



Strategic foresight - and the EU

by Antonio Missiroli

As the perfect storm that hit the EU a few years ago seems to be slowly dying out, the crisis management mode that prevailed then seems now also to have given way to a more reflective mood: a less uncertain present is encouraging greater focus on how to shape a less uncertain future. Various political and institutional initiatives across the Union indicate a growing interest in strategic thinking and analysing trends and factors that may affect Europe's position in the years and decades to come.

It may therefore be useful to dig a bit deeper into the nature, practice and record of strategic foresight - as has emerged elsewhere, especially in the United States - and to assess its relevance for the Union. To do so, a preliminary distinction needs to be made between 'foresight' as an essentially *predictive* function, and 'strategy' as a mainly *prescriptive* one.

On foresight

Big shocks and tectonic shifts - such as large-scale wars, protracted economic crises, or technological revolutions - have often prompted calls to identify new 'megatrends' and sketch out far-flung futures. These calls have been made, understandably, after the sequential events of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. And the same is happening again now.

However, there is one big difference between, say, the early 1950s and the current situation. Back then, in fact, the climate in which 'future studies' started blossoming - thanks to pioneer 'futuologists' like

Hermann Kahn or Daniel Bell - was one of relative predictability (of the domestic environment, the core variables, the main actors) and state-centred policy-making (or even planning). In essence, states and governments were in control of borders and markets. And in the late 1980s, when the winds of change began to sweep across the world and the 'end of history' was announced, the prevailing mood was one of boundless optimism regarding the seemingly unrestrained possibilities of the future - despite early warnings of a looming 'clash of civilisations'.

Today, neither is true: the future, even the immediate future, looks highly unpredictable, while states and governments are no longer in control, at least not to the same extent as in the 1950s (or even the 1990s). Complexity, chaos and network theories emphasise the fact that we now operate within open systems and that any policy should just try to build resilience and 'prepare to be prepared'. As a result, 'foresight' is now fundamentally different from what it used to be, and surely a more hazardous undertaking. There has indeed been no shortage of intelligence blunders and so-called 'strategic surprises' in recent years, from 9/11 to the 'Arab spring' - not to mention the financial crisis itself.

Maybe this unpredictability of predictions is the reason why looking to the future(s) has turned into a flourishing business, no matter whether it is named strategic foresight, horizon scanning, international futures, or just scenario planning. Of course, methodologies vary significantly: some aim at raising awareness and fostering preparedness;

others at offering menus of competing policy options or ‘alternative worlds’; and a few of them border on open advocacy and spin. In finance, risk analysis is a varying combination of them all (while ‘forecasting’ is a predominantly statistical exercise). In public policy, these are all seen now as indispensable tools for 21st century statecraft, linking trend-spotting with agenda-setting.

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All these considerations apply also to the EU itself. The best laid long-term plans and strategies associated with European integration date back to periods when predictability and state control were highest: right after the Hague summit, for instance, with the opening of the original Community to new members and the proposal of the Werner Plan for economic and monetary union (1969-71); between the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty (1986-1991); and then again between the creation of the euro, the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement and the Convention on the Future of Europe (2001-03).

‘Strategy may sometimes have some merit, especially in military contexts, as a contrast to tactics. But strategic is usually meaningless except to tell you that the writer is pompous and is trying to invest something with a seriousness it does not deserve.’

The Economist Style Guide on the use of the words strategy/strategic

Moreover, at least at sectoral level, the EU does best in terms of foresight and planning capacity in those policy areas where its competencies are exclusive (or near-exclusive), somewhat centralised, and science-based: animal health, for instance, or consumer protection, climate, energy, and space policy. Some Directorates-General in the European Commission still have remarkable know-how (and dedicated foresight units) that produce relevant trend reports, although most are highly technical and struggle to convey a comprehensive picture.

Other EU institutions and bodies do not have a comparable capacity: not the Council, whose mandate is much less future-oriented anyway; not (or not yet) the EEAS; and not even the Parliament, which cannot boast of anything comparable to the US Congressional Research Service. In sum, it seems legitimate to say that the EU, as a whole, can be quite good at gathering targeted information but is less good at processing, disseminating and sharing it.

More lately, the fledgling European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) has started trying

to bring together relevant expertise from all EU institutions and bodies (and beyond) with a view to promoting a joint ‘foresight’ capacity, somewhat along the lines of what the US National Intelligence Council (NIC) has been doing since the mid-1990s. Yet, despite the name of the initiative, its scope seems limited to preparing the ground for - rather than carrying out - ‘strategy’ proper.

On strategy

The trouble with ‘strategy’ is that it often means different things to different people. The *strategos* was a civil-military official elected by ancient Athenians to assume leadership in times of war, and ‘strategy’ has been traditionally associated (from Sun Tzu to von Clausewitz) with military planning in pursuit of political goals. During the Cold War, ‘strategic studies’ dealt mainly with the military competition (conventional and nuclear) between the two superpowers. As both society and warfare have now grown more complex, strategies have factored in a broad-ranging combination of military and non-military variables.

In business, ‘strategic’ approaches based on quantitative methods emerged from the development of operations research and linear programming during World War II. Since then, strategy emerged as a key concept as the commercial world made the transition - yet again - from a relatively stable, predictable environment to a rapidly changing, uncertain, unstable and more competitive one.

In politics, ‘strategists’ emerged first in the US, following the increased use of television advertising for campaigning in the 1960s. The horizons of their initiatives were intrinsically shorter but no less dependent on the “vision thing”, as George Bush Sr famously put it. Their political role has continued to grow over time and it is indeed difficult to underestimate the impact of such figures as Lee Atwater and Karl Rove (for the Republicans), James Carville and David Axelrod (for the Democrats), or David Gergen (for both). Comparable ‘spin doctors’ have also emerged in European countries - from Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann to Bodo Hombach, from Jacques Séguéla to Henri Guaino, from Bernard Ingham to Alastair Campbell.



Yet there is also a more basic, commonsensical meaning of the term: how many times do we hear (or say) that we (or they) “need a strategy”? What is often meant by that is a clear objective, an action plan, a roadmap, a compass, a sense of direction or, to use a fashionable term, a ‘narrative’ - more generally, overcoming muddling through and purely reactive behaviour.

This applies also to the EU, especially these days. It is no coincidence that a number of initiatives have taken shape lately across the continent to re-launch the ‘strategic’ reflection over the future of the EU. These range from the so-called ‘Westerwelle Group’ of eleven foreign ministers, led by Germany’s, that delivered its final report last September; to the ‘European Global Strategy’ blueprint, coordinated by four national think tanks (with the blessing of the foreign ministries of Sweden, Poland, Spain and Italy) and likely to be presented this spring, not to mention numerous other papers published by commentators, foundations, big business or ‘wise men’.

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In this domain the Union has a mixed record. To start with, its most successful ‘strategies’ rarely carried this name. Enlargement was driven by a short and simple article in the Rome Treaty. The single market was spearheaded by a sort of ‘green paper’ (the Cecchini Report) and pushed through by judicial action. And Schengen was a quintessential case of spillover, both geographic and functional.

Interestingly, however, the one policy area where medium- to long-term ‘strategies’ or ‘visions’ have been repeatedly called for (and often drafted) has been, notably, the CFSP. The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty even introduced ‘common strategies’ among the foreign policy instruments at the disposal of the Union. These were meant to have a regional focus and be public documents agreed upon unanimously whilst allowing for qualified majority voting - a quite exceptional case in the CFSP domain - when adopting specific ‘joint actions’ and common positions stemming from them.

As soon as the new treaty entered into force, in May 1999, three ‘common strategies’ were swiftly agreed: on Russia, Ukraine, and the Mediterranean – while a fourth one (on the Balkans) was implicitly dropped. None of them generated any ‘joint action’ and, in late 2000, High Representative (HR) Javier Solana delivered a critical evaluation report [printed in ISS Occasional Paper no.27] in which he argued i.a. that:

- The three ‘common strategies’ brought no added value mainly because they referred to areas where

common EU policies were already well established (PCAs, EuroMed, the Stability Pact), thus amounting to little more than inventories of existing activities;

- Lacking any guidelines, procedures were improvised and ended up in lengthy negotiations in Council working groups which led, in turn, to a ‘Christmas tree’ approach based on the lowest common denominator, with no clear priorities;

- The decision to make them public turned them into quintessential declaratory texts, well-suited for public diplomacy but less useful as internal working tools balancing pros and cons, evaluating EU interests and goals, and identifying areas of disagreement with partners.

The lesson was quickly learned and contributed to the success of the European Security Strategy (ESS) of December 2003. This time around, the new ‘vision’ ventured into new territory: it was the first threat assessment ever made by the EU; it was not drafted at working group or even COREPER (Committee of Permanent Representatives) level; it identified priorities and called for more coherent approaches; and it helped reconcile different views both among the member states and *vis-à-vis* their main external partner, the US.

Yet the ESS was still a mainly declaratory text - although briefly used as an additional (quasi-legal) basis for launching operations - rather than an internal blueprint or a ‘white paper’. Tellingly, it was HR Solana himself who preferred to keep the ESS as a general doctrine and resisted calls to translate it into a series of specific action plans. The 2003 security strategy was the combined product of exceptional circumstances (the divisions over Iraq) and unique opportunities (the need to mend fences and react to the new challenges). In other words, it was a one-off achievement. This was made all the more evident when, in late 2007, on the insistence of some member states to revisit the text in light of the experiences made, Solana limited the scope of the new exercise to a ‘report on the implementation’ of the ESS.

The drafting of the report, in turn, was soon caught up in complex intergovernmental negotiations and then hit by the initial rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish voters (June 2008), the conflict between Russia and Georgia (August), and the collapse of Lehman Brothers (September). Nevertheless, the report convincingly updated the previous threat analysis and reaffirmed the overall validity of the ESS, calling for more determination and coherence in implementing it. Yet the making of the 2008 report also vindicated, in retrospect, the 2000 criticism of the methodology and scope of such exercises –



which have partially resurfaced, as some analysts have pointed out, in the framing of the so-called 'strategic partnerships' which the EU has launched with a number of major countries worldwide.

In the meantime, the terms 'strategy' and 'strategic' have almost disappeared from the EU treaties. The only reference to be found now is in art.26 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), where the European Council is called on i.a. to 'identify the strategic interests' of the Union. Yet this has certainly not silenced calls for a more 'strategic' approach to both our internal *modus vivendi* (and *operandi*) and our external action (and projection).

Where from – and where to

It is fair to argue that the Union's external projection as a security provider peaked between 2007 and 2008, with a large number of peace-building operations and widespread optimism about Europe's potential role in the world, as articulated in the opening paragraphs of the ESS. Since 2008, however, many events and developments have occurred which change the context in which the EU operates.

Internally, the Union is now dramatically confronted *declining resources*: financial resources, due to the combined impact of the subprime crisis and the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone, with subsequent budgetary cuts; but also political resources, in light of the ever more apparent divisions - between creditor and debtor states, 'upstairs' and 'downstairs', integrationists and sceptics - that have crucially affected cohesion inside the EU, not to mention the increasingly introverted attitude of citizens across the continent.

Externally, the Union is being confronted with *rising challenges* to its well-being and overall security:

- More unstable neighbours, and their (and also our) increasing exposure to *their own* neighbours: 'securing the neighbourhood' has turned into a much more complex and far-reaching objective than when it was first formulated in the 2003 ESS;
- An increasingly multi-polar and fragmented international system, characterised by power shifts (certainly not to the advantage of the 'West' as we know it) and fragile institutions, which in turn makes 'effective multilateralism' a noble but at times unattainable goal;
- Threats, risks and hazards that are ever less predictable and ever more disruptive - able as they are to cut across geographical borders and functional

boundaries - and have systemic repercussions, thus forcing the EU to become 'more active, capable and coherent' than ever before.

All these internal and external trends now intersect and overlap, putting the EU on the spot. In Donald Rumsfeld's jargon (from 2003, yet again), "known unknowns" are teaming up with "unknown unknowns", highlighting Europe's old and new vulnerabilities.

Maybe the real trouble, then, lies with *writing* strategies rather than discussing and conceiving them. In fact, the final product of collective drafting risks either reaffirming, and sometimes rehashing, the *status quo* (whatever the reason, including what social scientists call path dependency or 'group-think') or drastically challenging it, as it happens when a newly elected government articulates a radically new agenda to respond to new challenges (e.g. the National Security Strategy adopted by the Bush administration in early 2002). For the EU, the former has frequently happened while the latter is hardly feasible.

That is why the 'foresight' component, however volatile and open-ended, is important for any credible 'strategic' approach. It helps identify broad trends, drivers and shapers of change, possible unintended consequences of policy choices, and 'game-changers'. It helps also factor in shocks, build in resilience, and phase in mitigation tools. It helps adjust means to ends (and ends to means) in a changing and uncertain environment. And it helps prepare institutions and decision-makers for the unexpected - and the undesired.

Both military thinking and management theory, today, emphasise the fact that a successful 'strategy' is an adaptive process where piecemeal decisions are taken over time following a pattern based on continuous feedback between formulation and implementation. In other words, a rigid *Gesamtkonzept* from which every future action derives naturally and consequentially would definitely not meet today's requirements, and it would probably backfire. Old-fashioned abstract 'blue sky' thinking, however, would certainly prove equally inadequate and would probably be ignored.

Perhaps a permanent conversation on our common 'strategic' interests and the best means to protect them, based on constant joint monitoring of medium- to long-term internal and external trends, could do the trick – because the future, too, is no longer what it used to be.

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