

## Sven Biscop's Call for an EU Grand Strategy

DORINA GYURKÓCZA

On the 4th of February 2011, at the Central European University Sven Biscop<sup>1</sup> gave a lecture on the need for a creation of a comprehensive European Grand Strategy.

The European Council adopted its Security Strategy in 2003. The Strategy drew up principles and objectives promoting the European Union's security interests. In 2008 in order to make the Strategy more adaptable, a report was made on the implementation of the Strategy, which initially seemed to promise great hopes, but eventually brought disillusionment. The report, contrary to many expectations did not contain any concrete proposals for the implementation of the Strategy for the future. However, in the light of the events of the past few weeks, the topic is becoming more and more urgent, what is the EU going to do with its Common Foreign and Security Policy?

In his presentation Sven Biscop highlighted three main issues. Firstly, he talked about the European Security Strategy and its impacts on the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Secondly, about its reconsideration and about the options of its implementation, last but not least about its better application. The Security Strategy of the European Union have been completed in 2003, it drew up extremely positive goals, set up principals and priorities for promoting the EU's security interests. According to Biscop, the main feature of the EU's Security Strategy is that in case of an emerging political, safety or security problem, the EU is trying to solve it with all of its available assets and sources that is combining all military, economic, social and political assets. Its other main feature, which is at the same time also the Strategy's main message, that the EU is addressing the emerging crises in cooperation with the other actors of the international system, like multilateral international institutions, such as the UN or the WTO, and with global superpowers like the USA or the BRIC countries.

To the question of whether the strategy had a tangible impact, Biscop has given both a yes and no answer. „The Strategy has a strong impact on setting the priorities, but has not enough effect on determining specific tasks, and putting them into practice.” According to Biscop the Strategy needs to be broken down into smaller, more specific strategies and action plans. „There is a need for the identification of specific EU interests and the definition of concrete objectives, in order to direct sub-strategies, policies and actions. Only when the EU's interests and red lines are clear can the Strategy be implemented. There are still several questions which would require consensus from the Member States concerning regional objectives, enlargement, global and institutional objectives, conflict resolution and crisis management.”<sup>2</sup> One of the biggest problem with the Strategy itself is that the Member States do not apply it in their day to-day policy-making, although the long-term goals are well kept in mind.

By its nature, the Strategy covers a wide area of issues; it is integrating all external policies, not just the European Security and Defence Policy or the Common Foreign and Security Policy, but all relevant Community policies as well. „For each of these areas more detailed strategies must be developed, serving as “sub-strategies” to the grand strategy.”<sup>3</sup> „The European Security Strategy makes valid choices, but a fully-

---

<sup>1</sup> Sven Biscop is Belgian foreign and security policy expert, he graduated from the Ghent University of Belgium, from the faculty of Political Science and Public Administration by winning the best thesis award for his work on European security and defence policy. Then he won the Paul-Henri Spaak PhD scholarship and continued his research, in 2002 he wrote his dissertation on Euro-Mediterranean security: A search for a partnership. He is a senior research fellow at Egmont - the Royal Institute for International Relations and director of the Europe in the World Program. His research focuses on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. He is also a professor in many well-known universities. He is a member of the Scientific Councils of the Flemish Peace Institute, the *Centre d'Etudes en Sciences Sociales de la Défense* in Paris, and the *Strategic Advisors Group of the Atlantic Council* in Washington. He is the editor in chief of *Studia Diplomatica*, as well as author of many international books and publications.

<sup>2</sup> Which types of operations must European forces be able to complete, which regions and scenarios require intervention, and which is the scale of the effort to be devoted to these priorities?

<sup>3</sup> Sven Biscop: The value of power, the power of values: a call for an EU grand strategy, *Egmont paper 33*, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Academia Press, October 2009. p. 9.

fledged revision is now required, in order to complete it. Europe built itself without a clear strategy and that past and present civil-military operations are more the result of opportunities than true strategic thinking.”<sup>4</sup> However Biscop considers that now the time seems particularly favourable for developing a comprehensive Grand Strategy.

In 2007 has begun the reconsideration of the Strategy for the proposition of France and Sweden to define in more detail the EU’s strategic objectives. Making the objectives more clear and setting more concrete goals for all fields of external action. In 2008 four seminars have been held in order to improve the Strategy. As a result of those seminars, a document was issued, the Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy – Providing Security in a Changing World. In Biscop’s opinion the creation of this report can not really be called as a success, it seems rather as an unfinished business, offering little in terms of recommendations for the future, which the EU cannot afford now that the Lisbon Treaty has changed the institutional set-up of its foreign and security policy. The main goal – to make the Strategy more applicable – had not really been achieved. He called this document as a missed opportunity; the report itself offered less in terms of concrete recommendations for the future than the actual Strategy. „This outcome has once again confirmed the image of a hesitant and reactive EU, uncertain of its role on the world stage, internally divided and riddled by institutional blockages.”<sup>5</sup>

Biscop said that he had participated both in 2003 and 2008 in the academic preparation of the documents, and while in 2003 the preparations had been characterised by the enthusiasm of both of the experts and Member States, and also there had been political will for formulating a common foreign and security policy on the issue, by 2008 the same enthusiasm was only represented by the experts and the analysts. The Member States lacked the political will and enthusiasm for making the already existing Strategy more applicable. The change of the Member States’ attitude was due to several events, including the concerns raised by the Lisbon Treaty, or the ongoing war in South Ossetia. All these events diverted the attention from the importance of the Strategy; the Member States gave higher priority to combat the problems of the economic crisis, than to the reconsideration of the European Security Strategy.

Biscop explained that Europe has a very distinctive social model combining democracy, the market economy and strong government intervention. The EU guarantees economic prosperity, political freedom, security and social well-being to its citizens. To uphold these interests, the EU must be a power, a strategic actor that consciously defines long-term objectives, actively pursues these, and acquires the necessary means to that end. „European integration has always been an open-ended process, into which policy fields were incorporated in a mostly ad hoc fashion, but that approach has reached its limits. The EU has arrived at a stage where its own further development without strategy appears difficult.”<sup>6</sup>

Biscop mentioned as another problem the fact, that the EU is rather a reactive than a proactive actor in the world. But in order to achieve its goal in becoming a major global actor, the EU should undertake a rather proactive role. As Biscop said, while the superpowers of the world are playing chess, the EU is rather playing a ping pong game. He considers the current Security Strategy adequate, but incomplete. He stated that currently the EU has no direct enemy, there is no direct threat against it, rather it is just facing challenges such as, the concerns over energy security, migration, sustainable development, climate and environment protection and the economic crisis.

The fundamental objective of the EU can thus be defined as the preservation and strengthening of those values for its citizens. Other threats are indeed more diverse, less visible and less predictable, such as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and biological weapons, regional conflicts and state failure. It all means that the EU can already afford not to focus on military power alone, the new Grand Strategy need not be threat-based nor need it focus on the traditional, coercive use of power. Instead, it can focus on values. „The best way of defending our interests in order to defend our model and values, is precisely to spread those values, because increasing the access of citizens worldwide to the same core public goods (security, prosperity, freedom, well-being) directly addresses the underlying causes of threats and challenges.”<sup>7</sup> The EU’s Grand Strategy can thus be aimed at achieving objectives that are in the self-interest of the EU, if a label is required Biscop said it ought to be a positive power. Furthermore, the EU’s interests and objectives in a region should determine to which extent the EU will contribute to, conflict resolution and crisis management, through diplomatic, civilian and military instruments. Priority regions and scenarios must be defined, in function of Europe’s vital interests: where and why will the EU go to war and deploy troops?<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

Biscop also said that before defining the EU's long term objectives one should also define its vital interests. According to him those are the following: defence against any military threat to the territory of the Union, a secure supply of energy and other vital natural resources, the maintenance of international law and universally agreed rights, a clean environment, manageable migration flows, open lines of communication and trade and autonomy of EU decision-making. As a consequence the EU cannot be a status quo power that seeks to maintain current conditions, because its agenda entails a commitment to actively shape the environment. Last but not least it is not sufficient to have a more complete grand strategy; the EU must then also apply it. And that requires an institutional follow-up structure.

At the end of his lecture Biscop pointed out three main areas where the common strategy would require a major reconsideration among the Member States. The first and timeliest is the EU's neighbourhood policy. Its lack and failure have been already manifested itself in the happenings of the past few weeks in Egypt and Tunisia. At present, the EU's neighbourhood policy is not unified, while the countries situated on the western parts of the European Union believe that the main priorities of the neighbourhood policy are promoting and distributing peace, prosperity, democracy and human rights, for the countries on the southern areas of the EU it is not more than the question of oil and gas supplies and the fight against terrorism and migration. The second main area and also a challenge for the EU is to find common interests with other superpowers of the world and turn these interests into long term cooperation. Such cooperation and common interests are for example, the fight against pirate activity at the coast of Somali, where the EU is conducting the coordination of the countries taking part in the operations. Biscop pointed out that the various emerging problems are giving chances for the EU to form coalitions and cooperation with the countries of the world on various topics and make such cooperation permanent for the future.

Finally, the third main area is the issue of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, according to Biscop in this policy the EU is playing a very effective role. It is involved in many actions, but it's very difficult to evaluate and determine, that how these actions serve the EU's interests on the long term, without having an appropriate strategy. He stated that the EU without having a single strategy applicable to each and every eventuality is only capable of making ad hoc decisions with the help of improvisation, which in turn can only further strengthen the EU's reactive nature. For example in the European Security Strategy it is stated that "Problems such as those in Kashmir, the Great Lakes Region and the Korean Peninsula impact on European interests directly and indirectly, as do conflicts nearer to home, above all in the Middle East"<sup>9</sup>. But that statement also does not necessarily means a proactive resolution of the problems. It also says that the "Resolution of the Arab/Israeli conflict is a strategic priority"<sup>10</sup>, but it doesn't give any hint on how the EU is planning to tackle with that. Other conflicts are mentioned as well, but it is not clear at all whether that means that the EU should actively contribute to their resolution.<sup>11</sup>

\*

Being the largest economy in the world, the EU cannot afford to neglect its common foreign and security strategy. And that is only viable through a revised unique and strong Grand Strategy. In order to become a global power it is absolutely necessary to have a more proactive, coherent and meaningful European Security Strategy, which not only sets out guidelines, but reshapes these long-term priorities into specific tasks. Europe needs to operate more effectively in our globalized world. Nevertheless, there should be developed a high level of desire for a decisive Europe, playing a leading role in world affairs. Therefore there is a strong need for a strategy which stands for the EU's own values and interests, and implies them in a more effective way.

\*

[institute@southeast-europe.org](mailto:institute@southeast-europe.org)  
[www.southeast-europe.org](http://www.southeast-europe.org)

© DKE 2011.

---

<sup>9</sup> A secure Europe in a better world: European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December, 2003. p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 31.