

Sven Biscop

Geopolitics with European Characteristics

An Essay on Pragmatic Idealism, Equality and Strategy

Introduction: a double challenge

Knowing how to do things is not the same as knowing what you are doing. Think of the Ukraine crisis. The European Union (EU) rolled out the entire machinery of trade negotiations, with all of its intricate procedures and technical details, everything according to the manual, to complete a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine. Not a single small mistake was made. Except for the large and catastrophic mistake to assume that these negotiations were taking place in a political and geopolitical vacuum.

The Ukraine example highlights two major challenges to the EU's self-conception as an international actor, and one lesson. All of these should be taken into account in the ongoing debate about the future *EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy* (EUGS), the new strategic guidance for all of EU external action, which the High Representative will present to the European Council in June 2016 (Biscop, 2015).

The first challenge relates to the fact that the EU as such deliberately closed its eyes for the less amiable goings-on in the world around us and behaved as if geopolitics and power politics no longer existed. Then Mr Putin made us blink our eyes – and lo and behold: geopolitics matter and power politics is going on everywhere around us. This is exactly what then senior EU official Robert Cooper already wrote in 2003. Among themselves the EU Member States may have entered a postmodern era of trust and cooperation and left geopolitical competition behind them – how many tanks you can bring to the table does not quite determine the outcome of a European Council meeting. But most of the rest of the world still lives in a modern world of states competing for power, or in a premodern world of failed states (Cooper, 2003). And so we feel under pressure, not knowing quite how to react, seemingly running behind the facts as multiple crises engulf our neighbourhood.

For sure geopolitics need not necessarily be associated with power politics. Geopolitics means no more than the impact of geography on politics, especially in international relations. That impact is a fact that cannot be denied: Europe is where it is, and that has consequences. We have to care more than others, notably the United States (US), about war in Ukraine, in Syria and Iraq, in Libya and in the Sahel, because our trade and energy supply are endangered more, because some of our citizens have joined these wars as 'foreign fighters', and because our countries are the closest safe haven for the many refugees as well as the primary target for the extremists that these wars around us generate. At the same time we have to care about the freedom of the global commons (the seas, the skies, space and cyberspace), which is vital to our global trade. Geopolitics is one very important factor, among others, that shapes our interests and the threats and challenges to them.

It is a fact however that many other global and regional powers understand geopolitics as a competition to dominate or control geographic areas. In order to protect their interests they seek to establish exclusive spheres of influence, and they do not hesitate to use economic blackmail and armed force to achieve their ends. The decade from about 1995 to 2005, when the EU and others could indeed be forgiven for thinking that cooperation would become the predominant paradigm in international relations, has proved to be but an atypical interlude. In today's decidedly multipolar world, the two trends definitely coincide: competition and

cooperation. On many issues the great powers do cooperate, constantly, but at the same time geopolitical competition is once again on the increase, and not just in Europe's neighbourhood.

The second challenge has to do with the fact that the EU's idealist strategic paradigm is under pressure. The idealist narrative as laid out in the EU's first grand strategy, the 2003 *European Security Strategy* (ESS), remains true: 'The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states'. That means states that equally guarantee the security, prosperity and freedom of all their citizens, just like EU Member States themselves aspire to; these are put forward as universal values. Most security problems that Europe faces today are indeed caused by states that are not very democratic or very well governed, and usually neither. But in a world of geopolitical competition, mere altruism, offering the proverbial (economic) carrot, will not suffice to create well-governed democratic states. Certainly not as the credibility of the EU's idealist narrative and the effectiveness of its own model have been greatly damaged by its slow response to two successive crises, in which Europeans have shown but little solidarity, not even with each other: the eurozone, its specific Greek spin-off, and the refugees.

Furthermore, there are powerful alternative narratives that deny the universality of an equal right to security, freedom and prosperity. They either propose a different set of universal values based on a very specific reading of religion, such as the so-called Islamic State (IS), or a specifically non-universal course based on authoritarian nationalism, such as Russia and to some extent China. Both alternatives have adherents in Europe, from alienated citizens swayed by the promise of fulfilment or adventure who go and join IS, to right-wing populists seeking to emulate Putin and fence their countries off from the EU and the world in order to return to mythical national roots, just like in the 1930s. Unfortunately, the latter are in power in several Member States. The looming possibility of a Brexit, which is also a fencing off from Europe, further erodes the credibility of the European project.

The lesson, finally, is that flawless tactical execution can never substitute for a flawed strategy. Before specific objectives can be defined, instruments fine-tuned and means allocated, the EUGS must restore Europe's confidence as an international actor, by providing us with a new handle on the world around us: a new paradigm and a fresh narrative. The paradigm is changing. The EU has come to accept (though but recently) that its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has to serve to defend the interests of the Union and its Member States. If it does not there is no reason why the Member States should invest in the EU level of foreign policy-making. In the debate on the EUGS, that is now a given. As the High Representative put it at the opening of the EUGS consultation process in October 2015: 'We need a strategy to protect proactively our interests, keeping in mind that promoting our values is an integral part of our interests' (Mogherini, 2015).

Yet that does not mean that the EU can or should simply join the competition and play power politics like the others. First and foremost, Europe may sometimes have to compromise on its values, but it should never violate them. Moreover, those who are playing power politics are not necessarily successful. The impressionable may be taken aback by the image of Putin the resolute leader (dare I say: the warlord), but that mirage hides the fact that much as we are struggling to deal with the crises in Ukraine and in Syria, Putin is struggling too to preserve or to regain, not to extend Russian influence. Ultimately, he is on the defensive, as more and more people in the countries neighbouring Russia are attracted by the European way of life that is embodied by the EU rather than by their own Russian-style regimes, and as the Russian economy is continuing on a downward path since 2011 already.

In the EUGS debate, the notion of 'pragmatic idealism' is gaining ground. This is indeed the question to be answered: how can our idealism be pragmatically adapted to forge a new strategic paradigm for EU foreign and security policy that allows Europe both to remain true

to itself and to become more effective in a world of both cooperation and competition between the powers?

Past practice: un-avowed pragmatism

Until today the operating principle of our idealist grand strategy has been positive conditionality, under the label of partnership. The EU brings the 2003 ESS into practice through bilateral partnership agreements with countries that commit to better governance and more democracy; in return the EU promises aid and access. Many of the bilateral partnerships are anchored in a regional framework, such as the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, which cover both flanks of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Ten global and regional powers have been upgraded to strategic partners. By and large, this approach has been successful in Europe, especially when EU membership was on offer as the ultimate reward. With a few exceptions, it has been least successful where, after the European continent, geopolitically it matters most: in our southern periphery and in relations with key strategic partners.

This outcome highlights a crucial difference in appreciation between the values themselves and the way the EU tries to promote them. In Europe, conditionality as a way of promoting well-governed democratic states is accepted, certainly when linked to membership, because closer relations with the EU can be interpreted as a return to the fold. Almost everywhere else however conditionality is seen as a return to the past, of European powers meddling in other countries' internal affairs. In our southern neighbourhood, for example, large swathes of the public do not consider Europe as a model at all. Even where many people do appreciate key aspects of Europe's internal governance, in China for example, their (justified) pride in their nation's achievements means that heavy-handed paternalism quickly antagonises them. Without modifications, what works in postmodern Europe and those aspiring to join it may not work elsewhere.

An additional cause, as well as a consequence, of the limited success of positive conditionality is that the EU had swayed from its own avowed idealism to an un-avowed pragmatism. The result is that several wide gaps have opened up in EU strategy:

First, a gap has appeared between the force with which the EU continues to spread its narrative outside its borders and the apparent weakness of the EU itself. To the outside world, the EU continues to say that only where states equally guarantee the security, freedom and prosperity of all citizens can there be peace and stability. But the perception is that the EU itself has given up on equality, between Member States as well as between citizens, and that its governance structures have badly withstood the pressures of crisis. There is a lot of exaggeration in this – observers outside Europe often underestimate the difficulty of undoing such deep integration as we already have and the strength of the bonds that it has generated – but also, alas, more than just a grain of truth. Our idealist narrative will not convince unless we are seen to apply it at home as well as abroad.

Second, an even broader gap exists between the idealist narrative and the substance of many of our bilateral partnerships. Again, the southern neighbourhood is a case in point. Before the Arab Spring, cooperation and conditionality was driven more by EU interests with regard to terrorism, migration and energy than any concern for good governance and democracy. And that has not changed since the Arab Spring. As, with the exception of Tunisia, one form of authoritarianism gave way to another, or to civil war, the EU opted to support the powers that can bring some stability, such as Egyptian President al-Sisi. But initially our rhetoric did not change, which confirmed the suspicion held by many in the region that the EU is not sincerely committed to reform and just uses the language of human rights and democracy to veil its pursuit of hard interests. At the same time though, many in Europe

began to feel that, in general, interests were not taken into account enough in EU foreign policy. This has now led to the more explicit focus on interests in the EUGS debate.

Third, this illustrates that a gap has opened between two EU objectives: promoting well-governed democratic states and promoting peace and stability. Henry Kissinger's question pertains as much to the EU as the US, and he phrases it better than anyone:

'Does America consider itself obliged to support every popular uprising against any non-democratic government, including those heretofore considered important in sustaining the international system? Is Saudi Arabia an ally only until public demonstrations develop on its territory? [...] And it appears also to be a question of timing: To what extent should security interests be risked for the outcome of a theoretical evolution? Both elements are important. Neglecting a democratic future – assuming we know how to shape its direction – involves long-term risks. Neglecting the present by ignoring the security element risks immediate catastrophe.' (2015, p. 125)

Europeans have made different choices in different cases: in Tunisia they were extremely hesitant at first to shift allegiance from the regime to the revolution; partially in order to be seen to be on the right side of history, in Libya they then opted for intervention, thereby saving the opposition and dooming Khadafy; in Egypt they quietly aligned with President al-Sisi. Once again the overall EU narrative hides a more nuanced but at the same time less coherent approach.

Fourth, a gap has emerged between the way the EU applies positive conditionality to different countries. Governments rarely enter into a partnership the end of which is their own demise. But that is what democratisation would mean in any non-democratic partner country. The EU can allow itself to be very strict with countries that are relatively weak, such as Ukraine, for which external support is vital, or in which it has limited direct interests at stake, such as Myanmar. But it has much less leverage over countries that possess abundant resources, such as the Gulf states, or whose security cooperation it needs, such as Algeria, and almost no leverage at all over a great power such as China. The EU does dare to take courageous decisions, witness the sanctions against Russia, and before that, Iran. In these cases, security is the main motivation though, not good governance and democracy. Similarly, if close relations with, and especially arms exports to Saudi Arabia are now being questioned, it is not because of human rights per se. Rather we have come to feel that the kingdom's actions, such as the execution of a prominent Shia critic of the regime and the subsequent escalation of tensions with Iran (in January 2016), or Saudi financial support for an arch conservative version of Islam in our own countries, has direct consequences for our own security. Overall the perception has arisen however that real conditionality is mostly imposed on the weak. It is of course entirely justified, and in our direct security interest, that in a case like Ukraine the EU uses its leverage to ensure that international money is well-spent and reforms are real. But the overall narrative of promoting equality within countries does hide its unequal application between countries. The great powers especially are more or less immune to the method of positive conditionality, as economic interests usually trump other considerations.

The European belief in its idealist agenda is sincere, but its pragmatic application is a reality too. It is also mostly un-avowed. The result is a lack of coherence and consistency.

The heart of a renewed idealist agenda

In order to adapt our idealist strategy, we must ask ourselves some difficult questions. First, are the values that we have hitherto aimed to promote truly universal? Second, even if the answer is yes, or partially so, does it actually serve our interests to continue to promote

them? Third, if so, what exactly should we seek to promote, where, how, and with which objectives?

The answer to the first question must be a resounding yes. Belief in these values implies belief in their universality, because not to do so is in itself a violation of those values. For example, to pretend that human rights do not apply equally to all humans is to deny the very notion of human rights; then we should call them European, or Belgian, or even just Flemish rights. It is as evident that if we do not apply the rule of law equally to all, there simply is no rule of law. And as long as democracy does not incorporate all citizens in all states, and all states in all organisations, decision-making is not truly democratic. That not all governments recognise this universality does not make it less true. It is only to be expected that those who benefit from the absence of democracy and the rule of law find arguments other than their self-interest to defend their position, such as the alleged cultural relativity of values, or that when certain values were legally enacted their states had not yet achieved independence.

Much more important is that not governments but many people everywhere share the same universal aspiration: that their government does not physically harm them but protects their security; gives them a say in decision-making, guarantees their rights and treats them equally before the law; and makes sure that each gets his/her fair share of the nation's prosperity. They may not frame it in the same terms as we; they might even see us as an obstacle rather than an ally in realising their aspirations; but from those who made the revolution in Tunisia to those who demonstrate every day in the cities of China, from those escaping a war zone by fleeing to Europe to we citizens of Europe: we basically want the same from our governments.

But do we serve or harm our interests by actively trying to convince those governments to grant those wishes? That is the key second question.

The most contentious values that we have sought to promote are democracy and human rights. In many of the countries that the EU has relations with, democratisation means regime change. Hence, this focus antagonizes governments just as we are reaching out to them. Once again, Kissinger poses the dilemma brilliantly:

“[...] the conviction that [our] principles are universal has introduced a challenging element into the international system because it implies that governments not practising them are less than fully legitimate. This [...] suggests that a significant portion of the world lives under a kind of unsatisfactory, probationary agreement, and will one day be redeemed; in the meantime, their relations with [us] must have some latent adversarial element to them” (2015, pp. 235-236).

While the ‘transaction costs’ of emphasising democratisation are obvious, the actual results of the policy are less so. In our own neighbourhood, where the EU is the most deeply engaged, the most obvious conclusion rather seems to be that democracy cannot be engineered from outside a country, not even when a regime is deposed militarily with the help of outside intervention, but has instead to grow on the inside.

Yet the EU cannot just abandon its democracy and human rights agenda either. For one, that would mean abandoning the vibrant civil society that in many countries is demanding more democracy and human rights and in many cases is counting on the international community for support. That would mean, also, distancing ourselves from the few instances when outside pressure has successfully contributed to democratisation. Sometimes, like in Myanmar, it does work. And it would mean abandoning ourselves: democracy and human rights are an integral part of who we are and, therefore, of how we do things – must do things. When our identity is challenged, by terrorists inside Europe for example, the answer cannot be to disavow it, by turning ourselves into a police state. Likewise, we must remain

true to ourselves in all of our external policies. That is also, finally, in our direct interest, for states that provide neither security nor freedom nor prosperity will eventually lose all support from their own citizens. When that moment arrives (which may take time, but it will) they will implode or explode – and risk to cause us lots of difficulties. And until that time, such discriminatory regimes fuel resentment and tensions among their own citizens, and also with their neighbours in order to distract their citizens from their real concerns.

If promotion of democracy and human rights should neither be abandoned nor overemphasised, perhaps the solution (and the answer to the third question) can be to broaden the narrative.

Democracy, human rights and the rule of law or, in other words, freedom is but one of three core public goods that people expect from their governments, alongside security and prosperity. What distinguishes European societies from many others is not just that we see these as universal values, but that we actively commit to create *equality* between citizens in these terms. Also, or even especially, in terms of prosperity: the state provides for those who cannot achieve a fair standard of living through their own efforts. This egalitarian aspiration is the real heart of the political project of the Union. It is what truly binds citizens to the EU, and to their state. Therefore, and in spite of the many differences between the social systems of the Member States, all mainstream political parties must adhere to it. Indeed, the most vaunted benefits of European integration, i.e. the abolition of internal borders and the single currency, are meaningless to citizens that are not granted a fair share of the prosperity that society produces.

Can equality also be the basis for a renewed external narrative? In international relations, too strong a focus on democracy implies a judgement of the other. That immediately sentences the relationship with any non-democratic regime to suspicion and contingency and therefore, often, to ineffectiveness. We will always fear getting tainted if cooperation goes too far; they will always fear being subverted if they allow us too close. A broader focus on equality across all three dimensions of security, freedom and prosperity offers more flexibility and therefore more reciprocity. We can state our intent to explore cooperation to increase equality between citizens in any one dimension – security, freedom or prosperity – another state is interested in, without the obligation to undertake any commitment in the others. Thus leaving more choice to the other, a partnership for equality will at the same time much more likely be a partnership of equals. We can avoid putting in doubt the authority of any non-democratic regime with which we engage, not by abandoning the democracy and human rights agenda altogether, but by no longer making cooperation in other areas in which we can contribute to equality contingent upon it.

Why would non-democratic regimes be interested in cooperating to increase equality between their citizens? Because it will increase domestic stability. And given that democracy cannot be engineered from the outside, promoting domestic stability is the best way of fostering a security and socio-economic environment in which it can be nurtured on the inside. Because more secure and prosperous citizens will become empowered citizens, who will eventually decide on their own fate. Meanwhile, domestic stability directly serves Europe's own security.

This pragmatic approach to Europe's idealist agenda allows the EU to give up the untenable premise that we will, from the outside, democratise all our non-democratic relations in the near future. The 1995 Barcelona Declaration, for example, envisaged a Euro-Mediterranean area of democracy and free trade by 2005 – we have given it ten years more and are not much closer to the objective. At the same time, it permits us to maintain close relations and cooperate with such regimes in various areas without violating our values, because every cooperation that improves equality directly benefits people and indirectly contributes to the climate in which a democratisation movement may emerge internally. This does not mean

that the EU can no longer speak out against human rights violations: it can and must, both publicly and privately – whatever is most effective in a given case. But promoting human rights and promoting democracy are, in this context, different things. We can condemn human rights violations without pretending that we can democratize the regime, i.e. create regime-change, from the outside, or even that such regimes themselves are our partners in promoting democracy and human rights.

Indeed, if we change the narrative, then we should probably change the language as well. The EU should no longer feel obliged to call everybody a partner. The issue with the term partnership is that it evokes a closer relationship than in many cases is actually intended. Because of its overuse of the term (how many of the members of the United Nations are not somehow partners of the EU?), the perception has arisen that the EU associates too uncritically even with very unsavoury regimes. In reality, of course, when it comes to democracy and human rights many of our so-called partners are not partners but opponents. The EU must maintain diplomatic relations with everybody, and can cooperate with everybody in specific areas. But the term partnership should be reserved for those relations with whom there actually is a sufficient degree of consensus in all three dimensions, security, freedom and prosperity, to allow for an agreement on policy objectives and on what are legitimate ways of pursuing them.

Of course, grey zones will remain, compromises are inevitable and some friction cannot be avoided when engaging with regimes that operate on the basis of a different set of values. The EU must have as clear red lines as possible though. While in the large majority of cases engineering democracy is difficult, as a rule, we should not engage in any cooperation activities that put even more obstacles on the path to freedom. Cooperating with other countries' security services is the most sensitive area in this regard, and the most tempting in which to overstep the line, because of the direct benefits for our domestic security that, for example, intelligence on jihadist cells in Europe can have. But if that intelligence is the product of torture, will it not on the whole provoke more violence rather than curb it? Finally, not as a rule, but as an emergency brake, breaking off relations, economic sanctions and, as a last resort, military action must be actively considered in case of the most grievous violations: war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing – the threshold to activate the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mechanism by the UN Security Council.

The EU has behaved too high-handedly in its relations with many countries. We should not overcompensate: humility cannot be the operating principle of a foreign policy either – we would still be disregarded, only in a different way. Equality can be the operating principle, however, of a pragmatic yet still idealist strategy: less finger-pointing but still true to universal values. Where do we have to implement pragmatic idealism as a matter of priority? This is where geopolitics comes back into the argument. Geopolitics dictates that domestic stability, the immediate objective of pragmatic idealism, is most important to Europe's own security in our broad neighbourhood (from the Sahel through the Horn, the Gulf, the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Arctic). And the other outside actors that shape this neighbourhood happen to be the same great powers that are crucial in preserving the freedom of the global commons: Russia and China.

But for the new narrative to be at all credible, Europe must first and foremost implement it at home.

Equality starts at home

The most important source of Europe's soft power is certainly not its soldiers nor its trade, nor even its development aid or its diplomacy. What really renders Europe attractive to other people is, quite simply, the European way of life, and how we govern ourselves to make that

possible. The idea that European governments, and the union of those governments, in spite of all the many imperfections of our system, do care more sincerely and more equally for the wellbeing of all European citizens, is a very powerful one.

But once a powerful image has been destroyed, it is very difficult to restore. Internally, the EU has come to lack clarity of purpose. Many of Europe's own citizens have come to see the EU as a threat rather than a promotor of their prosperity, as equality and solidarity have given way to austerity in the rhetoric and practice of both the EU and many Member States. Both internally and externally, the EU has also come to be doubted as a method. Every time again, when a major crisis occurs, too many Member States imagine that they will solve it on their own, only to realise, every time again, that they cannot. Thus they do always turn to the EU – belatedly. It are of course European citizens themselves who suffer most from this crisis of the European project, but it has also greatly undermined Europe's external narrative. The EUGS will not achieve its purpose unless the internal cohesion of the EU, and the conviction that the European model works, are restored, both inside and outside Europe.

The answer can only be more Europe – it is too late to return to the nation state. Even a cursory glance at the multipolar world proves that today the national level alone is insufficient to safeguard the national interest. More Europe must mean more than resilience, the latest buzzword to be taken up by the Brussels security and defence community, which is now put forward as a response to hybrid threats – the previous hype. For sure, Europe has to be resilient against threats of violence (i.e. be able to ensure its collective defence) and against all conscious attempts to diminish the autonomy of its decision-making, by legal and illegal means (such as foreign ownership of energy infrastructure or media, and corruption of officials or political parties). All of this goes without saying – which is why a defensive concept such as resilience does not have the power to mobilize the public for the European project. Of course citizens expect their governments and the EU to ensure their security – it would be dramatic if they did not. But they rightfully expect a lot more. In the minds of most decision-makers, the resilience of Europe is mostly about security: more control, more surveillance, more police or even military in the streets. The risk is that we end up securitizing issues that cannot be solved through security measures alone, such as the refugee crisis or radicalisation. Europe is edging closer to exactly the same militarisation of 'homeland security' for which it criticised the US after 9/11. But what about freedom? What about prosperity?

Unfortunately, the proponents of ever closer Union remain surprisingly weak and scattered and have yet to present a revitalized narrative that restores the European conviction that has been so badly damaged in the last few years. The six founding members did organise a special meeting, resulting in the statement that 'We firmly believe that the European Union remains the best answer we have for today's challenges and allows for different paths of integration. We remain resolved to continue the process of creating an ever closer union among the people of Europe.' (Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 2016) But no concrete initiative resulted from that meeting. The European Commission though has taken crucial initiatives to put the Union back on track, which offers some elements of the broader narrative: to stop the rising inequality in Europe, in terms of freedom and prosperity as well as security. To truly have an impact, these initiatives require a lot more political and financial investment however.

First, the EU and the Member States must make it absolutely clear that no such thing as an 'illiberal democracy' exists. There can be no place in the EU for Putin-emulating governments that curb the political rights and constitutional guarantees of their own citizens and limit their country's contribution to EU responses to internal and external crises. Because such governments directly undermine the cohesion and effectiveness of the Union they are a far greater threat to the European model of society than foreign fighters, terrorism or Russia. Acting against such tendencies cannot just be the role of the Commission therefore (which

has created new procedures to that end) but must receive the unequivocal backing of leaders in the European Council. Second, thanks to the Juncker investment plan of the Commission the emphasis has somewhat shifted to jobs, growth and welfare creation – but the overall image of the EU remains one of austerity and budgetary discipline. The latter is of course necessary – but not to the detriment of the investments which alone will create prosperity for European citizens. Finally, and closely related, the EU must ensure that as budgetary, banking and, increasingly, fiscal rules are being harmonised, Member States do not simply shift the competition with each other to the social dimension, cutting welfare to render themselves more competitive than their neighbours. Initial tentative thoughts from the Commission for at least minimal social harmonisation are indeed crucial to restoring citizens' confidence in the European project and in their own states (Thyssen, 2015).

High-profile initiatives to increase freedom and prosperity, in addition to the necessary security measures, will generate the most durable resilience: citizens that are convinced of the sincerity of the European narrative will not be susceptible to any competing narrative. And only a thus reenergised EU can energetically pursue a Global Strategy. To say that internal and external security are closely linked has become an open door; but in fact internal and external strategy overall form one continuum.

A new neighbourhood policy: more than resilience

Without any doubt, Europe's broad neighbourhood will absorb a lot if not most of our energy. In their Joint Communication of 18 November 2015, the European Commission and the High Representative (2015) have already outlined a new ENP – in effect pre-empting the EUGS of which the ENP ought to be a sub-strategy. But since it goes in the right direction, the Joint Communication can act as a useful precursor.

Reflecting the newly recognised importance of interests, the document states that 'the EU will pursue its interests which include the promotion of universal values', but adds immediately that 'not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards.' Therefore, 'the new ENP will take stabilisation as its main political priority.' Hence, while the EU will continue 'to promote democratic, accountable and good governance [...] where there is a shared commitment' (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Morocco and Tunisia are mentioned), it announces a shift of focus or, rather, acknowledges the trinity that certainly in the southern neighbourhood has been the EU's real focus all along: (1) 'There will be greater attention to energy security and climate'; (2) 'a new focus on [...] security sector reform, conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation'; and (3) 'safe and legal mobility and tackling irregular migration, human trafficking and smuggling are also priorities.'

Crucially, the EU puts forward the importance of equality for stability: 'Poverty, inequality, a perceived sense of injustice, corruption, weak economic and social development and lack of opportunity [...] can be roots of instability.'. Yet, the label under which ultimately the new ENP is sold, and the way the neighbourhood is looked at in the debate on the EUGS, is once again resilience. This notion actually first made headway in development policy, but when applied in the context of foreign and security policy, it raises important questions. Whose resilience, against what? Not resilience against dictatorship – most of our neighbours have authoritarian regimes in one form or another already, which directly cause many of the threats that we want to build resilience against. But certainly not resilience of the dictatorships either – while we have to admit that we cannot change non-democratic regimes, neither must we strengthen them. If the overall aim really is 'to strengthen the resilience of the EU's partners in the face of *external* pressure [emphasis added]', as the Joint Communication states, then the EU is turning to power politics. For in geopolitical terms, that simply means creating a zone of buffer states around us. To be a buffer state means to be able to take a beating and stand up again, on someone else's behalf. While such a bargain, if sufficient compensation is offered, might appeal to certain regimes, it is

hardly a selling concept for *citizens* in our neighbourhood, because it does not appeal to their own aspirations. Just like resilience will not appeal to Europe's own citizens, neither today nor in the past. Witness my own country, Belgium, briefly a part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815-1830), a buffer state against France, until the Belgians acted upon their own priorities. And, in the past, too often Europe (and the US) have ended up not just tolerating but even propping up dictators just because they were seen as a buffer against our adversaries.

If we want a Neighbourhood Policy that appeals to people in the region, we should rather highlight both the objective of stability and the promotion of equality as the way to reach it. Under the double heading of stability through equality we can cooperate with every regime in our neighbourhood, on measures that provide more security, freedom and/or prosperity for more citizens, according to where the regime's and our preferences and interests overlap, and as long as the regime does not cross the red line of R2P. The Joint Communication does actually state that 'economic and social development should be at the heart of the EU's contribution to stabilising the neighbourhood and building partnerships.' Gradual integration in the internal market and investment are the two most powerful levers. But they will have to be funded, for which the Joint Communication puts too much hope perhaps in the international financial institutions.

Stability through equality is a message that can truly appeal to the citizens of Ukraine, for example, rather than the dubious honour of merely being a buffer state against Russia – which it might yet become however if the country's reform process flounders. For if that were to happen, there would be little enthusiasm in the EU to continue to engage with Ukraine. So somewhat paradoxically the EU needs to be very strict now in linking all support to real progress in reform, in order to create more equality in Ukraine, so as to be able to build a partnership of equals with Ukraine afterwards.

Turkey too, it seems, is beginning to be seen as a buffer state by the EU, insulating Europe from refugee and migration flows. Except that in this case the buffer state seems to be holding all the cards, seen, for example, at the special EU-Turkey summit on 7 March 2016, where Turkey demanded €6 billion plus visa-free travel to Europe for Turkish citizens, in exchange for the EU returning refugees having arrived in Europe from Turkey. If a buffer state is all it can be, then Ankara wants to extract as high a price as possible. Paradoxically, that price included accelerating the accession negotiations – but if Turkey truly seeks EU membership, then why pay it to be a buffer state? Ankara must know though that EU membership is predicated on democracy and respect for human rights, while it is moving in exactly the opposite direction, towards more authoritarianism. This shows that in the southern neighbourhood, even the 'golden carrot' of membership is insufficient to promote democratisation. In reality, is it not increasingly likely that the political constellation in which all EU Member States would ratify Turkish accession will just never appear? Would it not be advisable then for both parties to recognize that fact and agree on a different relationship, such as strategic partnership (which, it appears, has been offered in the past but rejected by Turkey). Just like with its other neighbours, the EU could then offer Turkey cooperation and support on security, prosperity and/or freedom, in view of what Turkey chooses and where interests overlap. Europe must make it clear though that the areas in which Turkey does choose to cooperate, are inter-linked: we ought not to allow Turkey to push up the price for cooperating on the refugee challenge indefinitely, while it expects military support through NATO from those very same European states (Patriot batteries, notably) and while its policies continue to undermine rather than help the war effort against IS.

Importantly, the Joint Communication envisages a flexible way of bringing in more countries than just those falling under the ENP, from the four regions of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Gulf and Central Asia, by setting up thematic frameworks, notably on migration, energy and security. This makes perfect sense, because threats and challenges obviously do not

recognize the borders of the ENP. Why not go further and simply extend the ENP to these countries, on a voluntary basis, since 'differentiation and greater mutual ownership will be the hallmark of the new ENP' anyway? For our 'real' neighbourhood, the stability of which is vital to our own stability, does extend into these four regions.

Great powers in the neighbourhood

Geopolitics dictates a strong focus on our neighbourhood, but stabilising our periphery actually implies dealing with the great powers, notably China and Russia. Russia obviously borders on the EU. China, under the heading of 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), is set on a westward expansion, through Central Asia and into Europe, the Middle East and Africa, by means of what a Belgian diplomatic friend of mine has dubbed 'infrastructuralism': massive investment in connectivity infrastructure. The EU thus cannot 'pivot' to Asia like the US is doing. First of all, our own neighbourhood, unlike that of the US, is much too troublesome. But more fundamentally, Europe is of course a part of the Eurasian landmass itself – and Asia, or at least China, is in a sense even coming our way, because of OBOR. Hence the increasing importance of what Luis Simón (2015) calls the 'middle spaces', which connect our immediate neighbourhood to, and overlap with, the neighbourhood of the other great powers: the Arctic, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. That is not to say that we can ignore Asia as such – vital economic interests are at stake there, which require notably that the freedom of the global commons be preserved, which in turn requires initiatives at the global level to forge effective multilateral structures. Furthermore, a policy on OBOR demands a policy on China, which in turn demands a policy on Asia. The point is therefore that because of the geopolitical implications, stabilizing our own neighbourhood is in itself something that only a global strategic actor can endeavour – an EU that all too modestly sees itself as nothing but a regional actor could not even hope to begin addressing this huge challenge.

The involvement of other great powers in our neighbourhood is another reason why resilience is perhaps not the best term to describe the main goal of the ENP. It reinforces the (erroneous) impression that the EU is seeking exclusivity in its relations with its neighbours – that it is seeking to establish its own sphere of influence. Our objective is not in the first place to enable our neighbours to keep out other powers. We should rather aim to empower our neighbours to make their own choices, in full autonomy, by offering them close cooperation with us (along the lines described above) in a way that is reconcilable with them cooperating closely with other powers too. If a country chooses, of its own accord, to associate primarily with another power, forcing it to change its mind can only be counter-productive. Only when other powers encroach upon a neighbour's autonomy and force it to break off its freely established relations with us, should we assist it to resist. After all, 'if the EU is to have a normative influence, it needs to be able to guarantee the security of those who chose to follow its lead.' (Hannon et al., 2015)

The ongoing dispute with Russia over its attempt to strangle Ukraine's autonomy is obviously not the best starting point for a new ENP that looks for win-win solutions. The EU can benefit however from China's westward move. In the end, we need not fear a Sino-Russian alliance, because President Putin's flirtation with China after the Ukraine crisis (exemplified by the signing of a gas deal on terms very advantageous to China) cannot hide the fact that China presents Russia with a much more serious geopolitical challenge than Europe ever will. Asian Russia has plenty of natural resources, but fewer and fewer Russians – a void that naturally generates Chinese attention and Russian fears. (Fischer, Klein and Libman, 2016, offer a thought-provoking scenario) Under the circumstances, Russia would become a tributary rather than an ally were it to move closer to Beijing. By contrast, Russia need never fear that Europe in one way or another will seek control over Russian territory or resources. Quite the contrary, we can offer Russia stability and predictability in economic and security relations. If what Russia seeks is equality in international relations, it is ultimately more likely to find it in the west than in the east. Moreover, once Chinese expansion in Central Asia

really surges, it is bound to create friction with Putin, who considers this as much his sphere of influence as Ukraine.

None of this guarantees that Russia will show a more conciliatory attitude to Europe, for it does not change Moscow's perception of our neighbourhood policy as being driven by an anti-Russian agenda. Furthermore, Putin has manoeuvred himself into a deadlock. For lack of economic benefits to offer, he has increasingly built his domestic popularity (which is real) on nationalist anti-Western rhetoric (and action, notably persecution of homosexuals, standing in for the 'effeminate' West) and on daring foreign policy exploits. The latter have 'won' Putin the Crimea and a seat at the negotiation table for Assad, as well as the reputation of being a much more resolute leader than anybody in the US or Europe. But Russia has also antagonised the majority in both Ukraine and Syria, all in return for the continued use of two naval bases. Nor is it in Russia's interest that the war in Syria continues indefinitely – but it cannot end, let alone 'win' this war on its own. Yet for all that the tangible results are limited, a compromise is akin to a loss of face, which is exactly what the regime cannot afford. Therefore the regime chose to paint the Syrian issue in terms of a confrontation with the West as well. Perhaps now that the diplomatic endgame for Syria has begun, an eventual Russian-American-European agreement on the future of Syria might yet translate into a more cooperative Russian stance on Ukraine – but that remains very much to be seen.

Nevertheless, over time China's expansion will increase the pressure on Moscow to find a face-saving way out and restore good-neighbourly relations with Europe. This demands strategic patience on Europe's side. The longer the dispute over Ukraine lasts, the more the pressure will rise inside the EU to end the economic sanctions against Russia. But lifting the sanctions now, before Russia has given any conciliatory sign, would amount to abandoning our most effective instrument (in combination with the low energy prices). Indeed, Europe has already made an important gesture, for the Minsk II agreement between Ukraine and Russia, brokered by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande, by remaining silent on the Crimea, has signalled that de facto, though not de jure, Europe is willing to live with its annexation by Russia. In response, we have seen only more military posturing by Russia. The key is not to overreact, for that would play right into Putin's hand. While we do have to send some military signal, through NATO, to demonstrate our resolve to defend our territories, mostly to reassure the Eastern European countries themselves, it is absolutely in our interest to focus our strategy on the economic arena, where Russia is weakest.

China's OBOR investment plan will furthermore directly benefit Europe economically – if the EU plays into it as one. Until now however, Member States are competing with each other to gain Chinese investment – and China is playing us. The standard Chinese slide-show on OBOR has twenty-eight variations: if it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium, hence Antwerp will show up as a key hub in the presentation for the Belgian embassy, just as it will be Rotterdam tomorrow, or Hamburg, depending on the interlocutor. It ought to be the EU itself that has the biggest say on what the European end of OBOR could look like; then it would indeed make sense to link it up with the Juncker investment plan. Furthermore, the EU need not passively wait while OBOR is coming our way. We can have a forward economic strategy ourselves, proactively engaging our neighbours, including in Central Asia, the better to position ourselves to create truly joint economic benefits for all involved – China, the countries themselves, and Europe. For this reason too it would make sense to extend our Neighbourhood Policy to Central Asia, one of the key 'middle spaces'. Indeed, a Chinese academic described OBOR to me as China's neighbourhood policy, and the China Institute for Reform and Development (2015) explicitly refers to the EU model as a source of inspiration. And: 'One Belt, One Road' – *I Dai, I Lu* – can also be understood as 'One Zone, One Road'.

In this regard, American strategy risks running counter to European strategy, however. At the end of the 15th century the Pope sanctioned the division of the world in a Portuguese and a

Spanish sphere; today the US is dividing the world – in a TTIP and a TTP sphere. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Transpacific Partnership are about much more than trade – this is a geostrategic project. By not inviting China to join, TPP constitutes another factor that pushes China and Russia together (Becker, 2016), for as it is understood that TTIP and TPP will be very important in ‘setting roles for a new era’, China is seeking ways and allies to empower it to become a ‘rule maker’ too (Jiang, 2015, p. 5). This goes directly against the interests of the EU and, according to Kissinger (2015, p. 306), of the US too, as he dubs it crucial to remain closer to Russia and China than they are to each other. Edward Luttwak (2012, pp. 213-247) points out that actually the US is pursuing three China strategies simultaneously – by the Treasury, the State Department and the Department of Defence. Whoever is in charge will have to realise that the pivot to Asia, which in an important measure is dependent on Europe’s ability to stabilise its own neighbourhood, cannot work if at the same time it reduces Europe’s capacity to do so by driving Beijing and Moscow in each other’s arms.

Finally, what of developments in the great powers themselves? Should Europe aspire to promote equality in Russia and China too? In Russia, the anti-Western rhetoric of the regime does appeal to the public at large, at least for now; it is difficult therefore to have great expectations. In China though, Europe, notably specific aspects of its internal system of governance and allocation of resources, is seen in a much more positive light by the regime as well as by the public that cares about such basic things as food safety, air quality and social security, all of which are seen to be in much more ample supply in Europe than in China. In any case, the EU can base relations with the non-democratic great powers on the same principles as those with other non-democratic states: to welcome all cooperation in every field of mutual interest that creates more security, prosperity and/or freedom for more people, and that does not reinforce the authoritarian nature of the regime.

The Pragmatic Use of Force

For the EU and its Member States, unlike some of the other great powers, the use of force can never again be a normal instrument of statecraft. Europeans have started too many wars, and suffered the consequences on their own territory, right at home. Of course, the military instrument can also be deployed preventively, and it has a crucial deterrent function. But the actual use of force, in the context of a strategy based on pragmatic idealism, can only be an instrument of last resort. If it comes to that last resort though, when vital interests and/or the Responsibility to Protect cannot otherwise be upheld, Europe should be willing and prepared to act. For too long the perception has been that EU policies, especially in the neighbourhood, end where conflict begins. Yet security, prosperity and freedom are inextricably linked: where there is no equality in terms of prosperity and freedom, there can be no stable security – but vice versa, where security is not guaranteed, there can be no freedom, and prosperity is useless.

Once again, geopolitics dictates that Europe’s focus as an autonomous security provider outside its borders should be the broad neighbourhood. This is where Europe has to take the lead in providing security, for the simple reason that nobody else will. The US, following its own geopolitical logic, has shifted its strategic focus to China, the only potential peer competitor (Simón, 2016). It will support Europeans, if they take the initiative to act – but the US will no longer always take the initiative for them to resolve crises around Europe that do not directly threaten EU/NATO territory. Other powers do act in our neighbourhood too, on both sides of ongoing conflicts, but too often in a way that aggravates rather than resolves crises – witness Russians and Turks in Syria, or Iranians and Saudis in Yemen. Such wars unfortunately cannot be ended at a stroke, but that does not mean that Europe should watch from the side-lines. When vital interests and/or R2P demand it, Europe can, pending the resolution of the conflict, already secure locally emerging safe zones, where local actors can restore a semblance of normality by organising the provision of the core public goods (Kaldor

and Solana, 2016). A safe zone is safe only when armed forces are on the ground to protect it, with serious firepower and air support, ready to fight when the zone is threatened. Even if our forces do not go out to actively seek to defeat an opponent, this still is a much higher level of ambition than what so far many Member States have done under the EU flag or even, in many cases, under any flag. But a safe zone without combat troops risks ending up a dead zone – remember Srebrenica.

The EU should resolve therefore to act as the first responder whenever a crisis arises in the broad neighbourhood. That means: to analyse what is happening, to assess whether it is important to us, to decide what has to be done, and to forge the coalition that can do it. It does not mean that the EU always has to act alone; indeed, we better act with allies and local partners, but if necessary we have to be prepared to act autonomously. Nor does it mean that if we decide upon military action, we always have to act through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – we can also act through NATO, the UN or an ad hoc coalition. But: in all of these options, ‘we’ means ‘we Europeans’.

The neighbourhood is not the only area outside Europe where Europeans may be called upon to intervene with military means. We have a vital interest in contributing to the freedom of the global commons (notably the seas, space and cyberspace). We must contribute to the operations of the UN, as part of our commitment to a rules-based international order. But the broad neighbourhood is where the primary role is ours.

Epilogue

By announcing *der Untergang des Abendlandes* I would fit seamlessly into the prevalent mood in Europe. Yet unless we bring it about ourselves, it will not come to pass. Europe is neither poor nor weak. The EU and the Member States have the means to ensure their citizens’ security, freedom and prosperity, if only they muster the will and the unity to do so. And citizens know that. That is why a discourse based on the abundance of threats and the necessity of austerity and sacrifice will not be credible. We cannot just ask people to “endeavour to persevere”, as in the story told by the Indian character Lone Watie in the Western movie *The Outlaw Josey Wales*:

‘You know, we got to see the Secretary of the Interior. [...] We told him about how our land had been stolen and how our people were dying. When we finished he shook our hands and said, ‘endeavour to persevere!’ [...] And the newspapers said, ‘Indians vow to endeavour to persevere’. We thought about it for a long time. ‘Endeavour to persevere’. And when we had thought about it long enough, we declared war on the Union.’

Europeans will feel European and commit to the Union if the EU turns around and positions itself again as the promotor of their security, freedom and prosperity – as the defender of equality – in Europe and in the world.

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Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is the Director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and teaches at Ghent University and at the College of Europe in Bruges. He is an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College and regularly lectures in its courses, as well as in various European staff courses and at the People's University in Beijing, where he is a Senior Research Associate.

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