

03 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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Whenever the EU undertakes a strategy-defining exercise related to some aspect of foreign policy, the core question surfaces of how to balance interests and values. The new Global Strategy will be no exception in having to address this thorny and pivotal issue.

An increasingly prevalent argument is that the EU ought to be more tightly instrumental and ends-oriented in pursuing its interests. The Global Strategy's focus on security issues reinforces a widespread perception that the EU is experiencing a shift from a transformative-liberal power to a *realpolitik* actor. Faced with an irredentist Russia, a febrile Middle East, refugee surges and terror attacks, governments have now more than ever a justified motive for hard-headed geo-strategy.

Balancing interests and values

The familiar framing of 'interests versus values' somewhat distorts EU foreign policy debates. The relationship between values and interests is complex, and sometimes there will be a trade-off between the two, while other times certain values can enhance self-interest, further complicating the process of arriving

at a definition for what is a 'value' as opposed to an 'interest'.

The most positive argument is that a more liberal world order – rules-based, democratic, rights-respecting and interdependent – would serve as the EU's best security guarantor. This conviction can easily be over-stated, because more democracy does not necessarily equate to more security. Having said that, the inverse mode of thinking can be even more grievously erroneous: propping up autocratic regimes against strong domestic pressures for change will often backfire against European interests.

It is important to note that taking values seriously is not a matter of the EU behaving as a kind of super-NGO, driven by nothing more than good charitable intent. European foreign policies are and should continue to be guided by interests. What then becomes the problem is that ministers and commissioners often overlook the way in which interests are in fact entwined with values.

Realists, for example, insist that there is little scope for a focus on values especially as the reshaped global

order consists of unmitigated predatory power - if 'we' are in decline, then 'our' liberal values must be irredeemably doomed, many argue. Such conceptualisations, however, lack the nuance to capture what is in fact a highly eclectic emerging order – one that is far from being entirely value-free. Contrary to what is often assumed today, jettisoning values would *not* bring EU foreign policy smoothly and harmoniously into tune with underlying global trends. What unfolding international change does call for, more subtly, are alternative *means* and *tactics* for protecting certain political values.

A new role for the Global Strategy

The new Global Strategy will undoubtedly pay lip service to the role of values within foreign policy. The challenge is then to remedy the EU's Achilles heel which is that general statements of 'strategic' philosophy are usually not matched by middle-level tactical guidelines.

It is clear that the Global Strategy is not concerned with pre-empting day-to-day foreign policy decisions. However, the Global Strategy can offer added-value in the mid-range between macro-abstract principles and quotidian decision-making, if it does not limit itself to generic principles. And it is precisely in this mid-range that the EU needs greater clarity and precision in how to advance what might be termed *interest-driven values*.

A given tactical approach towards certain values can be strategically damaging, while another tactic adopted in pursuit of the same values can yield positive security gains. The *way in which* certain values are supported is just as important as the values themselves. This is where previous EU security documents fall short, and where the Global Strategy could provide some kind of operationally-meaningful guiding template.

Furthermore, tactical questions are rarely black and white. In its concrete policy options, the EU is rarely faced with absolute, sharp-edged choices between 'interests and values.' The more meaningful metric is whether it can exert tangible leverage over very select reform issues in highly specific national or regional contexts.

In working towards *mid-range* policy guidelines, the EU should talk less about 'European' values as the basic norms of human rights and accountable governance as they are not exclusively European. The EU needs to cease holding a menu of liberal norms to be synonymous with the specific rules that govern relations between EU member states. Other countries can advance a whole range of progressive 'values' without looking at all 'European' in the rules, institutions and norms they choose.

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A tactically pressing challenge is that regimes around the world are simply getting better at neutering human rights, development, democracy and civil society initiatives. If the

Global Strategy fails to address this disturbing trend it will miss what is now one of the most constraining impediments to effective EU foreign policy. Again, this requires much tailored tactical rethinking, not a Global Strategy replete with imprecise assertions that 'values are important'.

One final and sobering point: the ascendancy of illiberalism is today not only a problem 'out there', beyond the EU's border, but one that needs to be combatted also *within* many member states. European foreign policy can no longer be understood merely as an exporter of desirable values; it also needs to be crafted more thoughtfully to receive global support in the service of the EU's embattled *internal* values.

