



The EU's Existential Crisis: Far from Academic

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The emergence of a potential caliphate to the south of Europe and a highly uncertain and volatile situation to the east, along with upheaval in the Middle East, has concentrated minds on the more immediate external challenges facing Europe. August 2014 was a month of not only remarkable challenges to European stability and peace, but it also highlighted the presence of an ongoing existential crisis for the EU. At its core, this is a crisis about the identity, role and purpose of the EU on the international stage. Although there are plenty of strategies in EU external relations, it is argued that what is missing is a compelling overarching strategy explaining what the links and priorities are between the various sub-strategies. This calls for a broad strategic vision from the EU institutions and the Member States alike. In the absence of a fundamental strategic rethink of the Union's global strategy, the frequently project-based foreign policy risks condemning the Union to growing irrelevance.

Introduction

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The contribution is divided into two parts, the first addressing issues of role, identity and purpose, which are key to understanding the existential crisis. The reasons behind the sense of strategic drift in the EU's external actions are examined, with the key point being that both the Union and the world around it have changed and this, in turn, calls for a shift in self-perception and a keener understanding of the nature of change in the international system.

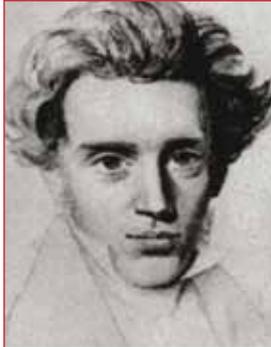
The second part examines what, if anything, might give the EU a keener sense of its strategic role, identity and purpose. Ironically, the main challenge identified is not a shortage but a surfeit of strategies, but with the absence of an obvious common thread. In the absence of a fundamental strategic rethink of the Union's global strategy, the current *ad hoc* and project-based foreign policy risk condemning the Union to growing irrelevance.

Role, identity and purpose

Theory, Schmeory

Any debate about strategy, roles, identity and purpose risks repeating arguments that have been filling academic journals for well over a decade now. Ian Manners is often attributed the main role in kicking off what became a fundamental and divisive debate about the role and identity of the EU on the international stage. The core of Manners' argument is that 'the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is'.¹ Although his arguments are rooted in earlier debates from the 1980s about the extent to which the Union is, or should be, a 'civilian' or 'military' power, he claimed that the EU is 'different from pre-existing political forms and that this difference pre-disposes it to act in a normative way'.² This is not the time or place to rehash the extensive debates surrounding the Union's supposed or actual normative nature. Suffice it to say that inherent ambiguity about the EU's own identity, or the nature of European integration's *finalité*, has significantly complicated the task of understanding 'what it is' in external relations. If the EU is indeed a fundamentally normative actor, what it does and says sometimes point in the other direction.

Existential dilemmas



Søren Kierkegaard

The changes in the international system, noted at the outset, have also faced the Union and its members with a decidedly 'modern' or Hobbesian world – or even post-Hobbesian world in the sense that the assumed vulnerability of individuals and the security of states has in some senses been reversed. This has led some to portray the Union's supposed normative identity as a weakness rather than a strength in today's international system. As Adrian Hyde-Price has argued, the EU has increasingly come to serve as the institutional repository for the 'second order concerns of its member states'.³ Hence, to realists the normative identity of the EU is a matter of convenience for the Member States as they pursue their 'first-order' concerns such as the promotion of exports.

The role of the European Union is also seen by some as a social 'construct.' Under this approach the social environment plays the main role in shaping identities and outlook, and this is then replicated through the actions of the EU and its constituent parts. The agents (in this case the EU and its members) and the environment in which they operate (the international system) are mutually constitutive.⁴ The importance of self-belief leads to a heavy emphasis upon speeches, statements and declarations as a way of understanding the social construct.

The different theoretical themes that preoccupy scholars may seem farremoved from the policy world. They are in some senses, but they also pose core questions about how to perceive, and thus how to understand, the world around us. They also invite policy makers to consider the factors that lead to change in the international system. Of course, the same theoretical approaches can also inform impressions of the European Union from outside. Equal emphasis has therefore to be placed on how external actors perceive the Union's global role; something that is often challenging in notoriously inward-looking Brussels politics. Theory can thus provide some of the basis analytical tools that can be employed in the first stages of any strategic reassessment, by academics and policy-makers alike.

What you see depends on where you sit

The predominant rhetoric of the EU is a liberal one based, above all, upon the idea that the Union enjoys a power of attraction, especially to its

neighbours, because of who and what it is. This is often related to notions of distinctiveness, as in Javier Solana's claim that the EU has 'a distinctive European approach to foreign and security policy' in the 2008 revision of the European Security Strategy.⁵ A similar idea was touched upon five years earlier by Robert Cooper who argued that the European Union exemplified a post-modern system that, unlike the Hobbesian modern world, 'does not rely upon balance; nor does it emphasize sovereignty or the separation of domestic and foreign affairs'.⁶ The post-modern system was built upon a conscious rejection of the modern system that led to nationalism and eventually war. It soon became more than a system and approached an order, in the sense that it was highly structured by treaties and

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organisations (such as the Treaty of Rome and the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty). In this order, organised mutual interference was not only tolerated, but key to limiting national sovereignty. In foreign policy, post-modernism implied the 'continuation of domestic concerns beyond national boundaries and not vice versa. Individual consumption replaces collective glory as the dominant theme of national life. War is to be avoided: acquisition of territory by force is of no interest' (Cooper: 2003, 53).

Although it is easy to overstate the post-modern thesis and the EU's uniqueness (Canada and Japan would presumably also qualify under the same rubric), the explicit rejection of nationalism in favour of integration is a key tenet of liberal interpretations of international relations. It follows that for post-modern states the predominant interest is in expanding the area of cooperation, either through integration (membership) or through other forms of association. The EU has tried to do this in a variety of ways, such as the direct appeal to regionalism (as in the case of the African Union), or through a dense network of association or partnership agreements. In each case, the relevant agreements include the idea of the EU as *exemplar* with various degrees of conditionality attached to the conscious effort to replicate the Union's core values and principles.

The notion that the EU is somehow distinct, or exceptional, carries its own dangers. By placing such stress upon a model of external relations reliant upon the EU as exemplar, alongside the somewhat arrogant assumptions about the Union's powers of attraction, leaders within the EU institutions and the Member States failed to notice the emergence of a decidedly 'modern' world – not only around the EU but on its very doorstep and, indeed, within it (most notably the resurgence of nationalism). To John Mearsheimer, a well-known American realist scholar, 'Elites in the United States and Europe have been blindsided by events only because they subscribed to a flawed view of international politics. They tend to believe that the logic of realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free on the basis of such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependency, and democracy'.⁷

The events of August 2014 may be seen as a catalyst but, in reality, they only serve to put into stark relief a process of strategic drift that has been going on for at least a decade. During this time the EU often promoted doublestandards, under the flag of pragmatism; its members often failed to support the Union's external actions adequately and occasionally undermined them; the external relations of the Union lacked internal cohesion and have even demonstrated elements of competition (trade v development v foreign and security policy) or at least lack of coordination; the Union's external public diplomacy has often proven one-way and has reached either the wrong people or too few; while there has been a lack of courage or vision when it came

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to the Union's global role. The overall sense of drift became even more pervasive due to the all-consuming concentration on the financial crisis for much of the last five years. Even the *pièce de résistance* of the Union's external actions – enlargement – is set to wither with Juncker's announcement that 'no further enlargement will take place over the next five years'.⁸

What can arrest this sense of strategic drift? The response, in short, should be for the new incumbents in the Commission, the European Council and the High Representative

for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to embark upon a fundamental geo-political and geo-economic reassessment of the EU's role, identity and purpose on the international scene.

Strategy

No strategy please, we're the EU ...

Demands for strategic vision, even a 'grand strategy', have been debated outside the EU institutions for several years now and it has steadily intensified.⁹ Most recently, Shada Islam noted that, 'A strategic rethink of Europe's global outreach is urgent [...] In a world where many countries are wracked by war, terrorism and extremism, EU foreign policy cannot afford to be ad hoc, reactive and haphazard'.¹⁰ Yet demands for strategic vision, let alone grand strategy, have often been met with a knowing look, or a roll of the eyes, since the EU just doesn't 'do' grand strategy. The more acerbic observations lament the naiveté of 'academics' who believe that it is remotely possible for the EU institutions, let alone 28 Member States, to have a productive discussion about strategy.

Some, like the Foreign Affairs Council in May of this year, claim that there is 'a common strategic vision' uniting the Union and its members. If this is so, its substance is either not evident (to the Member States in particular) or, worse still, persuasive.¹¹ Other responses, emanating from the European External Action Service (EEAS), point out that an overarching strategy already exists in the form of the 2003 European Security Strategy (revised in 2008). The claim, however, that it is 'in many respects still valid and pertinent to date' is disputed within the EU institutions. Most recently, the Court of Auditors noted that the European Security Strategy 'does not reflect the evolving geopolitical events which have transformed the world'.¹² Indeed, this strategy starts off by noting that, 'Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free' – notions that can certainly be challenged a decade later.¹³ Put rather more bluntly by Olivier De France and Nick Witney, Brussels 'continues to shun any elaboration of or revision of the ten-year old European Security Strategy. So the essential conceptual framework that should guide priorities in foreign and security policy, and the allocation of defence resources, is missing'.¹⁴ In its stead, *ad hoc* and project-based foreign policy prevail.



Again there is growing evidence of the perceived need to adjust the EU to the changing realities of the international system. This goes back to at least 2010 when Herman Van Rompuy opened up the gates for a debate on the role of Europe in the world when he asked, 'For instruments to work optimally, one needs to link them to a common strategic vision. Where do we go? Who are our partners? Where do we want to be in ten or twenty years' time ahead?'¹⁵ Having asked essential questions, any debate was swiftly overtaken by the exigencies of the financial crisis. Yet, the appetite for strategic debate was not entirely extinguished as Catherine Ashton illustrated in October 2013, when she observed that 'Europe faces rising security challenges within a changing strategic context while the financial crisis is increasingly affecting its security and defence capability. These developments warrant a strategic debate among Heads of State and Government'.¹⁶

Contrary to the arguments above, it is worth noting that the Commission has on several occasions tried to reflect either broadly on the EU's role on issues like the internal security of the Union, which led to the adoption of a strategy in 2010, or the external trade-related, **Global Europe**.¹⁷ There is less evidence of any geo-political analysis and thinking going on from the EEAS side to support the development of a more political global outlook. The emphasis under Catherine Ashton was on developing the so-called strategic partnerships with key third parties – a term which still lacks much meaning or substance.¹⁸ Nor it is true that the Member States would scoff at the mention of a more strategic basis for EU external actions. In fact, it is the opposite. A number of Member States have advocated the need for strategic review. Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden even commissioned a think-tank process for a European Global Strategy to facilitate this process.¹⁹ Others chose to highlight the role of security and defence which, in strategic terms, remains the least integrated aspect of the Union's external actions. For instance, the French 2013 Defence White Paper appears to go in a similar direction when it stated that building a 'European approach to defence and security is a priority' and, to this end, 'the impetus must come from the highest political level of the Union, i.e. the European Council. It must determine the role that Europe intends to play on the international stage and the nature of the world order that Europe wishes to promote [...]'.²⁰ The idea of an EU *Livre Blanc* 'which could [...] be an opportunity to express a shared vision' was also floated.²¹ In a parallel manner, the European Parliament has also demanded a White 'Book' on European defence. For its part, the Commission advocated the development of 'a strategic approach covering all aspects of military and non-military security'.²²

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In spite of the anticipation of some form of strategic debate, the European Council chose to sidestep it in December 2013, aside from the charge to the Commission and the High Representative to 'assess the impact of changes in the global environment' and to report to the Council in the course of 2015 'on challenges and opportunities arising for the Union'.²³ Ashton had already touched upon a number of challenges in a preparatory document for the European Council, which

included cyber-attacks, the consequences of climate change, and 'increased competition for energy, water and other resources both at a national and international level'.²⁴ If there is the appetite, the European Council has opened up the possibility for

the incoming High Representative and Commission to lay the foundations for a profound strategic debate. So far, Juncker has indicated no particular interest in any such debate with the focus being very much upon Mogherini's role in steering and coordinating the work of the relevant Commissioners with regard to external relations.²⁵ Yet, even this mandate opens up the wider question of to what end is any steering or coordination to be done?

Drowning in strategies, but not a strategy to be found

In some senses, the European Union's strategic persona is far from under-developed and may, if anything, be over-developed. The presence of the 'strategic partners' mentioned above, 140 country strategies, numerous regional strategies (at least 16), thematic strategies (on the environment, energy, non-proliferation, cyber security or counter-terrorism, to cite but a few) or continental strategies (Africa or the Arctic), paints a picture of a Union literally drowning in strategies. The aim of any strategic reassessment should **not** be to tear all of these up, but to imbue them with a clearer sense of what

links them together into a coherent, or comprehensive, strategic vision. The question of what priorities any strategy should have, whether it be thematic global commons issues, our specific geographical locale, like the European Neighbourhood, or the United States, are of course important. But, they are secondary to the task of identifying the essential elements linking together the strategies above, that then give them a more coherent direction and purpose – a type of *meta* strategy. Two candidates are often mentioned in this regard: democracy and human rights; and multilateralism and the rule of law. Both are compelling, but closer inspection suggests that neither are implemented in a manner that is fully convincing.

On the first, in 2011 Catherine Ashton referred to the need 'to have human rights running as a silver thread through a truly integrated range of external policies'.²⁶ Her speech to the European Parliament came just after the launch of an ambitious joint communication to the Parliament and the Council entitled, 'Human Rights and democracy at the Heart

Strategic visionaries?



Donald Tusk [L] and Jean-Claude Juncker [R], European Commission
Source: <http://www.euractiv.com>

of EU External Action – Towards a More Effective Approach.²⁷ It is true that democracy and human rights are scattered across the EU's external policies as well as the instruments and agreements with countries, regions and multilateral organisations. But, this has not been matched with actual results due to the 'frequent gap between the EU's principles and its actions on democracy and human rights, and the fact that when the EU does act to promote democracy and human rights, this often has limited impact.'²⁸ This is in part a result of the well-known diplomatic dilemma of balancing interests and values, as in cases of Egypt, Ethiopia or Russia, but it also reflects the sometimes reluctant support from the Member States for measures designed to bolster democracy and human rights, such as sanctions. In some specific areas, like trade, there is a paucity of information on how trade-related conditions (positive and negative) impact upon human rights and democracy.

A second candidate is multilateralism. The 2003 European Security Strategy states that, 'In a world of global threats, global markets and global media, our security and prosperity increasingly depend on an effective multilateral system. The development of a stronger international society, well-functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order is our objective.'²⁹ The United Nations is often placed at the core of the concept, especially when it comes to security issues and setting the standards for global governance, but the term stretches beyond this to include many other formal and informal organisations and arrangements (such as the World Trade Organisation, the International Criminal Court, the Council of Europe, the G-20 and the G-7, to name but a few). It also extends to the bilateral aspects of the Union's relations with its strategic partners to develop what has been termed 'partnerships for effective multilateralism.'³⁰

Catherine Ashton herself made reference to 'effective multilateralism with the United Nations at its core, in search of lasting solutions to critical international peace and security challenges.'³¹ This is a natural centre of gravity for the Union's external actions given the advantage enjoyed by the Union's members in terms of membership (constituting one-eighth of all votes in the General Assembly and one-fifth of the membership of the Security Council), but also the shared interest in many of the global commons issues (such as climate change, energy, water scarcity and the role of women). At the same time, this is seen as an historical anachronism by many rising powers and one that reflects the world of 1944-1945 and not that of the twenty-first century, which has led to demands for readjustment in European membership of a number of international financial institutions, often with American backing. The apportionment of seats and voting rights within the United Nations will therefore be one of the tests of the Union's commitments to multilateralism.

The European Union is also faced with the simple fact that the international system remains by and large Westphalian – a system designed by and for states. A reminder of this was the Union's attempts to improve its leverage and visibility by securing enhanced observer status in the United Nations

General Assembly. This was thwarted on the first attempt, but on the second yielded limited speaking rights for the President of the European Council and the High Representative at the plenary meetings held at the beginning of each regular session of the General Assembly. These rights were certainly below what the Union envisaged necessary to play its role as a truly global actor or, put another way, 'it is inconceivable for the world's number one donor of development aid to be unable to secure relatively easily the support of the majority of states in the UNGA on an issue of instrumental importance to it.'³²

References to 'effective multilateralism' are often accompanied by reference to the rule of law. The EU has traditionally pursued an expansive or 'thick' approach to the rule of law which enables the Union to claim general positive influence, but the lack of clear benchmarks makes any casual links between any dialogue and results spurious. The need to conceptualise the Union's understanding of the rule of law and benchmarks for its application are urgently needed, with the caveat that the Council of Europe could legitimately claim to be the obvious benchmarking body, in which case any such exercise should follow their lead. In any event, neither body has produced a 'single and authoritative document clarifying what the rule of law entails and how one may assess a country's adherence to this principle in theory as well as in practice.'³³ Since the Union cannot claim a monopoly over defining or understanding the rule of law, a clear idea of how the concept gives the Union a relative advantage, or how it might be benchmarked and how it complements existing policies such as the European Consensus on Development, would assist the development of this important concept from a soft ideal to an obligation in the Union's external actions.

Although there are clear candidates for the essential 'threads' linking together

the various sub-strategies they are in some cases, like multilateralism or the rule of law, not yet fully conceptualised. As has also been suggested, they are not consistently implemented which leads to the fundamental questions of role, identity and purpose posed at the beginning. Based upon a clearer idea of the threads joining together the EU's external strategies, a clearer sense of priorities is urgently needed. Not all issues or countries can possibly be of equal importance. Attempts to avoid this issue only lend an Alice in Wonderland quality to the proceedings (it was the Dodo who famously said, 'everybody has won, and all must have prizes').

Conclusions

The analysis above suggests that there is a growing need for a strategic reassessment of the EU's global role, identity and purpose. This is not a new issue, but this summer's events, such as those in the Ukraine or the activities of ISIL to the south, have made this need even more apparent. Any strategic reassessment should in the first place aim at understanding the nature of change in the international system. A number of conceptual tools to facilitate this reflection were suggested at the outset. In the second place, careful thought should be devoted to the nature of the linkages between the existing

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sub-strategies at regional, country and thematic levels. Third, once the nature of the essential elements linking the sub-strategies is evident, they not only have to be integrated but also implemented consistently. This will imply hard choices, such as those between energy and human rights; but it is these choices, guided by a clearer sense of strategic vision, that will shape the role, identity and purpose of the Union. These three elements must also be participatory and must involve the Member States and other interested parties, such as EU Centres of Excellence, universities and think tanks. This will, inevitably, be a difficult process but it is also necessary, given the undesirable consequences of continued *ad hoc*ism and muddling through.

The questions posed above are challenging, but are ones that will hopefully exercise the minds of the new Commissioners, members of the European Parliament, the High Representative and the EEAS. Concerns about streamlining and coordination are of course important, but in the absence of a compelling strategic vision it is not clear what is being streamlined, and to what ultimate end coordination is pursued. The world will move on with, or without, the EU shaping it.

Notes

- * I am grateful for the observations of Eviola Prifti, Katerina-Marina Kyrieri and Sabina Lange on an earlier draft of this piece. I am also grateful to EEAS officials with whom I had a chance to discuss some of these ideas, without necessarily implying agreement!
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 - ² *Ibid.* p. 242.
 - ³ Hyde Price, A., "'Normative" power Europe: a realist critique', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13, Issue 2, 2006, pp. 222-224.
 - ⁴ See Christiansen, T. et al, 'The Social Construction of Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1999, pp. 528-544.
 - ⁵ *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing Security in a Changing World*, Brussels, S407/08, 11 December 2008.
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 - ⁷ Mearsheimer, J., 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5, September/October 2014, p. 78.
 - ⁸ Juncker, J. C., *A New Start for Europe*, p. 10.
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 - ¹⁰ Islam, S., 'Why Global Europe must change in an 'Anxious Age'', *Friends of Europe*, 4 September 2014. www.friendsofeurope.org.
 - ¹¹ 3312th Council meeting, Foreign Affairs, 9542/14, 12 May 2014, p. 17.
 - ¹² Special Report: *The establishment of the European External Action Service*, European Court of Auditors, Luxembourg 2014, p. 8, 11, & 26.
 - ¹³ *European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World*, Brussels, 12 December 2013.
 - ¹⁴ De France, O. and N. Witney, *Europe's strategic cacophony*, European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2013, p. 10. At the time there were only 27 EU members, Croatia joined in July 2013.
 - ¹⁵ Address by Herman van Rompuy, President of the European Council, to the College d'Europe, PCE 34/10, 25 February 2010, Bruges, p. 5.
 - ¹⁶ *Preparing the December 2013 European Council on Security and Defence: Final Report by the High Representative/Head of the EDA on the Common Security and Defence Policy*, Brussels, 15 October 2013, p. 2.
 - ¹⁷ Communication from the Commission and the European Parliament and the Council, The EU Internal Security Strategy in Action: Five steps towards a more secure Europe, COM(2010) 673 Final, Brussels, 22 November 2010; and *Global Europe: Competing in the World* (Brussels: European Commission).
 - ¹⁸ Those with China, Russia and the United States were developed first, followed by those with Brazil, India and South Africa. The concept has now been extended to ten strategic partners in total, with a specific rejection of a 'one size fits all' approach which, although logical, makes any overarching strategic interests even more difficult to identify.
 - ¹⁹ See Towards a European Global Strategy: Security European Influence in a Changing World, 28 May 2013. <http://www.euglobalstrategy.eu>.
 - ²⁰ *French White Paper on Defence and National Security 2013*, Ministère de la Défense, July 2013, p. 63.
 - ²¹ *Ibid.* Loc cit.
 - ²² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Towards a more competitive and efficient defence and security sector*, Brussels, COM(2013) 542 final, 24 July 2013, p. 16.
 - ²³ *European Council*, 19 December 2013, Brussels, p. 10.
 - ²⁴ *Preparing the December 2013 European Council on Security and Defence: Final Report by the High Representative/Head of the EDA on the Common Security and Defence Policy*, 15 October 2013, p. 1.
 - ²⁵ Mission Letter, Federica Mogherini, from Jean-Claude Juncker, President-elect of the Commission to Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Policy and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Brussels, 10 September 2014, p. 3.
 - ²⁶ Ashton, C., *Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of EU External Action – Towards a More Effective Approach*, Speech to the European Parliament, 13 December 2011. http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2012/060112_hr_silverthread_en.htm.
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 - ³² Wouters, J. et al, 'The Status of the European Union at the United Nations after the General Assembly Resolution of 3 May 2011', *Global Governance Opinions*, Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, July 2011, p. 8.
 - ³³ Pech, L., 'Rule of Law as a guiding principle of the European Union's external action', CLEER Working Papers, No. 3, 2012 (The Hague: Centre for the Law of EU External Relations), p. 30.