One Step Back, Two Steps Ahead
Revisiting the ESS: Toward the EU as a Regional Player

By Tobias Franke

“If we try to defend everywhere we defend nowhere.”
-Colonel George Kilburn

The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) has been welcomed for outlining clearly what challenges the EU faces and how it seeks to tackle them. In other words, it states for the first time how the EU sees itself as a security actor in the international arena. However, almost five years down the line, much of the initial enthusiasm has vanished and one comes to realize that the ESS, like so many EU policy documents, is haunted by an old friend: the gap between high ambitions and actual performance. Nevertheless there seems to be reason for optimism. A plan for better implementation of the ESS was presented by the High Representative Javier Solana in December 2008. Paired with the energies of the outgoing French presidency, in the realm of European security and defence this can eventually lead to a full revision of the ESS in 2009. Contrary to the 2003 ESS, which was sparked by the externally introduced division over Iraq, a revised version could concentrate on internal motivations to re-assess the EU’s security actorness and tackle the question of how to narrow the ambition-performance gap.

The spectrum of approaches to bridge this fissure is wide and ranges from a plan to enhance the EU’s powers in order to claim a stronger place in the center of world affairs to rolling-back the EU’s engagement or even settling for the rather provocative idea of ‘comfortable irrelevance.’ Taking into account the special character of the EU as a security actor, this paper’s point of departure is from somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. By analyzing the ESS, it will identify five key questions: What is the geographical scope of the EU’s security ambitions? What threats does the EU face? What precisely

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are the objectives Brussels seeks to achieve, and interests it seeks to defend, and what capabilities does the EU need toward these ends? How – if at all – will it use force to counter threats? How will it structure its interaction with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?

While considering the overlap of these questions, this paper nevertheless chooses geography as a starting point for analysis. The ESS in its current form displays the strain between ‘building security in our neighborhood’ and ‘building a better world’ but appears to position itself more in the realm of a global actor while the EU – given its limited capacities – might not be capable yet of assuming this role. Hence, would a more precise and narrower focus on the region allow the EU to do less — but better? Put differently, if a revised ESS took one step back, might this allow two steps forward in its performance as a security actor? Instead of stressing that the EU is ‘inevitably a global player,’ authors such as Carl Bildt and Roberto Menotti have suggested that the ESS might want to seek to contribute to global security by being an effective regional player.

This paper aims to pursue and expand on this idea. It therefore argues that narrowing the geographical scope of the ESS, i.e. positioning the EU as a regional rather than a global security actor, will create positive externalities that can contribute to solving other underlying tensions within ESS discourse. In the long run, such a regional focus has the potential to narrow the gap between expectations and performance.

The Challenge of Geography

Terry Terriff stresses the importance of the link between geography and strategy, as the geographical realm ought to determine the policy orientation of an entity. More precisely, Michael Sheehan asserts that, “location, space, and distance influence the projection of political power.”7 In the absence of a clearly defined geographical scope, security strategies risk losing their applicability and focus. The broader strategy remains on this point, the more difficulties actors encounter in defining their own roles, and stakes and how to approach security measures. As David G. Hansen stated, geography, “knowledgeably and sensibly applied... is a discipline that can clarify strategic issues and increase the chances of success in any political, economic, or military endeavour.”8

If a revised ESS took one step back, might this allow two steps forward in its performance as a security actor?
Concerning this crucial issue, the ESS is still in a process of self-discovery. The ESS appears divided between its first part, highlighting global challenges and key threats, and its second part on strategic objectives, which includes a section on “building security in our neighbourhood.” The ESS fails to connect these parts in a way that they complement each other. The reader is left, therefore, with a discourse somewhat at odds with itself in which, as the European Council commented, “even in an era of globalisation, geography is still important” but “the first line of defence will often be abroad.” Additionally, the ESS states on the one hand that Europe has never been so secure, indicating the benefit of a narrower European region: but on the other hand one third of its text emphasizes the key threats that are inherently global in focus. In underscoring both the relative security and the eminent threats, the ESS displays a certain intellectual tension; as the European Council observed: “taking these different elements together...we could be confronted with a very radical threat indeed.” Interestingly, these contradictions are also reflected in the scholarly debate between two camps in the regional-global dispute. In the end, it appears safe to follow Felix Berenskoetter’s reasoning that “the EU’s strategic horizon is thus caught in an unresolved tension” between these two outlooks.

In sum, a narrower geographical focus implies more concerted efforts, potentially yielding more benefits for both the EU – by securing its area – and for neighbouring countries, which profit from more dedicated European action.

While acknowledging the arguments made by several member states, notably France, for the EU as a global actor, we can make a solid case for the EU as a regional player. To this end, we draw on what this paper calls the “pentagon of geostrategy” (Figure 1).

Firstly, asking the question of where to become active means asking where beneficial results can be achieved. In this context, Pedro Serrano avers that a narrower geographical scope is desirable, taking into account the “capacity for the EU to exercise its political clout. ESDP operations/actions will be more relevant in those places where the European Union’s political influence or impact is greater.” Further exploring this point, Sven Biscop demonstrates that norms and values from Brussels have the highest probability of being
shared or accommodated by neighbouring countries. Permanent and close interaction could then support the emergence of a security community of the EU and its environs.\textsuperscript{14} The European Parliament implicitly acknowledges this idea by outlining in its 2008 report on ESDP and the implementation of the ESS the significance of disputes and instability in the EU region, for example, Belarus, Transnistria, and South Ossetia.\textsuperscript{15} In sum, a narrower geographical focus implies more concerted efforts, potentially yielding more benefits for both the EU – by securing its area – and for neighbouring countries, which profit from more dedicated European action.

Secondly, the still limited capabilities of the EU add to the difficulties of conceiving and following up policies on a wide range of issues. Consequently, Steven Everts suggests limiting a revised ESS to three or four policy priorities that will “increase the chance of producing one or two much-needed successes.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, the fact that the ESS addresses the whole spectrum of possible international security challenges does not necessarily enhance either its performance or its standing in the eyes of the international community. Everts even goes as far as saying that “politicians should resist their current inclination to dream up a policy on all issues, regions and conflicts in the world.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus, a geographical limitation could enhance, rather than stifle, credibility.

Thirdly, since the end of the Cold War, member states have developed from an economic entity, which prospered under the U.S. security umbrella, into a political entity seeking to project power around the globe. Nonetheless, this development has been relatively rapid and might have gone too far too soon. In other words, in the security realm, the EU has grown from a child to an adult without maturing through puberty and still lacks the necessary experience. Hence, Klaus Becher notes that:

\begin{quote}
[The ESS and] its implications—including the need for active, sustained engagement in crisis areas outside Europe, transformed military and other security-sector capabilities that can underpin such risk-prone engagements, and a credible willing-
\end{quote}
ness to use force when necessary and legitimate—have not yet been fully realized and digested in most member states.\textsuperscript{18}

In this situation, EU security activity might limit its focus from the global to the EU’s own backyard, including the Balkans, Eastern Europe (in particular, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia), and the Caucasus. Such an adjustment would halve the current EU radius of action from 4,000 to 2,000 km (taking Brussels as the center point).

Fourthly, emphasizing the instabilities surrounding the EU encourages prioritization. For instance, as Menotti suggests, “a more detailed geopolitical vision” would help “to differentiate among levels of threat.”\textsuperscript{19} As the EU is “surrounded by regions with a high potential for problems and tensions,” explain Nicole Gnesotto and Giovanni Grévi, its security strategy could help restrict the geographical focus and thereby create a clearer vision of the direct risks to European security.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, the larger the EU’s geographical scope of action, the higher the probability of encountering difficulties in finding common ground among member states. The Balkans is the only region where the EU can adopt a more or less consistent strategic approach. The long-term goal of integrating these countries into the EU, the acceptance that these countries must be stabilized in order to ensure EU security, and the economic and political tools put at Brussels’ disposal (e.g. the Stabilization and Association Agreements) underscore this point.

\textit{Figure 1: The Pentagon of Geostrategy}

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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{pentagon_geostrategy.pdf}
\end{figure}
This consensus on common approaches slowly fades the farther one departs from the core European region. Concerning most countries outside the European continent, write Marc Leonard and Richard Gowan, “individual member-states maintain differing – and sometimes mutually contradictory – policies.”21 In the cases of Iraq, Chad, and the Congo, member states were divided even over the question of active engagement. Hence, it appears that the greatest potential to find common ground among the states lies in its direct vicinity. In this respect, Kilburn suggests that a “geographical limitation of the ESS, and consequently the EU’s civil-military actorness, would enhance cohesion.”22

Threat Perception

Scholars of international security, such as Sheehan, believe “the geographical element is crucial, because the sense of ‘threat’ is crucially shaped by geographical distance and terrain.”23 Moreover, one of the key questions for a security actor is who or what constitutes a threat, which is to some extent pre-conditioned by the geographical area of activity.

However, the ESS is once more caught in the dilemma between global and regional. While it does identify five key threats (terrorism, proliferation of WMDs, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime), it cannot provide uniform definitions for them. Its threat assessment therefore remains vague as it provides only a “common ground between the inevitably different threat perceptions”24 of the member states, explains Jean-Yves Haine. Biscop demonstrates this pull between regional and global by identifying terrorism and WMDs as essentially global threats, while a softer European approach is reflected in the enumeration of the other three threats. Haine calls this “an intra-European compromise”25 between globally oriented large member states and more regionally oriented small states. This may also explain why the ESS uses non-committal language such as may or could when talking about threats to European security.26 To some extent, this strain may also be explained by the need to display what Bildt describes as “a European awareness of the same new threats that had come to dominate U.S. thinking.”27 The danger, however, is that the ESS is more focused on, for example, international terrorism and new terrorism, neglecting the classic variant embodied by organizations such as ETA.28

Therefore, a revised ESS might show more confidence in defining what the EU, both as a regional actor and as an international entity with a special character, regards as threats to its security. A possible dilemma, resulting from a broader approach to threats, is analyzed by Seth G. Jones.29 He as-
asserts that the nature of a threat conditions the scope of military forces to be used. Thus, a greater threat would provoke high-end military responses, i.e. full military warfare, while a diminutive threat would trigger a low-end reaction, such as peacekeeping. However, as Jones points out, threats may be perceived differently, resulting in different levels of willingness for cooperation. Subsequently, Charles Lipson considers that “if actors prefer different outcomes, the range of possibilities creates bargaining problems. Which cooperative outcome should they choose?”\textsuperscript{30} Hence, we can assume that a narrower geography supports a clearer definition of threats, leading to two beneficial consequences: Firstly, states are more likely to have the same preferences; and secondly, states, although they may have different preferences for intervention, will be more likely to compromise. This becomes even more important considering the different levels of combat training which the separate European armed forces have received.\textsuperscript{31}

Taking into consideration the proposals from the first section, we can more clearly identify the threats to the EU. The instability in the Balkans, Moldova and the Caucasus undermines Europe’s security. In the EU region, the biggest threats to European security therefore appear to be what we will call “failing” states, in which organized crime is a key factor, facilitating human, drug and arms trafficking.\textsuperscript{32} Additionally, Russia and energy security, closely related to all of the abovementioned regions, should become a key priority. Furthermore, terrorism will remain an important threat to the EU, though its roots are essentially domestic and sometimes paired with (Islamic) fundamentalism.\textsuperscript{33} A revised ESS should therefore insist on a more “European” approach to terrorism and distinguish itself from Washington’s rather bold approach, which so far has done little to ease tensions with the Muslim world.

**Interests, Objectives, and Capabilities**

Academics are surprisingly united on the lack of clearly defined interests in the ESS. In the introduction, the ESS describes the EU as a global player not because of its values, missionary spirit, and interests but because of its GDP and population figures. Hence, responsibility is “taken on by default rather than by calling.”\textsuperscript{34} This shortcoming is mirrored in the ESS’ three strategic objectives: addressing threats, building security in the region, and an international order based on effective multilateralism.\textsuperscript{35} While they represent valuable objectives, the ESS does little to clarify or define them and hence stays so broad, every member state can read its favorite agenda into it. Under the third part (policy implications) the ESS then calls for a more capable EU. However the non-existence of clearly defined interests and objectives makes it hard for the ESS to answer the question of why and for what rationale
the EU would want certain capabilities. It cannot explain, therefore, what spectrum of civil and military capabilities it seeks to acquire. For instance, for what purpose (if at all) does the EU need to purchase costly transport planes? Moreover, no commitment can be found on either procurement or spending. Tomas Valášek, for example, points to the necessity of fixing a spending requirement for defence of at least 2% of GDP in the ESS. It seems that if interests and objectives were more precise, a clearer picture of necessary capabilities could emerge, and more rational rather than increased spending could be designed. In sum, the triangle of interests, objectives and capabilities materializes as a triangle without corners.

The need for a proper triangle becomes even more significant when considering the increasing necessity of public support for civil and military interventions. The defence sector’s request for more financial resources can only be met if the public can identify with the tasks at hand. In this respect, Barry R. Posen notes that, “if the strategy’s commitment to the pacification of Europe’s periphery were more explicit and distinctive it might catch on with European publics.” Hansen equally supports the idea that a narrower geography would clarify the actor’s objectives and thereby increase public support. Furthermore, Sheehan notes that a more precise geopolitical delineation and discourse can contribute to “creating the political identity of the domestic community,” subsequently increasing public backing. Data also indicates that issues nearer to Europe attract more public attention and support. Lending these arguments even more credence is the fact that the funding for CFSP is extremely limited – in 2006, for example, it amounted to a mere €103 million – which makes ESDP a scarce resource that ought to be used as such. Therefore, as Agnieszka Nowak writes, the EU should only engage “in those regions where the EU has key/vital interests, areas which have direct impact on Europe’s security,” which will most likely lie within Europe’s immediate neighborhood.

**Use of Force**

A key component of security strategy is determining what induces the actor to use (or not to use) force. In the case of the ESS, a comprehensive answer to this question becomes even more important as each member state retains a monopoly over legitimate violence, creating a tendency for diverging actions at the European level, often best described as “supranational inter-
The non-existence of clearly defined interests and objectives makes it hard for the ESS to answer the question of why and for what rationale the EU would want certain capabilities. Therefore, if we consider the EU’s narrowly defined region, the threats within this region, and the fact that we have defined stabilizing failing states as the EU’s main focus in order to create democratically governed countries in the EU region, then what can we infer about a UN mandate? We can assume that where vital EU interests are at stake, and this is the case in its region, a UN mandate should be a desirable but not a necessary precondition for the use of force. The European Council should be accorded the ultimate authority to legitimize violence as it would be a questionable approach to “delegate the security of our nations to a body that is often unwilling or unable to act responsibly and quickly.” It is also in the EU’s region that countries and citizens are more willing to accept a non-UN mandated mission. Previous experiences in the Balkan interventions and the will to accept sacrifices in this arena are testimony to this trend.

If the EU should get active outside of its clearly defined region, it should make a UN mandate a necessary precondition for the use of force. This inescapable double-standard can nevertheless signify a step forward in the sense that it could be agreed upon by the member states. It outlines a framework within which decisions for the use of force could be taken and, hence, might be able
to prevent future fissures between European capitals. Consequently, it can prevent that in crises states use the imprecision of the ESS as an excuse to put their heads in the sand.

Relations with the United States and NATO

On the issue of EU relations with the United States and NATO, the ESS neglects to make any profound reference to this topic at all. Therefore the strategy fails to address an important facet of the question of “who provides for security.”\textsuperscript{50} The ESS contents itself by stating that “the United States has played a critical role in European integration and European security, in particular through NATO,” without, however, specifying how future relation should look.\textsuperscript{51} The only hint about this relationship is the ESS’ vague call for “an effective and balanced partnership with the USA.”\textsuperscript{52}

In fact, the EU and the United States need each other, not least because they share common positions on numerous issues. Further, a revised ESS should not have to choose between positioning the EU as a rival or as an equal partner with the United States. The different natures of these two actors makes this an apples-to-oranges comparison. At the same time, a new strategy should refrain from painting ESDP and NATO as competitors. Nonetheless, a revised ESS ought to allow the EU a degree of autonomy, or in other words to emancipate itself, in the regions where its vital interests are at stake.

In this spirit, Dominique Moisi proposes a geopolitical divide of spheres of influence, in which the EU would be responsible primarily for Europe (in particular the Balkans), and the United States would focus on the Americas and Asia.\textsuperscript{53} Owing to the historical and geographical legacy, each actor has a légitimité propre in his respective region; a quality which becomes even more necessary to gain public support. His proposal is not intended to break European ties with the United States, it is merely a step for the EU toward taking responsibility in its environs as, asserts Jolyon Howorth, “it is neither healthy nor, in the long run, possible for EU member states to continue to depend on the open-ended commitment of an ally which is overstretched in many parts of the world and for which Europe hardly figures on the strategic radar screen.”\textsuperscript{54} If the ESS is explicit
on this breakdown of influence between the United States and the EU, it can help reduce the “continuous existence of multiple centers of authority in the field,” writes Jan Zielonka, which oftentimes represents “two competing universalistic claims.”

Transferring this idea to relations between ESDP and NATO, ESDP’s realm of responsibility should lie in the EU region, with NATO only intervening in this sphere in exceptional circumstances, for example, when a NATO entry force is needed.

If such a situation were to arise, NATO would command the mission up until the point where the ESDP’s civil-military involvement would begin to exceed NATO’s purely military involvement (‘Tipping Point’); at this point, command would pass to ESDP, in order to avoid a duplication of command structures (Figure 2).

However, this ‘division of labour’ scenario can only arise after all options for a ‘division of spheres’ have been exhausted. The central goal of ESDP should be the ability to conduct missions in its region autonomously without recourse to NATO. Such an approach would allow devolving more responsibility to the EU, and could also help to more clearly define what capabilities are required to secure the region.

A revised ESS should not shy away from acknowledging these arguments, as the risk of relying on a U.S.-led NATO represents what Jones describes as “the possibility that the US will impose its will on Europe in areas of strategic importance.” Hence, a narrower geographical approach within a revised ESS would allow the EU to call for more autonomy from the United States and NATO in its region. Such a step does not only have the potential to more clearly guide the EU’s procurement strategy, but might also strengthen its stand vis-à-vis the public. ESDP has generally had a sound public image and Washington has suffered a severe blow to its reputation while Bush was in office. Without breaking ties with either the United States or NATO, a more assertive stance of the EU’s ESDP could be anchored in the ESS.

**Conclusion**

The end of the Cold War initiated an unprecedented amount of strategic rethinking. Hence, repositioning within an international system in which security has become a ‘fluid’ concept is even more difficult for an actor like the EU, which is unique – perhaps inherently ambiguous – consisting of a previously unknown alliance of states guarding de jure their sovereignty
but de facto pooling some of this sovereignty on a supranational level. As a result, the uniqueness of the EU’s ESS should not seek to mirror comparable documents of global, traditional nation-state players.

**Figure 2: ‘Division of Labour’ between NATO and ESDP**

In this context, this paper demonstrated that when analyzing the discourse of the ESS, five key, underlying, interconnected tensions become visible, which struggle with the tension between the global and the regional. This paper has tried to demonstrate that the ESS tends to position itself more inside the ‘global’ realm, while the EU is really situated in the ‘regional’.

This fissure creates the trend wherein the highly ambitious policy document cannot be met by actual performance. This not only sparks frustration between the member states, but also has the side effect of diminishing European credibility abroad. Narrowing the geographical focus of a revised ESS appears therefore to be, in Hansen’s words, “an essential element of analysis.
... and policy recommendation” with which the EU could enhance its share in “building a better world.” While this represents one step back from the current ESS, it could mean two steps forward for the EU’s performance as a security actor.

-Hannah Meyers served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

1 Interview with Colonel George Kilburn from the UK Liaison Office (France). Paris, May 14, 2008.
9 European Council, A Secure Europe in a Better World.
10 Ibid., 7.
11 Ibid., 5.
17 Ibid.
18 Becher, “Has-Been, Wannabe, or Leader”- 351.
19 Menotti, European Security Strategy, 15.
22 Interview with Kilburn.
25 Ibid., 16.
27 Bildt, “We have crossed the Rubicon”.
30 Charles Lipson quoted in ibid.
32 Bildt, “We have crossed the Rubicon”.
33 Martin, “The European Union’s Security Strategy”.
34 Berenskoetter, “Mapping the Mind Gap”, 77.
39 Hansen, “The Immutable Importance of Geography”.
Valášek, “Europe’s defence and its new security strategy”.
Nowak, “Civilian Crisis Management”; 45.
Terriff et al., Security Studies Today.
Ibid., 13.
Interview with Kilburn.
Gnesotto and Grévi, “The Global Puzzle”.
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