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A Grand New European Security Strategy

Sven Biscop

When a basic assumption of one's strategy is no longer valid, one writes a new one. That is the case of Europe today: we assumed that the United States would always be our ally and would never act as a rival against us. Then came the second Trump administration. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is absolutely right, therefore, that we need a new European Security Strategy (ESS). Not just to address Trump, though. Do we really have an effective strategy on the Russian threat, on the Chinese challenge, and for the Middle East?

WHAT IS IT?

This is Grand Strategy: a new ESS will replace the 2016 *Global Strategy*, which itself superseded the original 2003 ESS. Reverting to the original title serves clarity: this is the EU equivalent to the National Security Strategies (NSS) of the individual Member States. Following its adoption, subordinate strategies must be updated, notably the *Strategic Compass*.

This will also be, or will certainly be read as, our reaction to Trump's December 2025 NSS, just like the 2003 ESS followed on Bush Jr's 2002 NSS (which announced the doctrine of pre-emptive war). But we definitely must not be reactive – we must set our own agenda. We could learn from the style, though: now is not the time for a jargon-laden communication, but for a short and sharp strategy. Be concise and convincing.

WHOSE STRATEGY IS IT?

Grand Strategy goes far beyond foreign policy – it concerns all instruments of power. A NSS is promulgated by the Head of State or Government, therefore, not the Foreign Minister. Although the first ESS and the *Global Strategy* were led by the High Representative, it is logical that now the President of the Commission takes the initiative for what will be a Joint Communication. The Commission also has more institutional power to implement strategy. It does mean that the entire Commission must own the strategy. And, of course, Member States are key: they must see the new ESS as providing overall direction for their national strategies and policies.

Grand Strategy also goes beyond the operational capacity of the EU. Only the EU can be at the centre of any European Grand Strategy. But the Union does not have the instruments of collective deterrence and defence; it can only act upon the collective defence guarantee of Art. 42.7 TEU through the command structure and defence plans of NATO. On Ukraine too, Europeans act through the EU as well as NATO, the Contact Group, and the Coalition of the Willing. To be effective, the ESS should guide this entire European effort, including any future core groups.

A truly European, as opposed to EU, strategy, should at least involve the UK, which is pivotal. It certainly is possible to have a dialogue with Britain and other non-EU European allies during the drafting process, just as partners were consulted when the previous strategies were written. But could the UK also formally align itself with the eventual ESS?

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WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Grand Strategy starts with the question: Who am I? Which role am I playing on the world stage? For decades, our answer was: We are the most loyal allies of the US. We truly had a special relationship, in fact. We were allies and, also, political and economic competitors, but unlike other states, we agreed that we would never be rivals – we would never compete through illegal and illegitimate ways.

But Trump does exactly that: claiming our territory, using illegal tariffs, and interfering in our domestic politics to promote the extreme right (i.e. racists and fascists). Trump's NSS says it black on white: EU policies are erasing European civilisation, therefore this US administration will cultivate resistance against it. That is a hybrid threat as much as any Russian or Chinese subversion of our sovereignty. The US now is a normal country: an ally, a competitor, and a rival, depending on the issue at hand. Even if Trump's successor is someone very pro-European, the next president after that again may be of the MAGA type. This is a structural change, therefore: from now on, whether the US is a steadfast ally depends on who wins the elections, which was never the case before.

World politics is even more truly multipolar now. Trump's NSS envisages a world in which three great powers (the US, Russia, and China) each have a sphere of influence. We are at risk of being isolated: if Trump concludes agreements with Putin and Xi, we will not follow and normalise relations with Russia, while EU-China relations are stuck.

WHERE TO START?

The ESS must redefine our role: we are not just someone's allies; we are not a middle power either. The EU must be independent. That is only possible if the EU itself acts as a great power; otherwise, it will be the object of the strategies of the other powers.

The starting point of the new ESS must thus be that in this multipolar world we see ourselves as one of the poles, as a great power that actively seeks to shape the world. Our ESS must be a manifesto that projects an alternative vision for the future world order, which can serve as a rallying point for all those who reject the logic of spheres of influence. We have many potential partners – countries are not waiting to be assigned to one or the other sphere of influence – but we must make ourselves attractive to them.

That begins by standing up for ourselves, as we did over Greenland. The point is not, obviously, to turn against the US. The Transatlantic alliance and the deep economic interdependence are very much in our interest. But the more we concede to Trump, the less the relationship will serve our interests; if we roll over, Trump will just grab more and more. We must draw red lines, therefore, as we must towards Russia and China, and politely but firmly enforce them, to ensure that relations with the US remain balanced and viable.

The overall stance, thus, should be: The EU is an independent great power that will defend its vital interests, by force, if necessary, but through win-win solutions whenever possible. We will cooperate when we can, but push back and retaliate when we must. Those vital interests were first defined in the *Global Strategy*: (1) the security of our citizens and territory; (2) our prosperity, which must be shared; (3) our democracy; and (4) a multilateral, rules-based global order.

The aim of strategy is not to say something about everything, but to state priorities. "Everything" can be covered subsequently in sub-strategies. The ESS ought to focus on what is most important to safeguard our vital interests in the face of external threats, and highlight links to key internal strategies. The priorities set by the *Global Strategy* mostly remain valid, in fact, but the context in which we pursue them is fundamentally different.

WHAT SHOULD IT COVER? (1) DEFENDING EUROPE

Sovereignty and hybrid threats: The most dangerous and urgent threat against our way of life is the internal threat from our own anti-democratic forces. It is only because they exist that outside powers can instrumentalise them to subvert our sovereignty. But the ESS must make it

clear that any unwanted outside interference, in any sector (politics, the economy, infrastructure, etc.), no matter from whom, will have consequences for our relations with the perpetrator.

Geoeconomics: Alongside hybrid actions, the great powers increasingly deploy economic instruments for strategic purposes, including industrial policy, export controls, and investments in critical infrastructure. Economic measures may thus have long-term security implications. The ESS should not only reaffirm the *European Economic Security Strategy* that the Commission has already put forward, but must articulate our own vision on how we will use our economic leverage, in areas where others depend on us, to pursue our strategic objectives. At the same time, we should not securitise economic policy in its entirety. The implementation of the Draghi Report and other measures to increase the competitiveness of European companies, although obviously linked, fall outside the scope of the ESS.

Deterrence and defence: We need an alliance, first of all among ourselves, for no European country can defend itself alone. The alliance with the US, through NATO, provides a second layer of deterrence and defence. We have allowed the Transatlantic alliance to become unbalanced, however, by disinvesting from defence since the end of the Cold War. That has led to an overdependence on the US which makes us vulnerable to American pressure in other policy areas. Moreover, the Trump administration has stated very clearly that, under the US nuclear umbrella, Europeans must own their own conventional deterrence and defence.

The ESS should explicitly endorse the ambition to build a militarily autonomous European pillar within NATO. The desired end-state is that all European forces together (including Turkey and Canada) constitute a force package that is as complete as the US force package, with European strategic enablers, so that ultimately we can undertake any operation that we want to without having to rely on American capabilities. The EU's role is to facilitate this ambition through its defence industrial policies.

This European force package must include a pool of expeditionary forces, including air and naval forces, aimed at stabilising our Southern and Southeastern flanks and securing our lines of communication. NATO has come to focus too exclusively on collective defence and the east, while the EU's own efforts have either become a paper exercise (the Headline Goal Process) or are far too small to be significant (the Rapid Deployment Capacity). Europe is not a continental power, but a maritime power – we must build and use our armed forces accordingly.

Enlargement: The ESS should state unambiguously that Ukraine is part of the Europe that we are defending. It is a candidate for EU-membership and, like any other candidate country, we will never allow a hostile power to prevent it from joining, not even through war. Consequently, the ESS should endorse the security guarantee that the Coalition of the Willing must give to Ukraine if and when an arrangement is found to end the war. And, of course, in order to arrive at a settlement, we must finally co-decide with Ukraine on a clear negotiating position and strategy vis-à-vis Russia.

WHAT SHOULD IT COVER? (2) STABILISING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Sphere of Cooperation: The North Atlantic, the Arctic, the European continent, the Caucasus, the Gulf, the Middle East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel: these are the regions that must be kept stable for the EU to remain stable. Our geopolitical position is challenging, to say the least. Our way obviously is not to impose stability by enforcing a sphere of influence, but we could aim for a Sphere of Cooperation and use the ESS to issue an invitation to our neighbours to deepen or to establish bilateral partnerships in security and defence to that end.

Great power rivalry is playing out in our neighbourhood: states that take up an EU offer of cooperation will receive counter-offers from others, or may even face retaliation from a hostile power. In such cases, we must lend assistance; if we are not willing to do that, we should not make the offer in the first place. Rather than always

looking over our shoulders for a security guarantee from the US, we should consider which guarantees we can offer to which neighbours. For one lesson from the US' and Israel's illegal, and strategically ill-judged, war against Iran does stand out: they have leverage because they have the capacity and the will to shift from diplomacy to the use of force – we do not. Hence the need, mentioned above, for a serious European power projection capacity.

But another lesson is probably even more fundamental: contrary to our self-image, our diplomatic power has become very limited too. In the 2016 *Global Strategy* we actually committed to deepen dialogue with Iran and the Gulf states on regional conflicts. Did we ever seriously try? Would we have any chance of success if we took a high-level diplomatic initiative now?

Partnership in security and defence must thus be accompanied by cooperation on foreign policy, and must be tied into our broader structural partnerships, which notably include a strong geoeconomic dimension. Already close relations with neighbours such as Azerbaijan, Egypt, and Jordan could be upgraded in this sense. Turkey, as a NATO ally and being in a customs union with the EU, is obviously pivotal to this projected Sphere of Cooperation – but overall EU-Turkey relations would have to be put on a new footing.

WHAT SHOULD IT COVER? (3) KEEPING THE WORLD TOGETHER

World order: The ESS must explicitly reject the logic of spheres of influence. Rather than stability, that is a recipe for intense and interminable geopolitical rivalry, as the great powers will surely seek to aggrandize their spheres while smaller states play off one power against the other. We must also reject the logic of a "concert of powers": the powers will inevitably end up ignoring the interests of the smaller states.

Our aim instead must be to keep the world together: preserving a multilateral rules-based order that is as universal as possible (in terms of policy areas covered and participating states), so that all states are free to interact with all other states, according to their own preferences. That is vital for us, as an export economy that has to import the bulk of its natural resources. To that end, we must demonstrate convening power: bringing together those that share our interest in a universal, multilateral, rules-based order, and table concrete projects for improved global governance, notably in the economic and financial sphere.

The Global Gateway: The ESS should finally provide a strategic rationale for the Global Gateway: this is the instrument that should thwart the creation of spheres of influence. By putting an ambitious offer on the table, the EU can convince other states not to kick out other powers, but to also work with us, so that these states do not become exclusively dependent on just one of the powers.

China: The EU first used the trinity of partner – competitor – rival to describe China, and that is indeed the way to deal with it (and with all other states – everybody is all three towards everybody else, in varying degrees). That is tactics. But what do we aim to achieve vis-à-vis China? Real strategy is lacking. We often know what we do not want; cars dumped on our market below market price, for example. But what is it that we do want? The ESS ought to state clearly our strategic purpose, notably in the geoeconomic sphere, but also on the world order. As long as we assess that an accommodation with China is possible within a rules-based order, that should remain the objective.

HOW TO ENSURE FOLLOW-UP?

It took us ten years, from the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, to adopt a first EU Grand Strategy, and then a full thirteen years before we updated it. Now another ten years have lapsed without a strategic review. We need a systematic process and should decide now that henceforth every Commission President will commission a new ESS for every term of office.

We also need to institutionalise strategic thinking. The Commission has its internal think-tank, IDEA, and the

EEAS has a policy planning unit. We are lacking a real strategy unit, with departments for each priority set in the ESS, which from a European security perspective serves EU decision-making as a whole. Like in the US the National Security Council serves the President (that is, if he wants to make use of it).

Our main challenge, however, remains our dispersed decision-making. We can just about run a proxy war, in Ukraine, taking decisions through the EU, NATO, the Contact Group, and the Coalition of the Willing. One could never fight a direct war with another power this way. If we ever found ourselves at war with Russia, new structures would have to be improvised immediately: a "war cabinet" that takes control. At the very least, we should start wargaming such scenarios now.

CONCLUSION: ON OUR OWN TERMS

The moment Trump re-entered the White House, he forced us into reactive mode, and there we remain stuck. We cannot go on like this, waking up every morning to see what new folly Trump has embarked upon while we were sleeping. What will we do when Trump concludes that his Board of Peace works so well (since he chairs it) that he does not need the Security Council anymore and recalls the US ambassador? An empty chair policy, like the Soviets in the 1950s. What if Trump ends all support for Ukraine? Or orders all US personnel to leave their posts at NATO? Unlikely but no longer impossible scenarios.

But instead of gaining back the initiative on our own terms, many leaders seemingly are adopting Trump's frame of reference. "Europe can no longer be a custodian for the old-world order, for a world that has gone and will not return", said von der Leyen in her speech to the 2026 EU Ambassadors Conference. By prematurely declaring the end of the existing universal order based on the UN Charter, we are only helping Trump, and Putin. Instead, we should be actively building the alliance that upholds the order. That is not a coalition of middle powers, as Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney advocated in Davos. If we think of ourselves as just a middle power, we have already lost. The EU is a great power, a pole of the multipolar world that attracts middle powers to its cause by advancing a plan of action to maintain a rules-based order that serves all of their interests.

"Nous avons peur", the Belgian statesman Paul-Henri Spaak famously said to the UN General Assembly in 1948, referring to the Soviet Union. The point is not that today we rather fear the US, as some imply. Rather it is as if *"nous avons peur de nous-mêmes"*. We are afraid of our own boldness when we imagine a leading role for ourselves, and so we hesitate and temporise. If that remains our mindset, then we need not bother writing a new ESS. A new strategy only makes sense if it expresses a collective will to act. Having called for a new ESS, von der Leyen must now forge that coalition of the will.

Prof. Dr Sven Biscop lectures at Ghent University and is the acting Director-General of Egmont. His very first project when he started at Egmont in 2002, under the direction of Prof. Dr Rik Coolsaet, was a contribution to what would become the 2003 ESS. Twenty-four years later, the chance to contribute to a new ESS is "gefundenes Fressen". Sven warmly thanks his Egmont colleagues Victor De Decker and Bernard Siman for their inspiration.

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