

# REASSESSING THE EUROPEAN SECURITY STRATEGY IN AN AGE OF AUSTERITY

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**Abstract:** *The current European Security Strategy was drafted in the strategic context of 2003 and (unsubstantially) revised in 2008. More than a decade later, the dramatic changes in the international context have important implications for EU's strategic position and cast doubt on the relevance of the existing conceptual framework. Despite the efforts of some member states and various scholars, think-tanks and policy-makers advocating for a new strategic document, the much anticipated European Council of December 2013 - a body which could have provided a genuine impetus for such a change - remained silent on the issue. The author herein argues that a reassessment of the Security Strategy is more needed than ever if the EU is to remain a major global actor in times of crisis.*

**Keywords:** European Union; security; foreign policy; European Security Strategy; neighbourhood; strategic partners; global actor; economic crisis

## INTRODUCTION

In a turbulent and uncertain security environment marked by countervailing trends of unprecedented interdependence, on the one hand and of deepening rivalries and frictions on the global scene, on the other hand - the current European Security Strategy (ESS) provides little guidance on EU's core interests and instruments to advance and secure such commonly defined interests and values. Intertwined factors including the shift of wealth and political influence to "rising" (or resurgent) powers accelerated by the effects of the economic crisis, the US "pivoting" to Asia-Pacific, the complex mix of traditional and post-modern security threats, as well the rapidly deterioration in security in Europe's southern and eastern neighbourhood – force the EU to abandon its inner-looking and reactive approach to security developments and seek with renewed vigour unity of purpose and action; yet, financial constraints severely limit the means to achieve such goals – thus, prioritization becomes vital.

The structure of this paper unfolds as follows. The first section reviews the core provisions of the 2003 ESS and of the subsequent Implementation Report, while briefly discussing their particular contexts. The second section examines the main arguments for revising the ESS – which refer to a mix of internal and external factors altering the reality in which EU functions. Lastly, the third section

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analyzises the outcomes of the December 2013 European Council and highlights several for and against arguments for a reappraisal of the ESS.

## 1. THE EUROPEAN SECURITY STRATEGY (2003) AND THE REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ESS (2008)

Primarily driven by the Transatlantic rifts over the war in Iraq, the first ESS was drafted “in a swift and rather exceptional manner” by a team led by Javier Solana (Andersson *et al.*, 2011, p. 5) and was approved by the EU leaders on 12 December 2003 under the title “A Secure Europe in a Better World”. The document was well received as a clear, concise and accessible expression of EU’s political project, ambitions and role in the world, yet its importance was to be primarily found in its significance, rather than in its actual content: by asserting its own security identity and its distinct approach to foreign and security policy, the EU made a consistent step towards building a “viable, active, and influential collective presence” (Toje, 2010, p.172). The ESS opens with an (overly) optimistic introductory phrase emphasizing that “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure, nor so free” and advances a “call to duty” (Biscop, 2005, p.15) by stating EU’s global aspirations: “Europe should be ready to share in the responsibility for a global security and in building a better world.” Briefly, three major strategic objectives are outlined for the EU: first, addressing a wide range of global challenges and security threats – including regional conflicts, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, state failure, organized crime, disease and destabilizing poverty, with the 2008 *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy* adding piracy, cyber security, energy security and climate change to the list; second, building regional security in the neighborhood – the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean region and the Middle East; and third, seeking the development of a multilateral, rule-based international order in which international law, peace and security are guaranteed by strong and well-functioning regional and global organizations (A Secure Europe in a Better World—European Security Strategy, 2003). In calling for a EU that is more *active*, more *capable*, more *coherent* and *works with others*, the Strategy sets forth EU’s principles and *modus operandi* in addressing security matters: *integration* by acknowledging the multidimensional character of security and pursuing a comprehensive security agenda beyond the traditional politico-military dimension; *global scope* by acknowledging that global action is essential for achieving comprehensive security; “*preventive engagement*” which implies a proactive prevention of conflicts and instability in the attempt to tackle the root causes of emerging security challenges with a broader range of coordinated instruments and capabilities; and finally, institutionalized and rule-based *multilateralism* and *cooperation with partners* as a prerequisite for addressing global, comprehensive security threats and for legitimizing the use of coercive measures (Biscop, 2005). The preference for this approach in addressing security threats reflects the widely held belief within the EU that the international system was developing into a principles-based, normative, multilateral world order where “soft power” tools

such as strengthening governance and human rights and providing economic development assistance would take precedence over power politics, military means and coercion (Bailes, 2005). In the years following the adoption of the ESS, several key developments occurring within and outside the EU made the reappraisal of the Strategy a matter of urgency: the “Big Bang” enlargement brought new actors to the table, many of which had not been included in the drafting process of the original document; the return of intra-state warfare in Europe and a resurgence of power politics marked by the Russia-Georgia war in 2008; the emergence or intensification of post-modern security challenges such as the outbreaks of the H5N1 (2006) and H1N1(2008) pandemics, the increasingly frequent cyber-attacks, and the devastating effects of climate change; the severe crisis weakening the West economically, politically and ideologically and accelerating the power shift to the East. As a result, several member states – such as France and Sweden - were more vocal in pushing for a revised ESS, a proposal which failed to gain the British and German support for several reasons including fears of reopening uncomfortable debates about Russia; concerns about a potential deepening of divergent views among the “old” and “new” members, which could have hampered the ongoing efforts to approve the Lisbon Treaty; or worries about an “end product” with a less ambitious purpose than the 2003 ESS (Andersson *et al.*, 2011). Instead, compromise was reached by drafting an “Implementation Report” called – similarly to the 2003 Strategy - “Providing security in a changing world” (European Council, February 2008). Although initially intended to sum up the emergent transformations of the security environment and evaluate the progress made on the ESS, the Report does not provide concrete recommendations for change, nor any follow-up mechanisms, generally reflects an abandonment of great power aspirations and remains focused on the *process* rather than on the *ends*, thus largely constituting “a return to the *status quo ante*” (Toje, 2011, p.189).

## 2. CALLING FOR THE REVISION OF THE EUROPEAN SECURITY STRATEGY

In this context, during recent years a significant number of individual scholars, think-tanks and policy-makers - supported by some member states<sup>1</sup> - have consistently called for a reappraisal of the 2003 ESS. Although “intellectual weight does not equal power politics” (Biscop, 2012, p. 2), such endeavors have

<sup>1</sup> Two notable efforts in this regard include the “European Global Strategy” project developed in 2012 by the foreign ministers of Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden and a leading group of European think-tanks with the purpose of fostering debates on EU’s global actorness in the context of major international shifts (Towards a European Global Strategy. Securing European Influence in a Changing World, 2013) and the similar “Think Global-Act European. Thinking Strategically about EU’s External Action” initiative of Notre Europe and other think-tanks calling for “new strategic reflection on the EU’s role as a global power, allowing the EU to achieve a new and open outlook on the evolution of the new trends that are reshaping our current world order” (Notre Europe, 2013, Introduction).

nonetheless raised awareness on the urgency of initiating a reflection process on strategy, especially in the context of severe budgetary constraints when the scarcity of resources makes prioritization even more important. Broadly, scholarly suggestions for such a reassessment fell into one of the following three categories of solutions: reinvigorating the ESS – namely, identifying and addressing implementation problems of the initial document; revising the ESS – which would imply updating EU's strategic goals and instruments in line with the current global context; or reinventing it – specifically, drafting 'a grand strategy' with a more ambitious and broader approach towards Europe's role on the global stage (for a comprehensive analysis see Andersson *et al.*, 2011). Irrespective of the preferred option, a wide consensus is seemingly emerging in the academic *milieu* that such an endeavor should primarily focus on *substance* instead of form or process, as reviewing the ESS does not constitute an end in itself, but rather one means of launching the debate on a future grand strategy (Biscop, 2012).

Arguments supporting a reassessment of the ESS make reference to a mix of internal and external developments shaping the reality in which EU operates. Internally, the EU is confronted with domestic security challenges which remain connected to the external ones, as according to the Internal Security Strategy (ISS) – drafted in 2010 as an internal counterpart of the ESS - “internal security cannot be achieved in isolation from the rest of the world, and it is therefore important to ensure coherence and complementarity between the internal and external aspects of EU security” (The EU Internal Security Strategy in Action: Five steps towards a more secure Europe, 2010), which explains “a certain redundancy [...] between the challenges identified in both the ESS and ISS” (Renard, 2014, p.2). As a result, non-proliferation, terrorism, organised crime and cyber security are singled out as key priorities for EU action in both documents. Additionally, the 2004/2007 enlargements have expanded the security agenda and have further complicated the decision-making process. The urgency of defining EU's shared, long-term interests, accommodate them with the upheld values and identify the instruments to secure those interests persists (Lehne, 2013). The innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty to improve the coherence of EU's foreign policy have raised a number of difficulties themselves; issues such as the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the mandate of the High Representative (HR), the new cooperation arrangements *via* Permanent Structured Cooperation, the implementation of EU's “mutual assistance” clause, and the fulfilment of new threat assessment obligations stipulated by EU's Solidarity Clause – generate concerns over institutional coordination, action coherence and unity of purpose among member states. Moreover, a coherent foreign and security policy is deemed vital for safeguarding EU's waning credibility and appeal both within the Union and globally; in times of crisis and growing mistrust in the EU integration project, a well-articulated Security Strategy could provide a “new attractive narrative” (Coelmont, 2012).

The external pressures generated by the long-term trend of power shift from the West to the East, the unprecedented level of global interdependence and interconnectedness coupled with an increasing rivalry for economic and political

influence, the complex mix of traditional and post-modern security threats, increased instability in Europe's southern and eastern neighbourhood – are just a few key challenges for the out-of-date Security Strategy. In the context of the US strategic rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific and the drastic budgetary cuts in defence spending on both sides of the Atlantic, EU member states are increasingly pressured to assume greater responsibility for their own security, especially in a periphery marked by violent protests and political unrest. An overreliance on US's key capabilities via NATO – as was the case of the intervention in Libya – no longer appears a viable option in the long-term: therefore, asserting European ownership of NATO by reinforcing the EU is vital for revitalizing the Transatlantic partnership. The current crisis in Ukraine has brought to the forefront questions about EU's willingness and ability to shape international developments in its neighbourhood (and beyond) in order to advance and safeguard its interests and values. Ten years after the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) it became clear that EU's plan of transforming its neighbourhood into a “ring of well-governed states” *via* a model derived from the EU enlargement process is far from meeting these ambitious goals. EU's response to the security crisis in its fragmented southern and eastern neighbourhood – marked by the return of power politics, dictatorships, military coups, failed states, insurgency, political and religious unrest, revolutions, wars and terrorist attacks – was largely reactive and defensive. A rethinking of the ENP within the wider framework of a new ESS would enable the revision of the “conceptual flaws and incoherent implementation” currently viciating the policy, such as the “one-size-fits-all” approach towards 16 diverse countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe grouped under the poorly-defined criteria of geographical proximity to the EU; an untailored model which does not suit either states seeking a close relation with the EU, or those avoiding a substantive bond with the EU; an Eurocentric conception ignoring the role of external actors within EU's neighbourhood; the over-prioritization of bilateral relations over regional approaches; unfit instruments for rapidly evolving security environments; and finally, a selective and inconsistent application of conditionality in its relation with its neighbours (Lehne, 2014).

The ongoing Ukrainian crisis has also led to reflections among strategic planners in Europe on whether the drastic cuts in European defence budgets have gone to extremes<sup>2</sup>, as it soon became clear that the end of the Iraq War and the ongoing drawdown from Afghanistan have not marked the end of crisis threatening Western security. Undoubtedly, the financial and economic crisis had a critical impact on military spending in EU member states, yet the fact that the European military “*malaise*” has been a constant reality for the past twenty years indicates that root causes are of *political* nature, rather than economic (Rogers, 2013). In this context, during the EU-US Summit on 26 March, 2014 President Barack Obama

<sup>2</sup> As an exception, the Eastern and Northern European states have largely maintained the existent defence spending levels or are reviewing their level of military spending in the context of heightened perceived threats to their national security, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Sweden.

expressed his deep concerns about the decreasing spending levels of most NATO European states and emphasized that: “The situation in Ukraine reminds us that our freedom isn’t free, and we’ve got to be willing to pay for the assets, the personnel, the training that’s required to make sure that we have a credible NATO force and an effective deterrent force” (The White House, March 26, 2014). Also, during the EU Defence Ministers talks in Luxembourg NATO Secretary General Rasmussen warned that “Every Ally has a part to play in this effort. NATO keeps us all secure and we must all continue investing to keep NATO strong. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine shows that we cannot simply take our security for granted” (NATO, April 15, 2014). In a similar vein, in a speech to the 21<sup>st</sup> International Conference on Euro-Atlantic Security in Krakow, NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow described Russia’s aggressive actions in Ukraine as a “wake-up call” for the Euro-Atlantic community: while reaffirming the US commitment to Europe’s security, the Ambassador stressed the importance of European nations stepping up their efforts “to match the US commitment - both politically and militarily” (NATO, April 4, 2014). To cite but one recent example, NATO’s Operation Unified Protector in Libya (2011) has clearly revealed the Transatlantic “capability gap”: after Washington transferred command and control to NATO, the US continued to play a critical role in OUP by making available to the Alliance key military enablers such as strategic airlift, ISR, aerial refuelling, command-and-control, and target-analysis capabilities, which the Europeans either lacked or did not have enough (Baltrusaitis, D., Duckenfield M.E., 2012). Within a relatively short timeframe, a number of NATO Allies expressed concerns about depleted stocks of precision guided bombs; Italy withdrew its Garibaldi carrier to cut military spending; France pulled out its Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier for maintenance while the UK military was also strained in the low-intensity conflict. The intervention in Libya was also indicative for the US shift towards a “leading from behind” new model of leadership in NATO operations deemed of lesser strategic importance in the context of budgetary constraints and a strategic reorientation towards Asia-Pacific; although providing key military assets which secured the success of the operation, US retained a “support role” and let the European Allies and NATO partner countries provide the bulk of the combat sorties while also deciding to withhold capabilities such as the A-10 Thunderbolt II or AC-130 Spectre gunships (Hallams, E., Schreer, B., 2012). The EU’s absence as a collective actor from a medium-scale, low-intensity mission in Europe’s immediate neighbourhood raised questions on the CSDP’s relevance as well as on EU’s willingness and ability to step up its efforts to meet its level of ambition as a pivotal security provider on the global stage (Howorth, 2013). It goes without saying that EU member states will have to possess the military capabilities to work together with allies and partners while competing with emergent powers to protect the European “homeland” from conventional or unconventional attacks and safeguard a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighbourhood, but also to maintain a strong influence in zones of privileged interest (Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, “the neighbours of the neighbours” – from Mali to Somalia, from the Gulf to Central Asia) and critical sea lanes in the “Indo-Pacific” (from Suez to

Shanghai) and the “wider North”; to secure maritime communication lines and strategic communications infrastructure, as well as to ensure access to energy supplies and raw materials in overseas territories and guarantee access to “global commons”; and lastly, to uphold European values *via* international law and an inclusive multilateralism (Missiroli, 2013). Yet, European defence budgets have been shrinking since the end of the Cold War. Since the beginning of the financial and economic crisis in 2008, declining budgets are not a reality only in Central Europe or in Western European states severely affected by crisis: reduction in military spending of over 10 per cent in real terms since 2008 has been observed in Austria, Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK and all countries in Central Europe – with the exception of Poland (Perlo-Freeman and Solmirano, 2014). Although still the top spender in 2013, the US has reduced its military expenditure by 7.8 per cent in real terms to \$640 billion (with \$20 billion of the \$44 billion nominal fall being attributed to the reduction in outlays for Overseas Military Operations mainly in Afghanistan and Iraq); France, UK, Italy and Canada significantly reduced their spending as well. In contrast, China’s expenditure increased by 7.4 per cent in real terms according to its policy of rising its military spending in line with economic growth. For the first time since 2003 Russia spent a larger share of its GDP on the military compared to the US, as a result of the implementation of the State Armaments Plan for 2011-2020 according to which \$705 billion will be spent on new and upgraded military equipment. Saudi Arabia rose from the seventh to the fourth place among the 15 countries with the highest military expenditure and has the highest military burden compared to any of the largest spenders.

From a regional perspective, in 2013 military spending has fallen in the West – namely in North America, Western and Central Europe and Oceania while increasing in every region and subregion outside the West: in Asia and Oceania, military expenditure increased by 3.6 per cent and reached \$407 billion; in the Middle East, military expenditure increased by 4 per cent in real terms in 2013 and 56 per cent between 2004-2013, reaching approximately \$150 billion; Africa had the largest relative rise in military spending compared to any region (by 8.3 per cent), reaching \$ 44.0 billion; while in Latin America, military spending increased by 2.2 per cent in real terms in 2013 and by 61 per cent between 2004-2013. Reasons of concern also stem from the fact that since 2004, 23 states have doubled their military spending in real terms<sup>3</sup> - these countries being situated in *all* regions of the world, *except for* North America, Western and Central Europe and Oceania (Perlo-Freeman and Solmirano, 2014). Thus, it becomes obvious that the economic decline and “de-militarization” trend within the EU has its mirror image in the assertiveness of emergent powers with an increasing economic, political and military weight on the global scene. Clear guidance on how to engage with these new poles of power is therefore indispensable; yet, the current ESS is vague and

<sup>3</sup> Mostly due to strong economic growth in GDP, such as China or Angola, to high oil or gas revenues discovered or exploited recently – such as the case of Ghana -, or to armed conflict or dangerous ongoing frozen conflicts such as Ukraine, Armenia or Azerbaijan.

incomplete in this respect. The 2003 ESS affirms the need to pursue EU's objectives "both through multilateral cooperation in international organizations and through partnerships with key actors" and mentions in this context six countries: the US which in the light of the transatlantic relation is "irreplaceable"; Russia, deemed "a major factor in our security and prosperity"; Japan, China, Canada and India, the list remaining opened for "all those that share our goals, and are prepared to act in their support". Unlike the ESS which does not articulate strategic partnerships as tools of EU foreign policy, the 2008 Report on the implementation of the ESS views partnerships as instruments for pursuing effecting multilateralism; however, it does not draw any clear delineations between partnerships with multilateral institutions, regional bodies or states and therefore, fails to mention criteria for coordinating distinct levels of engagement (Grevi, 2010). The 2008 ESS review adds vague references to Brazil and South Africa, as well as to Norway and Switzerland as key partners. Nonetheless, strategic partnerships remain poorly conceptualized, with no clear definition or distinction among different partnerships which are "neither identical, nor equal" (Renard, 2010). An overarching strategy clarifying the main interests and objectives of the EU would help identify strategic partners according to whether they meaningfully contribute to advancing or achieving the set goals, and would also prevent an uncoordinated establishment of such partnerships. More importantly, a new strategy clarifying EU's strategic ambitions would facilitate the achievement of focus, unity of purpose and political authority it currently lacks in its relations with pivotal partners (Hess, 2012).

### **3. DOES DEFENCE REALLY MATTER? THE DECEMBER 2013 EUROPEAN COUNCIL**

In December 2013, the European Council discussed defense and security policy for the first time since 2008 and represented the first occasion when NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen attended the Council's meeting. Expectations were high, but disappointment soon followed. The December meeting was originally expected to be "*the* Defence Council" (McDonnell, 2014), yet deliberations on security were to a large extent overshadowed by other pressing matters - such as those related to economic recovery and job creation. The introductory phrase of the European Council's Conclusions emphasizes that "defence matters". Yet, the meeting was largely regarded as failing to provide a strong political impetus for a clear and comprehensive debate on EU's "overall strategy", which has further fueled criticism on EU's waning influence and credibility both at home and on the international stage (Hatzigeorgopoulos, 2013, p. 3).

Even so, the European Council made several decisions in the realm of security and defence in three distinct areas, as follows: first, to enhance the effectiveness of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) – by launching a general call to improve EU rapid response capabilities, by establishing an EU Maritime Security Strategy until June 2014 and by developing an EU Cyber Defence Policy Framework by the end of 2014; second, to strengthen EU's defence

capabilities – by increasing member states' cooperation through "Pooling and Sharing" initiatives and the European Defence Agency (EDA) and specifically, by working to develop capabilities such as long-range reconnaissance drones, air-to-air refuellers, satellite communications and cyber assets; and finally, to boost Europe's industrial defense sector- by creating an EU-wide defence market and setting three priorities for the Commission, namely to promote research into technologies which can be applied both in the defence and the civilian sector, to harmonize industrial standards across member states and increase Small and Medium Enterprises' (SMEs) access to the defence sector (European Council, 2013). Despite the adoption of several specific commitments, the outcomes of the Council were described as "rather disappointing", largely because "no agreement was reached on what is probably the most urgent need, namely the revision of the ten-year-old EU Security Strategy" (Ricci, 2014). Seemingly, such modest results were hardly surprising for many commenters given the widespread doubts about the Council's ability to achieve ground-breaking progress on security matters. Critics have drawn attention to member states' lack of a common strategic outlook leading to divergent security agendas and to uncoordinated budgetary cuts (de France and Witney, 2013); their failure to foster a shared ambition which most often results in "political commonplaces or incremental bureaucratic progress" (Linnenkamp and Mölling, 2013, p.2) and the complicated circumstances both at national and EU levels preceding or following the December European Council - including the elections in Germany in September 2013, the British preference for bilateral commitments marked by the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties with France and key personnel changes in 2014 within the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council and the EEAS which will bear a significant influence on the implementation of any Council Conclusions. Similarly, other concerns emphasized the risks of deepening divisions among member states in times of crisis; of obtaining a document with even narrower provisions than the 2003 ESS; or of unnecessarily diverting attention away from the more pressing matters such as the sovereign debt and banking crisis, the record rise of Euro skepticism, enlargement fatigue and democratic deficits (Drent and Landman, 2012). According to some views, the reappraisal of the ESS is not only a futile initiative given that "within the EU, strategic documents are too often seen as an alternative to, rather than a guide for action", but also utterly damaging by generating a wide gap between stated objectives and actual outcomes (Menon, 2014, p.19). Yet, avoiding addressing national differences will not help mitigate divergent agendas: instead, by reopening debates on a new ESS, convergence of purpose and action among member states could be achieved easier by the explicit endorsement of existing common interests. Additionally, as financial constraints have forced member states to streamline their resources for foreign and security policies, a new ESS would better reflect these altered conditions and would prevent the reemergence of the "capabilities-goal" gap: "neither the EU nor its member states can afford to produce a shopping list, or have an 'apple-pie'-style global strategy" (Faleg, 2013, p. 6), hence the need for clear guidance on EU's strategic interests, level of ambition and means to achieve these goals. Moreover, by

ensuring a guiding framework for other sector-specific sub-strategies, a renewed ESS would enable their implementation, reassess and clarify EU's strategic priorities and enhance its visibility and political weight globally.

However, on a positive note, advancing two sector-specific initiatives at the European Council in December – the maritime strategy and cyber defense – might be the first (shy) steps towards a broader revision of the ESS in the near future, while the decision of concentrating the works of the European Council in June 2015 on defence could indicate the Council's commitment to pursue improvements in European security and defense with renewed strength.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, the deep and cross-cutting transformations occurring in the international security environment have increased the urgency of a revised, reinvigorated, or more ambitiously reinvented EU strategic response to emerging key challenges. At the same time, the economic recession has broad geopolitical implications, affecting EU's "hard power" – given that the global economic crisis has impacted countries and regional balances of power in the world – and "soft power" alike – as the credibility and attractiveness of the EU model are waning both domestically and externally. In this context, establishing a set of commonly defined strategic priorities and interests, while also providing the necessary instruments to achieve them is important – if "defence matters" indeed for the EU.

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