

26 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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The degradation of the EU's geopolitical environment is fuelling the fragmentation of European politics and raises serious questions about the future of Europe's security, prosperity and integration. The refugee and migrant flows straining Europe's cohesion are the most pressing dimension of a broader trend. Foreign affairs are 'coming home', whether in the form of financial turmoil or the threat of terrorist attacks, while the EU faces a more assertive Russia to the east. Foreign policy is therefore a central component of Europe's political and economic resilience.

The process leading up to an EU Global Strategy (EUGS) should define what the EU stands for and aims to achieve in international affairs (purpose and priorities), set organising principles for external action and broad roadmaps to implement them.

Of course, no strategic document will solve the conundrums facing Europe's politics and foreign policy, or fix pressing crises, on its own. However, Europe needs a joint strategic approach to prevent the aggravation of the risks – and seize the opportunities – that the current international environment

presents. In particular, the EUGS should target and mitigate four fundamental disconnects.

Mind the gap(s)

The first disconnect lies between the far-reaching aspirations that informed the EU's foreign policy and the reality of a harder, more divisive international *and* domestic context. The EU aimed to promote the rule of law, democratic values and multilateral cooperation in its neighbourhood and beyond. Disillusionment with frustrated aspirations risks triggering a swing towards retrenchment from a contested environment, and from a common foreign policy. This would, however, deprive the Union of the ability to promote its core message on the international stage.

So what went wrong? The problem was not Europe's message *per se*, but the expectation that others, notably its neighbours, would more or less rally to its call, and that soft power and conditionality would largely suffice to ensure success. Today, acknowledging that it is an arduous task to deploy influence in a polycentric world should not lead Europe to

give up on its core purpose but to pursue it in ways that fit the new context. The EU should concentrate its investment where progress is possible or it is imperative to act, set intermediate goals, and mobilise a wider toolbox including all levers of power.

The second gap, exposed by the current refugee emergency, is between tackling pressing crises and addressing the deeper, long-term trends that have engendered them. Crisis management will often be necessary, but must not come at the detriment of sustainable solutions. For example, there is ample evidence about the drivers of fragility that can feed destabilisation and about the cascading effects of the latter, from the Sahel to the Middle East. The EU has a major strategic interest in enabling the conditions for lasting development and inclusive political arrangements in its wider neighbourhood. Any sensible approach cannot be confined to technical programmes, or military force, while neglecting the political dynamics on the ground. Policies without politics will not work. The EU will also need to engage all relevant parties, from the local to the regional and global level, helping connect sometimes disparate priorities and initiatives.

Smart multilateralism

The third disconnect is that between the need for cooperation to manage interdependence, and defuse tensions, and the competition of values and priorities that nurtures zero-sum thinking on the international stage. Multilateralism is growing more contested but progress is not impossible, as the Paris agreement on climate change or the Iran nuclear deal show. The EU should adopt a flexible approach to engagement that can serve a mix of purposes – rule-making, *ad hoc* initiatives, confidence-building or fending off competition. Engagement can also span different formats, from formal institutions

to *ad hoc* coalitions, from strategic partnerships to transnational networks. And Europe's relationship with the US will remain central to many of these formats.

Through diversified engagement the EU should aim, whenever possible, to strengthen the links between inclusive institutions and mini-lateral coalitions, reach out beyond the circles of the likeminded, seek ways in which old and new institutions can complement each other and aim for setting clear rules, beyond informal arrangements.

The fourth disconnect is that between the EU and national policies. The political ownership of member states is essential to the credibility of an EU foreign policy. But whether considering the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or the EU strategic partnerships, national commitment has often fallen short of the goals that member states have jointly set for themselves. This is in part due to their different strategic cultures and priorities, and in part to their shared reluctance to pool resources and authority.

The diversity of the EU can be an important asset. But if the creeping renationalisation of politics and policies in Europe is not reversed, external forces will turn its internal diversity into a liability. The EUGS should be part of the response to Europe's cohesion crisis, and mark a renewed national investment in Europe's foreign policy.



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