



Egmont's Grand Strategy Project

A Grand Strategy: Does it Matter in the Real World?

Jo Coelmont

In Egmont Paper No. 33 'The Value of Power, the Power of Values: A Call for an EU Grand Strategy', edited by Sven Biscop, Egmont calls for an EU Grand Strategy completing the European Security Strategy by identifying EU interests and setting concrete objectives. A proactive EU, acting as a true global power, must result. Some of Europe's leading strategic thinkers react to Egmont's proposals in its series of Security Policy Briefs.

In this paper of the Grand Strategy Project series, Brigadier-General Jo Coelmont, Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont, observes that historically Europe built itself without clear strategy (the so-called *méthode Monnet*), and that past and present civil-military operations are more the result of opportunities than true strategic thinking. However, he argues, now the time seems particularly favourable to develop an EU Grand Strategy.

From a theoretical or an academic point of view, one can justifiably argue that the EU is in urgent need of a strategy, of a Grand Strategy even, in particular to underpin its foreign policy. But does a Grand Strategy matter in the real world? Would it for instance provide leverage to the EU to influence international crisis management? Would it have an impact on EU decisions to launch or to refrain from CSDP operations? Would it enhance the chances to conduct such operations successfully?

The Cold War

If we analyse the European integration process, one could advocate that there is a merit in not having a (declared) strategy, certainly not a fully-fledged one with clear-cut objectives, well-identified means and ways to pursue them. The way we evolved from the European Coal and Steel Community to the EU was not so much based on a strategy as on a vague method: *la méthode Monnet*. And on a single principle, subsidiarity, i.e. we transfer a policy from the national to the European level, *belatedly*, when it is really no longer affordable nor doable at the national level. And it worked. But only because of specific geopolitical circumstances. We could afford at the time to be more inward-looking.

Indeed, by rejecting the idea of establishing a European Defence Community, developing a security and defence policy within the framework of

European integration remained a taboo subject for about four decades. But this restriction did not harm us – West-Europeans – too much at the time. During the Cold War, we were living in an atypical period of history, characterised by frozen international relations, with the US taking care of security problems for all Allies and partners. Before that period, and certainly nowadays, the only constant element in international relations is “ongoing change”. Looking in the rear mirror, the absence of a too clearly declared strategy and the internal focus on economic integration had its merits, but at present it is no longer fit for purpose.

The Need for Europeans to Engage in Crisis Management

Pretty soon after the fall of the Berlin wall, the EU as such was tested by the crisis that erupted in Yugoslavia. Jacques Poos, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg, holding the EU Presidency, said : “*C'est l'heure de l'Europe*”. But Europe failed. One of the lessons learned was that a European Security and Defence Policy was to be added to the European construction. But when introduced back in 1999, the ESDP was more an instrument than a policy, because talking about a strategy on when and where to launch ESDP operations still remained taboo.

During the Belgian Presidency, in the second half of 2001, it was proposed to publish an EU White Book on Defence. The reactions from the then 15 Member States showed that there are more than a dozen ways to gently say “no” to any reference to strategy in such a publication...

Not that much later, a second international crisis, in Iraq, inspired many wise men and women in the Convention to propose important additional building-blocks allowing the EU to develop a genuine strategy. Fortunately, the revolutionary ideas put forward in the Working Groups on External relations and on Defence survived the Convention, went unchanged into the draft Constitution and later into the Treaty of Lisbon. Building-blocks, but still no strategy.

In 2003 the EU published its European Security Strategy. A daring document at the time. But it mainly has merit if seen as a step leading to

something bigger. The ESS is indeed but an aperitif to a strategy, giving some indications on “how” to manage crisis management operations, while remaining rather silent on “why” and “when” to launch operations. Moreover, no indication is given of the capabilities required for crisis management. On the other hand, the question “where” to operate got an answer: worldwide. However, and to no surprise, it is fair to say that the impact of the ESS on the actual ESDP operations launched since its adoption has been minimal.

The series of military, civil-military and civilian ESDP operations launched by the EU so far was never the result of any strategy. Most of the time the EU simply reacted to an opportunity to be of help, without having longer term perspectives. For instance, to the UN request to reinforce the MONUC in Congo, the answer was “yes” in 2003 (Operation Artemis in Eastern Congo), “yes” in 2006 (EUFOR RDC during the electoral period), but “no” at the end of 2008, when requested once more to assist in Eastern Congo.

Needless to say that even today in the eyes of many the EU is all but influential on the international scene, in particular in the area of crisis management.

On the Ground

Does it do harm not to have a Grand Strategy while conducting a specific crisis management operation? It does.

In crisis management operations the chances for success cannot be measured by *adding up* all the instruments deployed. It rather is a *multiplication*: if one factor is zero, the result is zero. One may have all the required military capabilities, but if there is shortage on the civilian side, the net result will be suboptimal. But the most important factor is to have a *comprehensive political strategy*, a clear *desired political end-state*, and a clear and precise *political roadmap* to achieve all this. And, most important, in order to achieve a *durable* solution, a clear regional and even a global political consensus on the long term objectives is required. In the absence of such a comprehensive political strategy – an other word for a grand strategy – the military can, at an initial stage, be part of the solution but over time will end up being part of the problem. Without an

overarching political strategy, the net result of any crisis management will be close to zero, if not negative: a lesson that in the mean time is known to all of us.

The Lisbon Era

It is encouraging to note that the Lisbon Treaty not only explicitly calls for identifying “the strategic interests and objectives of the Union”,¹ it also provides us with all the basic elements required to arrive at a comprehensive political strategy. Indeed, for a Grand Strategy, one must first define the values considered vital or essential for the kind of society one seeks to preserve. And that part of strategy is clearly mentioned in the Treaty.²

The only remaining question is whether the political appetite exists in the EU and, more importantly, among the Member States to put the puzzle together and to act accordingly.

Favourable Political Conditions

The time is now particularly favourable to develop an EU Grand Strategy, for two good reasons.

First, Member States no longer see the development of an EU strategy as counter-productive, as the shortest way to splitting Members States and splitting NATO. Already during the second Bush Administration and now even more, with the Obama Administration, the transatlantic dialogue, in particular the dialogue between the EU and Washington, has changed. A kind of “common European Strategic attitude” is now expected by the US.

Secondly, soon we will finalise the process leading towards a new Strategic Concept for NATO. This process will force EU Member States to think about the future of NATO, about the future of Transatlantic relations – and thus about EU-US relations and subsequently EU- NATO relations.

¹ Art. 22 §1: “On the basis of the principles and objectives set out in Article 21, the European Council shall identify the strategic interests and objectives of the Union. Decisions of the European Council on the strategic interests and objectives of the Union shall relate to the common foreign and security policy and to other areas of the external action of the Union.”

² See i.a. Preamble, Art. 21, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

Once we will have consensus on all these matters across the Atlantic, the political climate to develop a “European Grand Strategy” will be more relaxed. (One could even argue it will require a “Stealth European Strategy” to have a constructive debate on a new Strategic Concept for NATO).

Will it Happen?

The climate may be favourable, but that does not guarantee that it will happen. Here history can shed some light. As Paul-Henri Spaak, a former Secretary-General of NATO and former Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said some 60 years ago, there are two kinds of countries in Europe – small countries, and countries that have yet to realize that they are small countries. In Saint-Malo, where they launched ESDP, the UK and France were well aware of being too small to set up – or even to influence – crisis management operations by themselves, like the one needed for Yugoslavia. They agreed this requires at the minimum an EU approach.

Since then a lot has happened. We now have continents that know they are small and continents that are discovering that they are small. But of these continents, those that have a Grand Strategy are playing chess, while the EU, without a Grand Strategy, is playing Ping Pong. Guess who has to change its game?

This leads to the conclusion that the political will to shape an EU that acts more strategically is growing by the day. Soon instruments like the External Action Service will be operational, ready to underpin and to follow up EU political decision-making on international strategy and policies. *La méthode Monnet* will guide us once more. One could argue that in doing so the EU is again a bit late, is not in pace with an outside world that is changing rapidly. However, it is important to have policies and decisions based on a broad consensus, to remain in pace with the political will expressed throughout the EU. Fortunately, from Eurobarometer polls it is clear that public opinion in about all Member States has been strongly in favour of developing a genuine CSDP for years. It is encouraging to note that in these matters public opinion is ahead of policy-makers. Time for the latter to catch up. After all, by providing the EU

with a Grand Strategy we are but living up to the political decisions that led to the Lisbon Treaty and are but giving substance to the European Security Strategy.

Brig-Gen (Ret.) Jo Coelmont is a Senior Associate Fellow in the Security & Global Governance Programme at Egmont. From 2002 to 2007 he served as the Belgian Permanent Representative to the EU Military Committee.

The Security Policy Brief is a publication of Egmont, the Royal Institute for International Relations

EGMONT

Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the authors and are not those of EGMONT, Royal Institute for International Relations