

How Grand is Global?

Notes on a European Strategy

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European external relations clearly suffer from strategic and political deficits. Years of institutional and bureaucratic tampering have done little to boost the two most important parts of Europe as a global actor: an idea about where we should be heading and a political will to take us there. The assignment to draft a strategy for European external relations is therefore welcome but it also raises some fundamental questions about the EU as a foreign policy actor: can the Union really ‘do’ strategy and what sort of strategic concepts are applicable to a collective of states? Addressing these questions, this paper will elaborate on the concept of *Grand Strategy* which frequently has been heralded as the solution to Europe’s strategic deficit.¹ Indisputably, the task to draft a *European Global Strategy* is a grand one. That, however, does not necessarily turn the end result into a grand strategy. While both of these strategic concepts aim at clarifying the relationship between means, vital ends and the environment in which they play out, they are not synonymous. As an example, a global strategy – especially from a European vantage point – arguably raises fundamental questions about the state and its sovereignty. As such it questions the very foundation of traditional grand strategizing.

The paper starts off with a discussion on what strategy could contribute to European cooperation. It then analyses the concept of grand strategy and its underpinnings before elaborating on how the planned global strategy could be based on this concept. Arguing that it can be, the paper concludes by laying out some of the consequences of such a choice, and reiterates that an idea about where Europe should be heading is only one of the missing parts of European external relations: any strategic direction must be followed by political will.

¹ See for example J Howorth, “The EU as a Global Actor: Grand Strategy for a Global Grand Bargain?,” in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 48, 2010, 455–474, and S Biscop, “Raiders of the lost art: Strategy-making in Europe” paper submitted to the Warsaw EGS-seminar, October 2012.

The point of departure

The European Union is in no shortage of strategic documents, outlining its ambitions and preferred means in a variety of policy areas. These relate to external affairs (trade, aid or foreign policy), internal affairs and relations among EU member states (internal security, single market), or cover some specific area that is supposed to bridge the above mentioned spheres (e.g. counter-terrorism). Each of these matches specific means to a selected end, be it development, security or growth. None however, takes a bird's view of how the EU, as the political expression of the continent's 500 million citizens, can maximise its influence and help shape global affairs according to its preferences. While this is understandable considering our history – the ever closer Union was meant to replace power politics, not excel at it – we are now facing an environment that is fundamentally different from the one that shaped European cooperation.

Currently, Europeans are shaken by the economic crisis while the poles of the evolving multipolar order are acting strategically in order to shape the future global system. Parallel to this, globalization is recasting the world economy at an unprecedented pace: commercial entities outgrow states, financial flows have grown out of control for any single state and from a global viewpoint Europe will soon be made up only of small states. A clear European formulation of what the emerging global order should look like, our place in it and how we will get there would in this situation fill several important functions. First, it would clarify for Europeans themselves what their basic values and interests are. Hopefully – almost 70 years after the Second World War and more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin wall – it could contribute to a new narrative of what European integration is about when internal peace is secured. But on a less lofty level, a strategy would help the Union to prioritise its external engagements and resources, something that is never more relevant than under times of scarcity. A strategy of a grander scale is hence necessary. But what would such an overarching global strategy be made up of, and who is it really for?

Attributes of a Grand Strategy

Quite a few scholars and analysts have made the case for a European grand strategy. Popularly defined as “the calculated relationship of means to large ends”, grand strategy has a long pedigree in the crossroads of history, political science and diplomacy.² While being a rather elusive concept, grand strategy has a few unmistakable characteristics. First, it clearly departs from an understanding of interests. While issue or sector specific strategies might be reactive, i.e. relating to external threats or opportunities, a grand strategy is meant to maximize gains in relation to the articulated interests of the actor. As such, having a grand strategy is dependent on having a clear view of one’s interests, or, as Sun Tzu stressed, knowing yourself.

Second, grand strategy is an instrument for powerful actors and them alone. To borrow from Thucydides, the strong have much to gain from a grand strategy in doing what they have the power to do, while the weak have little use of it when accepting what they have to accept.³

Third, grand strategy, at least in its traditional usage, is deeply intertwined with military power and the objective of winning wars. While other ends might be equally relevant today (maintaining a liberal world order, protecting vital ecological systems, securing flows of trade and information etc), “the fighting of wars and the management of states have demanded the calculation of relationships between means and ends for a longer stretch of time than any other documented area of collective

² J Gaddis, “Grand Strategy in the Post Cold War World” in T Henriksen, “Foreign Policy for America in the Twenty-first Century”, Stanford, California, Hoover Institution, 2001

³ W Murray, “Thoughts on grand Strategy” in W Murray, RH Sinnreich and J Lacey, “The shaping of grand strategy”. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

human activity”.⁴ As an illustration of this, Basil Liddell Hart – perhaps the most influential modern strategist – expanded on prior strategic thought by placing grand strategy above the context of military power, but he didn’t lift the concept beyond the context of war (although, to be fair, he recommended keeping an eye on ‘the subsequent peace’).⁵

Fourth and alluded to in the quote above, the principal proprietor of a grand strategy is a state or even a nation-state. Indeed, it is the preservation of Westphalian sovereignty that is the very essence of a grand strategy. This state-centric focus of grand strategy is reinforced by the fact that nationalism, ever since the French revolution, has proven extremely effective in mobilizing the full capacity of a territory towards a common goal.

Fifth, from the British strategy to master the seas to the US strategy of containing communism, grand strategy is intrinsically linked to the territory of both the strategic actor and the goal it seeks to attain. Grand strategy thus inevitably has a geopolitical element to it.

Finally grand strategy – or at least the successful formulation and execution of it – is closely tied to effective and far-sighted leadership. History is replete with political leaders who were either blinded by ideology and hence misread their external environment, or who lost track of long term interests in their pursuit of short-term goals or re-election. Grand strategy is only helpful in as far as political leaders have the capacity to focus on long term interests, adjust their assumptions and tactics in the face of changing elements while simultaneously avoid being overwhelmed by day-to-

⁴ J Gaddis, “What is grand strategy?” Karl Von Der Heyden Distinguished Lecture, Duke University, February 2009, available at <www.duke.edu/web/agsp/grandstrategypaper.pdf>

⁵ B Liddell Hart, “Strategy” 2ed. Meridan Books 1991

day events and decision making.⁶ In the modern fast-paced and information-rich world, such leadership is not only dependent on personal qualities but also on high quality decision making structures and bureaucratic capacities for strategic intelligence analysis and long term planning.

How grand can a global strategy be?

All of these characteristics point towards important and possibly conflicting elements when transposed to an EU format. Can the European Union even have a grand strategy or must the planned European global strategy be something inherently different?

Starting with of interests and self-perception, it is the very aim of the global strategy project to draft a strategy based on interests and values rather than threats. The values are already present in the treaties while the interests are rather hinted at. In the case of the EU, knowing yourself as a political actor comes down to whether members share a common understanding of the Union. Current debates on the challenges facing the euro system and the level or type of integration needed to stabilize it indicate that member states have rather different perceptions about the EU; what it is, what it should be, and whether they should be part of it at all.

Considering the attributes of power and military might, it can be – and indeed has been – discussed to what extent the EU is or can be a powerful actor. The Union clearly possesses ‘actorness’ of some sort but the nature of its power is less obvious. In a European global strategy it must be clear what sort of power the Union aspires to yield and what sort of influence that could result in. Clearly, such power will not predominantly be military (Europe’s relative decline in that area makes it an unsecure

⁶ W Murray, “Thoughts on grand Strategy” in W Murray, RH Sinnreich and J Lacey, “The shaping of grand strategy”. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

base on which to promote our interests) although military capacity will need to be part of it.

One area where the ambition of a European global strategy collides with the traditional notion of grand strategy is regarding state-centrism. Not only because a European strategy will have to guide the behavior of a collective of states acting through a semi-autonomous organization, but also because it will relate to challenges where states are not the dominant actors. As an example, when trying to safeguard human security or securing eco-systems, a single state – and its claims to sovereignty – constitutes more of a problem than a solution. At the same time, states are still the proprietors of most power resources and seem unwilling to cede any of their prerogatives. A European global strategy must relate to this and preferably offer a roadmap for how Europe can navigate a global system that simultaneously houses pre-modern, modern and post-modern states.⁷

The link between territory and strategy raises several challenges from a European perspective. For starters, the Union displays a remarkable geographical diversity: from land-locked city-states to island kingdoms, from alpine states to countries partly below sea-level. Forging a common strategy based on geopolitical reasoning alone will not come easy. Adding to this complexity is the fact that Europe, at least as a polity, is a non-determined territory. It is yet to be decided where it ends and the possible extensions include territories crossed by the Arctic Circle as well as the Euphrates. Apart from this diversity and even uncertainty regarding its own territory, how are spatial dimensions such as space or even non-territorial dimensions such as cyber-space inserted in a strategic framework? Whatever the answers, a European global strategy will need to problematize and perhaps breach the grand strategic link between territory and strategy.

⁷ I use these concepts as elaborated in R Cooper, “The Breaking of Nations – Order and chaos in the twenty-first century” London: Atlantic books, 2004.

Finally, the demand for effective and far-sighted leadership offers a number of challenges for an ad-hoc driven, consensus searching bargaining organization like the EU. A discussion on what institutional and political elements need to be in place for an effective interpretation and execution of strategy is vital, while perhaps not part of the strategy itself.

Conclusion: a strategic Europe in a post-Westphalian world?

Considering the discussion above, to what extent is the concept of grand strategy applicable to the EU? In many regards, I would argue that the Union is well equipped for grand strategizing: the planned strategy will depart from common values and interests, the Union constitutes a powerful actor (at least in some fields), it has the capacity for long-term perspectives and its ambition to harness and intertwine political, trade, aid, foreign and security policy is indicative of the all-embracing outlook that is pertinent to strategy on a grander scale. At the same time, the discussion above illustrates that other characteristics of grand strategy might be difficult to transpose to a common European level. Europe seems to have little future as a military power, it is clearly not a unitary state and both its territory and its structure are in flux. Still, these are perhaps more characteristic of the actors that traditionally have done grand strategy than of the strategy itself. But if Europe wants to become a grand strategic actor without becoming a militarily powerful state with a well defined territory, certain aspects need to be considered.

The first relates to change versus stability. Two dimensions are relevant here: the nature of the strategy and the nature of the actor. Grand strategies are often said to be either transformative or preservative.⁸ The former is more ambitious but also more costly and prone to backfire. When considering the actor itself the EU is unique in the

⁸ R H Sinnreich, "Patterns of grand strategy" in W Murray, RH Sinnreich and J Lacey, "The shaping of grand strategy". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

sense that it is in constant flux; its membership, its rules and its tasks are in constant transformation. Arguably, an actor that in itself is in constant transformation should neither opt for a strategy of preservation nor one that simply reacts to changes set about by events or other actors. Europe should complement its crisis and risk management perspectives with opportunity creation, in more general terms, it should supplement its preventive diplomacy with proactive diplomacy. This could, for example, mean more ambitious programs to encourage democratic transition in the near abroad or a drive to build a more legitimate global governance system. Indeed, contrary to conventional wisdom, with the current levels of global transformation a preservative strategy might be even more hazardous than a transformative one.

Second, the fact that the EU constitutes a less unitary actor than most other strategic actors means that it will have to pick its priorities carefully. However, only looking at areas where high levels of interest commonalities already exist will rule out the sort of overarching quality that a strategy aims for. Consequently, a strategy must not simply be a tool for channelling political will, but also a tool for fostering it. As such, it should include resolute goals that can be pursued now (perhaps relating to climate, innovation, democracy promotion) as well as more general principles with a longer time horizon and where engagement can be stepped up over time.

Finally, a grand strategy from an EU perspective, as already alluded to above, need to relax the focus on states and their perceived sovereignty rather than reinforcing it. As an example: one vital interest frequently re-stated in strategy documents is the preservation of “autonomy of decision-making”.⁹ But is that a realistic or even desirable condition to aim for? The strategy should help us to navigate the complex global system currently under construction. No doubt the interconnected challenges we are currently facing demand international and transnational cooperation on an

⁹ For a current example, see S Biscop, “Raiders of the lost art: Strategy-making in Europe” paper submitted to the Warsaw EGS-seminar, October 2012.

unprecedented level. To a large extent, the level of intra-European cooperation following the Second World War has been achieved thanks to nation states selectively giving up their decision-making autonomy. Why should the collective of these European states aim for the preservation of autonomy when engaging with other world actors in order to solve common challenges? Whether talking about individuals or eco-systems, Europeans are spearheading the view that protection must be assured beyond national frameworks. This is an issue that is likely to become a dividing line between global actors in the years to come and one where a European strategy should give clear guidance.

To conclude, in its aim for an overarching strategy for its external affairs, the EU clearly has much to learn from both historical and contemporary endeavors to articulate a grand strategy. However, even the best of strategies will prove an empty vessel without political will; a will both to actually matter to the world but also a will to transform ourselves in order to make it possible. This is perhaps the greatest irony of European grand strategy: to let go of national prerogatives and old habits that stand in the way of a truly strategic Europe demands considerable levels of political will. To steer us towards global irrelevance demands nothing at all.

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