Beyond the EU's Global Strategy

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Federica Mogherini presented the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) to the European Council last June just days after the referendum on Brexit. In the preceding months the issue of Brexit had attracted widespread attention and, as a result, the discussion on the Strategy had less public impact than it would have had in normal times. When the outcome of the referendum was known, it was even suggested to postpone the presentation of the Strategy to a more propitious time. The High Representative and the President of the European Council finally decided to carry on with the presentation, as a sign of normality despite the shock suffered. However, from the outset it was unclear to which extent the Strategy’s validity or relevance would be affected by the departure of Britain from the EU, since the document had been drawn up for a Union of 28, and the United Kingdom is one of the EU member States with more external influence.

That said, however, the changing international context, and in particular the arrival of a new Administration to the White House, could eventually have a greater impact than Brexit on the validity of the Strategy. The re-evaluation by the US of its international posture may indeed require an update of the EU external position in at least two areas.

**Security and Defense**

It should be noted from the outset that the EUGS is a security strategy, but not a defense strategy. The concept of “strategic autonomy” introduced and wielded by the EUGS means that the Union must be able to protect itself, respond to external shocks and help fragile third parties to acquire security skills in a complementary, non-competitive way, with NATO. However, this capacity for self-protection does not refer primarily in the EUGS to armed response, but rather to others areas such as cybersecurity, hybrid threats, energy security, strategic communication or the fight against organized crime and terrorism. The EUGS focusses on the development of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), ie on civilian and military crisis management. It also addresses the development of military capacities by Member States, and of an industrial base for this purpose, and mentions (in a somewhat elliptical way) the Treaties’ mutual assistance clause in the event of an armed attack. But it does not contain a true defense strategy for the EU, and refers rather to the possibility of using the aforementioned capabilities in different settings, and in particular within the NATO framework.

In this context, the inauguration of a new President in the US has consequences in least four parameters of the European defense equation.

In the first place, there seems to be a perceptible American will to be less confrontational than in the past towards Russia. Although the crisis triggered by the bombing of the Syrian base of al-Shayrat has shown that there are limits to this rapprochement, the way the crisis has been resolved, including President Trump indicating (via Twitter) that “everything is going to go well between the USA and Russia” shows a clear desire for distension. This distention can be considered good news in general terms, but it poses doubts to NATO members closest to the Russian border. In short, and paradoxically, the distention outside NATO can lead to tensions within, with potential implications for EU’s security approach.

Secondly, the new President has called on NATO (and its European allies) to modernize and pay greater attention to the fight against terrorism (a field in which, by the way, the Atlantic Alliance has played a relevant role, particularly in Afghanistan). This demand seems to be in line with the idea of an Alliance with a 360° approach, that is, which pays sufficient attention to its southern flank (but avoids assimilating the South exclusively to terrorist threats).

Thirdly, the way in which the new President has taken up the demand of his predecessors that European NATO allies assume a greater proportion of the budgetary burden in the
defense of the continent has generated some initial alarm about the degree of US commitment with European defense. However, this demand is nothing new, and the EUGS itself seems to recognize its validity by pointing out that a more credible European defense is also essential to preserve a healthy relationship with the US. In quantitative terms, it translates into reaching the target agreed at the Wales NATO Summit on nationally spending 2% of GDP in Defense in 2024 (although in its remarks the new President seems to consider that this commitment would have a retroactive effect). European countries generally recognize the legitimacy of the US request for greater commitment, but demand consideration to their contribution to security beyond defense itself, through its stabilization and development policies in potential or actual conflict zones. It is also argued that European Nations do not need more, but better spending, that is, that they should overcome the current situation of fragmentation and duplication of forces and capabilities, spend more on equipment and less in personnel or increasing research and technological development funds. In any case, assuming a gradual increase in defense spending in line with the Wales commitment, this should call for an in-depth debate in Europe on the allocation of that additional expenditure (developing European capabilities to deploy crisis management missions abroad, reinforcing its territorial defense, etc. ...).

Fourthly, the recent US bombings in Syria and Afghanistan, the new President’s statements regarding North Korea (“if China doesn’t help, we will solve the problem without them”) and its desire to significantly increase the already high American spending on defense, suggest a greater US predisposition to the use of force than during the previous presidency. The European reaction to the bombing of the Syrian air base has been supportive. However, other more complex scenarios are conceivable, and the memory of the European internal crisis following the invasion of Iraq is still fresh enough to alert us to the importance of maintaining intra-European and transatlantic unity. In any case, the potential scenarios are not necessarily divisive. For example, in an interdependent and interconnected world, there may be room for further cooperation between the US and Europe on security in Asia, with potential positive effects in the transatlantic security relations, which would be perceived by the US as more truly bilateral.

In short, the EUGS is an important starting point for the development of the CSDP (as the conclusions of the March 6 Foreign Affairs Council ultimately show). However, in tackling the current security context, the concept of “strategic autonomy” provided by the EUGS does not seem to be sufficient, and a process of strategic reflection within the EU that incorporates more fully the defense dimension is needed.

**Whole foreign action**

The other area in which the new international context may have an impact on the EU Global Strategy is its scope, which might need to be widened.

Although it is still taking its initial steps, there is a tendency in the new US Administration to withdraw on issues such as support for multilateralism, the fight against climate change, international response to the refugee situation, development cooperation, the protection and promotion of human rights or support for rules-based free trade, all areas in which the EU has a high profile.

Despite this prominent profile, these areas are beyond the core of the EUGS, which is a security strategy more than an external action strategy. When the Strategy was being drafted there was a discussion on whether it should have covered all the external dimensions of the Union (cooperation, trade, climate change, etc.), or whether it should have been limited, like the previous 2003 Strategy, to security aspects. Finally, the latter approach prevailed, although the Strategy tries to integrate the security dimensions of the other aspects of external action.

However, in the light of the new international outlook described, EU action may be more necessary than ever in areas such as combating climate change, development cooperation, international rules-based trade, human
It is therefore worth considering whether, beyond the Global Strategy, the EU would not benefit from a comprehensive external strategy, which would recall how much the Union does in those areas and what it aspires to do in the future. This could help the Union to overcome its image as a passive subject of international relations and recall that, since its foundation, with the consolidation of peace in Europe, it has been contributing to building a positive values-based international order. By vindicating its achievements and aspirations in these areas, the EU can better vindicate itself before its own citizens.

It has been said that no plan, however good it may be, survives contact with reality. The EU Global Strategy is a good document to articulate the Union’s external action in the field of security, and has already borne fruit, particularly in the development of the Common Security and Defense Policy. But perhaps a deeper reflection in the field of defense is needed today.

In terms of external action as a whole, it would perhaps be timely for the EU to explicitly articulate a vision of the world covering not only security aspects, but also other aspirations of its citizens in areas where the EU has shown its capacity to effectively transform international reality.