also because it focused primarily on the security and defense aspects of the EU's external action. Two other major factors made a new update of the 2003(2008) European Security Strategy a non-option.

Firstly, the old distinction between the EU's external crisis management and internal security activities has become

outdated. Instability and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa (MENA) have a major impact on security inside Europe through spill-over effects such as migration, transnational crime and terrorism. Linking external and internal security policies and instruments is a necessity for countering these spill-over effects and at the same time for addressing their root causes outside Europe in a coherent manner. This linkage is already visible in counter-terrorism activities which take place inside but also outside Europe. The same principle applies to migration. Halting the massive flow of migrants across the Aegean and strengthening border security was high on the EU's agenda in early 2016. However, this has to be coupled with addressing the causes of migration. To a large extent this is related to ending conflicts and by stabilization efforts in order to start returning to fully functioning states. Syria and Libya are prime examples of how continued conflict and disorder is feeding human trafficking. Migration for economic reasons, for example from countries in West Africa, asks for other solutions, in particular by strengthening opportunities for the local labor markets.

Secondly, challenges to our security have become multi-dimensional or, in popular speak, today we face hybrid threats. Russia uses all available tools, from state-run propaganda to energy delivery blackmail and from 'little green men' to traditional military force in confronting the West. Geopolitics is back, but Moscow has widened the set of instruments to pursue its objectives. The response to hybrid threats had to be hybrid as well. Simply strengthening military capacities — as important as it is — will not be enough. All available tools have to be brought together in a joined-up approach. As the EU, contrary to NATO, has a wide set of responsibilities across all government sectors, this requires a much wider strategy. At the same time, it has important consequences for the EU-NATO relationship, which needs to be adapted to the new security environment. This has been recognized. The common statement by the EU and NATO leaders at the alliance's Warsaw Summit in early July has opened the door to a more structural partnership in dealing with new security challenges.

The successor to the 2003 European Security Strategy reflects both the changed environment and the need to respond with a wide set of tools. It is 'double global': in terms of geography as wells as thematically. The European neighborhood — to the East and to the South — are of

Refugees in the Mediterranean. A new update of the 2003(2008) European Security Strategy was a non-option, because the old distinction between the EU's external crisis management and internal security activities has become outdated. For example, foreign conflicts impact European security through spill-over consequences such as the migration crisis (photo: Wikimedia/Ggia)

prime concern to the EU. But instability and conflict in Asia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean will have an effect on European security as well, in particular as sea lines of communication — key to maritime trade flows — might be interrupted. Global challenges can also be defined as 'stemming from anywhere'. Cyber threats are non-geographic by nature; they can come from any place in the world and hit any corner on the planet. Climate change is also a global phenomenon. Large international criminal networks operate around the globe. All of this implies a 'second global' element: the EU will have to respond by applying its full set of instruments. For that reason the Global Strategy refers not only to the security and defense sector but also to neighborhood, migration and energy policies, to strengthen cooperative frameworks in Asia or the Arctic and to transform global governance institutions such as the United Nations. In particular, close ties with the United States and Canada as well as the partnership with NATO are key in this respect. Naturally, the application of instruments will have to be tailor-made, depending on the situation at hand. But the essence of the Global Strategy is to bring soft and hard power instruments together in a joined up approach and to recognize that the EU has a particular role to play as a security provider in the near abroad and further away.

The essence of the EUGS is to bring soft and hard power instruments together

Implementation

The EUGS has to be translated into action — no doubt a more difficult task as diverging interests of member states and the issue of resources will come to the fore. The High Representative will present a plan of action with timetables after the 2016 summer break, covering several areas — one of them being security and defense.

Such an action plan or Security and Defence Strategy (SDS) will have to deal with at least three components: (i) ambition level and tasks; (ii) capabilities; and (iii) tools and instruments needed for more commitment by member states. During the Netherlands EU Presidency in the first semester of 2016 these topics and others were discussed in a series of seminars which the Clingendael Institute organized together with the Dutch Ministry of Defense. These informal gatherings took place before the Brexit vote, but nevertheless they resulted in the identification of the main elements of a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) White Book as it was called at the time.

Ambition level and tasks

The existing ambition level and the CSDP Petersberg tasks stem from a different era. The changed security environment asks for review and adjustment, taking into account both the changing nature of crisis management operations as well as the impact of the external-internal security nexus. Preferably, a new ambition level should not be expressed immediately in numbers of military to be deployed but rather in the sorts and types of operations the EU has to be able to conduct. It will be unavoidable to redefine the Petersberg tasks as they no longer reflect all the different types of operations which the EU is conducting today and might be carrying out in the future.

Clearly, in addition to external crisis management, CSDP has to play a role 'in the defence of Europe', both in response to hybrid threats from the East as well as to the spill-over effects of the conflicts to the South. In particular, a structural CSDP contribution to border security will be required. The mutual assistance clause (Art. 42.7), already activated by France, could also imply a role for CSDP inside EU territory while recognizing that it would imply a Treaty change. Once tasks have been defined, ambition levels can be identified, including for operations in the full spectrum. Ambition levels should be realistic for near-term implementation and could be more ambitious in terms of a long-term goal.

Dutch soldiers prepare for European Battlegroup Certification. Hybrid threats also demand military responses, and the CSDP could contribute, e.g. by the deployment of EU Battlegroups to the non-NATO members Sweden and Finland (photo: Wikimedia/Franklin Moore)

Capabilities

Addressing the existing shortfalls in areas such as intelligence and strategic reconnaissance, enablers for expeditionary operations, precision munitions, the protection of forces and securing sea lines of communication continues to be relevant. However, the new CSDP requires additional efforts and a shift in priority. Firstly, hybrid threats also demand military responses. CSDP could contribute, e.g. by the deployment of EU Battlegroups to the non-NATO members Sweden and Finland or by assisting the Baltic States in reinforcing their internal security, in particular through paramilitary forces (gendarmerie) — upon their request.

Second, for (external) crisis management the EU should be able to cover the whole spectrum from stabilization, training and assistance to intervention operations, when needed at the high end of the spectrum. For autonomous full spectrum operations in the near term the EU should aim for a brigade-size force, with adequate sea and air elements as required. Border security-related tasks will increase the need for smaller vessels, surveillance assets (space and air-based) and border guard personnel. But a fresh look at naval (and air) capabilities high in the spectrum is also required in view of the increasing anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) threats. Clearly, such autonomous European capabilities will not be realized overnight, but related capability goals should be defined as early as possible in view of long-term planning cycles.

Tools and instruments

Political will remains the key factor to deepen European defense cooperation — which continues to be a must as no single state can operate without others anymore. However, new tools and instruments are also needed to transfer political will — expressed in Declarations and Council Conclusions — to real capability improvement. So far, the principle of voluntarism has provided an escape route for doing too little. A step-change is needed in order to move into the direction of more accountability and commitment. Transparency on long-term defense

The European Council after the UK referendum. The British vote to leave the EU can open the door to a real strengthening of the CSDP and deeper defense cooperation in the EU, according to the author (photo: Flickr/European External Action Service)

and procurement plans will be the first requirement. But sharing plans is not enough. The SDS should define a new system, based on monitoring, assessment and accountability of the member states' efforts to solve capability shortfalls and to deepen European defense cooperation. Such a system could be developed over time with data collection and assessment authority gradually shifting to the European Defence Agency. It could start with Defense Ministers challenging each other annually (ministerial peer pressure) via a more structured and obligatory assessment based on EDA documentation per country (political assessment) to a European Semester-like accountability in the long-term. Benchmarks for collaborative investment should receive more political attention. Other ways of financing defense expenditure through the Union budget should be fully explored. In particular a sizeable Defense Research Program in the post-Horizon 2020 framework is needed.

These ideas and proposals for an SDS — presented in more detail in a report[4] — do not represent consensus among the EU member states. They are the result of informal discussions during the Netherlands EU Presidency aimed at exploring potential for an SDS. The real work is yet to start.

Brexit and the way forward

The British vote to leave the EU can open the door to a real strengthening of the CSDP and deeper defense cooperation in the EU. Without the blocking position of London other capitals would now be able to make more progress. On the other hand, diverging security interests — in particular between the 'Eastern' and 'Southern' member states — are likely to hamper progress on security and defense in the EU. Therefore, operating with smaller groups of countries still seems the best way forward, either inside or outside the EU context. Deepening defense cooperation in already existing bilateral and sub-regional clusters (outside the EU and NATO context) will certainly continue. This also offers opportunities to keep the United Kingdom 'in Europe' in the security and defense area. The Franco-British Lancaster House defense cooperation and the construction of multinational cooperation models such as the Joint Expeditionary Force will continue.

Brexit can open the door to a real strengthening of CSDP

For the EU the question is now if a good design — the EUGS — can be turned into action. Time is a critical factor. It took a year to elaborate the EUGS. Taking one more year for developing the SDS will be very risky as the political agendas in 2017 will be dominated by negotiating the details of Brexit and by national elections in several EU countries including France and Germany. EU Foreign Affairs Ministers had a first exchange of ideas on 18 July. The High Representative will present a plan with a timetable and proposals, most probably soon after the summer break. Defense Ministers will be involved during their informal meeting, to take place late September in Slovakia. By then, three months will have been lost since the June European Council. Also taking into account that the European Commission intends to publish its Defence Action Plan in the second half of 2016, there will be little time left for developing the SDS. Separating the two documents would be the wrong signal as the Commission's defense activities will have to be capability-driven. A huge responsibility lies on the shoulders of Federica Mogherini and the member states who have to be involved very closely in the elaboration of the SDS.

Dick Zandee is a senior research fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Foreign Relations 'Clingendael'. A shorter version of this article has been published in the Newsletter of the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) in late July 2016.

Would you like to react?
Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

1. *The European Union in a changing global environment – A more connected, contested and complex world.*
2. *European Council meeting (28 June 2016) – Conclusions,* EUCO 26/16, Brussels, 28 June 2016.
3. *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy,* June 2016.
4. Margriet Drent, Lennart Landman, Dick Zandee, *A New Strategy – Implications for CSDP,* Clingendael Report, June 2016. At the time of writing the report the term 'White Book' was still being used.