The European Council's "Strategic Agenda": an Agenda, Maybe, but not Strategic

JOLYON HOWORTH, JUL 16 2014

At the meeting of the European Union (EU) heads of state and government on 26/27 June 2014, a paper was adopted which bore the grandiose title of "Strategic Agenda for the Union in Times of Change". It announced five "overarching priorities" for the next five years: stronger economies and jobs; societies enabled to empower and protect; a secure energy and climate future; a trusted area of fundamental freedoms; and effective joint action in the world. The document has already been subjected to a robust overall critical analysis (Emmanouilidis 2014) and this article will focus only on the final section – the EU's foreign and security policy. That section notes that the strategic and geopolitical environment has become "fast-shifting", particularly in the EU's southern and eastern hinterland, and offers four policy prescriptions, which I shall address shortly. However, the fundamental flaw in this section of the "Strategic Agenda" is that there is, in effect, no sign of a strategy. If strategy is neatly defined as "the calculated relationship between means and large ends" (Brady Johnson 2014), it is notable that there is absolutely no reference to the former, and that the latter is reduced to the defence of the EU's interests and values and the protection of its citizens. There is neither any attempt to understand the nature of the contemporary world (a world of power transition) nor to conceptualize the EU's potential role in that shifting global order.

The EU regularly prides itself on being a "global actor". The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) stated that "Europe should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world". It went on to boast that "European forces have been deployed abroad to places as distant as Afghanistan, East Timor and the DRC". It did not add the key detail that only in the latter had those forces been deployed *under the EU flag.* The 2014 document refers to security and defence "commitments and responsibilities across the world". But the image purveyed by the EU is misleading. Of the thirty-seven missions recorded by ISIS-Europe as having been launched under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (ISIS Europe 2014), no fewer than seven have been in the former Yugoslavia (i.e. *inside* the EU's own external borders), and twenty in Africa. Of the remaining ten, five have been on the EU's Eastern border (three in Georgia and two in Moldova and/or Ukraine). Any objective or realistic geographical analysis of these missions would have to conclude that the overwhelming majority of them have been in the EU's neighbourhood. To this extent, it is clear that the EU is a *regional* actor, but one which frames regional conflicts and destabilisation in a broader globalising context. This needed saying in order to avoid illusions, and yet, even in the neighbourhood, as the Arab Spring and the recent crises in Ukraine make clear, the EU has neither a strategy nor even an effective policy.

The first "priority" enunciated in the "Strategic Agenda" paper is to "maximise our clout", by improving coordination "between the main fields of EU external action such as trade, energy, justice and home affairs, development and economic policy". This is akin to a formal statement from the Vatican that the Catholic Church opposes sin. The European External Action Service (EEAS) was created, in large part, precisely in order to enhance such synergies, and yet it is not mentioned in this paper as a vehicle for promoting cohesion. It has long been an item of faith in EU statements on external policy coordination that defence and development should be seen as two sides of the same coin. Yet there has never been any serious attempt to operationalize this approach (Carbone 2013). The inclusion of "justice and home affairs" as an *external* policy agent appears to refer to the current crisis of migratory policy that has been exacerbated by the Arab Spring and the chaos in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. On 1 July 2014, this became a major priority of the Italian presidency of the EU (New York Times 2014). Yet joined-up policy between

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and among member states in this policy area, far from making progress, has recently been unravelling, thereby undermining "the very foundations of cooperation and solidarity" in migratory policy (Henry & Pastore 2014).

The second priority is to "be a strong partner in our neighbourhood [by] promoting prosperity, stability and democracy" in the hinterland. Unfortunately, as recent events have demonstrated, the much-touted European Neighbourhood Policy is in tatters, its two component parts – the Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership – having demonstrated their virtual irrelevance to the course of events in both geographical areas throughout the escalating crises of recent years (Echagüeet al 2011; Perthes 2011; Lehne 2014; MacFarlane & Menon 2014). Any remotely constructive EU "strategy" for dealing with the neighbourhood must begin by recognizing these egregious past failings. The "Strategic Agenda" paper appears, on the contrary, to imply that more of the same will do the trick.

The third stated priority is to "engage our global strategic partners" on a vast range of issues "from trade and cyber security to human rights and conflict prevention, to non-proliferation and crisis management", both bilaterally and in multilateral fora. This is less a strategic priority than a statement of international wishful thinking. Once again, the Council paper implies that the EU currently *has* a policy towards its "global partners", blithely ignoring a significant body of recent critical analysis suggesting, to the contrary, that it desperately needs to develop one (Renard 2012; Sautenet 2013). Moreover, the section on strategic partners rather undermines its own global logic by highlighting the need to prioritize the *transatlantic* partnership. One major challenge for the EU – that of deciding how it should manage the relationship between its approach, on the one hand, to China, India, Brazil, etc., and, on the other hand, to the US – is thus sidestepped (Menon 2014).

The final "priority" is to "develop security and defence cooperation". The means to this end are listed as "strengthening the CSDP in full complementarity with NATO", developing military and civilian capacity, and a stronger European defence industry. This amounts not to a strategic agenda, but to a simple statement of just a few of the enormous challenges currently facing the EU in this crucial policy area. It is increasingly widely recognized that CSDP is in a state of existential crisis (Howorth 2014; Gnesotto 2014). There is a desperate need for core leadership, for strategic vision, for enhanced and appropriate *usable* capacity, for a radical new approach to CSDP's relationship with NATO, for an answer to the constant and increasingly urgent pleas from Washington for the EU to step up to the plate and assume its responsibility for the management and stabilisation of its neighbourhood. The EU's member states remain deeply divided over key issues such as the meaning of CSDP "autonomy" vis-à-vis NATO and the US; over the desirable balance between military and civilian priorities in CSDP missions; over the very range and ambition of those missions; over financing, procurement, and collective defence; and above all, over strategic vision. To state that the Union needs to "develop cooperation" on these issues is an extreme example of both litotes and struthiousness.

If the "Strategic Agenda" is the result of a lowest common denominator word-processing exercise from within the Council Secretariat, the banal generation of a form of words with which no member state could possibly disagree, then it serves no useful purpose. There is not a single idea in the paper, indeed hardly a single word, that has not been heard hundreds of times over the past quarter century. As a roadmap for the next five years, it differs in no way from any number of similar documents produced through similar word-processing procedures in recent decades. If, however, it is intended as a serious contribution to a strategic discussion the EU can no longer afford not to have, it suggests that the road ahead will be longer and more fraught than even the EU's harshest critics have feared (Laqueur 2012; Soros 2014; Zielonka 2014). The challenges facing Europe – as an international actor – derive largely from the ill-defined core purpose of this policy area, and from the increasingly illogical and unworkable structural and political relationship between CSDP and NATO. The problem remains fundamentally *political.* It is also strategic in the sense that the world around the EU is changing rapidly – and not for the better. Unless and until the EU's member states acquire a firm grasp of the processes of power transition that are taking place not only in their immediate neighbourhood but around the globe, and unless they make a resolute collective decision to become actors in those processes rather than bystanders or spectators, CSDP will continue to remain a work in progress which still has a very long way to go.

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