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**EUROPE AND THE WORLD  
OR SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN FALLACIES**

SVEN BISCOP



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## INTRODUCTION

European foreign policy: the words do not conjure up any grand images. In the absence of any real ambition, there are neither triumphs to celebrate nor disasters to mourn. There is only gentle irrelevance to contemplate. Such is the *image* of Europe as an international player today in the minds of those who make and study foreign policy and strategy, in our own as well as in foreign capitals. *Gentle* irrelevance, for Europe proclaims to wish the world well and is generous enough with its money to prove it. And it presents no cause for fear, only for irritation, in some corners, with its inconvenient insistence on universal values. But *irrelevance* nonetheless, for Europe lacks the unity and sense of purpose for resolute and sustained action to uphold these values, and continues to liberally spend its money quite regardless of values or effect. Increasingly irrelevant even, for in the wake of the financial crisis Europe struggles to maintain its own social model, which undermines the legitimacy of its value-based narrative and erodes the will as well as the means for external action.

Even if the image was false (and alas it is not, at least not entirely), because of it Europe is treated with benign neglect, by those that take our money, by our supposed “strategic partners” among the emerging powers, and even by our allies. All of them go through the motions of meetings and summits without really considering Europe a force to be taken into account. Many have been quick to exploit the absence of purposive action on our side to occupy the ground (the seas, the resources, the hearts and minds...) that we have abandoned or not cared to occupy. Europe, in sum, is not perceived and therefore not treated as a strategic actor, as a pole of the multipolar world, as one of the great powers.

And yet there is ground for optimism, because this unsettling story is mostly of Europe’s own making. The emerging powers are emerging and the world has become multipolar, so Europe’s relative weight has declined. But its absolute weight in world politics could be much greater. The story could still have a happy end, if only the governments of Europe would see through the seven fallacies that stop them from being the player that *collectively* they could be.

Sven Biscop<sup>1</sup>

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## THE DWARFS

There are only two kinds of countries in Europe, Belgian statesman Paul-Henri Spaak is reputed to have said: small countries and those that have yet to realize that they are but that – small countries. Alas, the latter far outnumber the former. To believe that on the world stage any European state is more than a dwarf is the single most damning fallacy for Europe's global role, for it creates the illusion in many capitals that they don't need the other Europeans.

It particularly stimulates bilateral wheeling and dealing with the great powers to the detriment of collective European engagement, seen as no more than a secondary supplement to national foreign policy. It creates a competition between Europeans to appear the most attractive to investment by and trade with the great powers; in practice that often translates as being the most compliant. *Divide et impera*: Europeans divide themselves and the great powers rule. For the great powers would not long remain great powers without a certain degree of cunning: of course they play off one European against the other, since we offer them the opportunity on a silver platter. We even go to the extent of acting collectively to undermine our collective institutions: since 2012 e.g. we have allowed for the emergence of a separate diplomatic track between China and Central and Eastern Europe. What the 16 European states involved stand to gain, apart from the fleeting illusion of importance, is not quite clear – that China stands to gain from this arrangement need not be doubted for a moment.

This fallacy is understandable, for some dwarfs do carry a big sword or a big purse. But dwarfs being dwarfs, it is either/or: no single European state today can claim global reach in all dimensions of power, military, economic, and political. Therefore no single European state can defend all of its interests on its own all of the time. Surely no European country assumes it can deal alone with all the ramifications of the Arab Spring, to name but the obvious example. None has the military clout: Britain and France could initiate the interventions in Libya and Mali (and deserve our appreciation for it) but could not see them through without assistance from the US and other Europeans. Nor does any European government have the financial means.

The conclusion is obvious: because some threats and challenges are just too big to face alone, in many instances defending the national interest demands collective action. Then why don't we do it?





## SNOW WHITE

To convince the Member States of the need for collective action through the EU, the Union must prove it can more effectively defend those interests which its Member States individually can no longer safeguard. Unfortunately, many officials and observers still seem to regard interests as a notion that does not or should not apply to the EU. The pursuit of interests runs contrary to their idealised view of an altruistic EU foreign policy. This is the attitude that leads some to condemn the interventions in Libya and Mali for the mere fact that they served our interests. One wonders whether these critics think any government would put its soldiers at risk when they have no interest at all in the matter, and whether they don't think that the people of Libya and Mali feel that the interventions at the same time were very much in their interest too. They accept that states have national interests, of course, and that the Commission's DG Trade defends interests is somehow acceptable too. But the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy in this view exists solely to do good in the world: the EU as Snow White, pure, innocent – and helpless.

A fallacy, for Union should create strength, not weakness. *L'Union fait la force*: not all Belgians may feel that their Kingdom's motto does or should apply to the country, but it certainly applies to Europe.

Fortunately, attitudes are evolving. The EU's anti-piracy operation, Atalanta, e.g. was always publicly motivated by a desire to assist the people of Somalia – a laudable purpose of course – while referring to the protection of European trade initially was “not done”, as if the one excludes the other. Today however, EU officials proudly refer to Atalanta as the first military operation under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) that clearly is about European interests – evidence that “we can do it too”. At the December 2012 meeting of the European Council, the Heads of State and Government noted that “in today's changing world the European Union is called upon to assume increased responsibilities in the maintenance of international peace and security in order to guarantee the security of its citizens and *the promotion of its interests* [emphasis added]”. In her *Final Report Preparing the December 2013 European Council on Security and Defence* (15 October 2013), the High Representative called for a Union able “to act decisively as a security provider”, “autonomously where necessary”, and “to protect its interests”, including even by “projecting power” – certainly the first time that last notion was mentioned in an EU document.

Foreign policy is about interests. The recognition at the EU level that that simple fact is neither good nor bad is the first step toward a Union of strength. It is the way these interests are then pursued that can be “good” or “bad” and indeed

requires close scrutiny. Sometimes the “good” way will require the use force, though. Let us not forget that our vital interests include upholding the core of international law, notably the illegality of war and the “Responsibility to Protect” people from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. In such situations, civilian power alone quickly leaves you powerless, for power is the result of a multiplication of factors: if one factor (military, economic or political/civilian) equals zero, the end result equals zero too.<sup>2</sup> Rather than Snow White therefore, perhaps Joan of Arc is a better image, if one is called for.

Of course force should remain the last resort. But a Union that is *never* willing to apply force under its own flag will never be a credible platform for collective action to those of its members that have a strong strategic culture.

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2. To paraphrase my colleague at Egmont, Jo Coelmont.

## THE APPLE

If European foreign policy is about interests, more is called for than going around the world handing out free apples in return for a token commitment to human rights and democracy. It is another fallacy to equate foreign policy with doing programmes and projects. Too many EU “policy” decisions amount to extending or adding to existing budget lines, without setting clear objectives or even assessing the effectiveness of past programmes. European foreign policy is not political enough.

Our response to the turmoil in our southern neighbourhood that followed the Arab Spring is a prime example. What the EU has called “More for More” in reality amounts to more of the same: extra money has been allocated to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), but without reassessing its objectives and instruments. Why would a policy that did not yield results in the seven years before the Arab Spring, all of a sudden work now? The additional money definitely is not enough to make a difference: one cannot go to Cairo with a few €100 million and announce that one will take the country in hand. For one, Saudi Arabia would just add another zero to that amount. The economic challenge is obvious, but it is beyond Europe’s means to address it in one fell swoop – “A Marshall Plan here and a Marshall Plan there and soon you’re talking about real money”.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, more money will not generate more effect if the way it is used remains unaltered. Conditionality – handing out apples to the good pupils – is less and less effective. Other actors, like China, have a huge apple basket too, so our relative leverage declines. More importantly, this basically paternalistic approach is no longer in touch with the times. Particularly in countries where people have just taken their fate into their own hands, like in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, they now want to craft their own model, rather than passively adopting a model from the outside, be it from Europe or elsewhere.

In our desire to be liked by everybody, like Snow White, we have declared partnership with just about everybody, with the emerging powers, with all of our neighbours, and many more, promising them apples if they would only become like us: democratic social market economies that guarantee the security, prosperity, freedom and equality of their citizens. In practice, by formally accepting regimes as partners even before they changed, we have taken away much of the incentive for change and reduced our own freedom of action. For once partnership has been announced, it is difficult for us to keep our distance and be very critical – Snow White is not the one to be strict and cut off the apple supply

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3. Steve Coll, “Hard on Obama”. In: *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 60, 2013, No. 12.

when necessary. As a result, rather than changing our partners, the whole notion of partnership has been tainted by the inclusion of unsavoury regimes which in the public eye became our friends. The apple has proved to be poisonous: neither the one that gave it nor the one that accepted it is much the better for it.

Time to abandon programmes and partnerships and return to diplomacy. Partnership is for those with whom we do share respect for the same universal values on which our own model of society is based and therefore can systematically engage in joint *action*. With others, we have diplomatic relations that allow for a *dialogue* and, if that is successful, occasional cooperation on specific issues. We are good at diplomacy, actually. The High Representative, Catherine Ashton, is the only person apart from his family who managed to speak with Morsi after the army had deposed him as president of Egypt. Her mediation efforts, in concert with the US, did not prevent the outbreak of armed clashes in the end, but it does demonstrate that the potential is there.

## THE WITCH

Once again the question can be asked why then the Union does not live up to its potential? If misfortune befalls Snow White, we blame the witch. But this is another fallacy: it is all too easy to blame someone else for the ineffectiveness of EU foreign policy, but in the end most of the blame lies with the Member States themselves, who are not willing to let the EU level play the role that it could play.

The programmatic approach to foreign policy is often decried as the result of the dominance of the ways of the Commission within the European External Action Service. But if that is to some extent true, it only holds sway because too many Member States are too exclusively focused on their national foreign policies and do not sufficiently use the collective EU instruments and institutions (that they have themselves created). “More for More”, to stay with the same example, is too programmatic by far, but it is also quite surprising that no Member States seem to push for a really new policy towards our southern neighbours, or even just for a real reassessment of the ENP.

Blaming the High Representative for the lack of success of EU external action has become a favourite Brussels pastime; this author must admit to having joined the chorus of criticism on more than one occasion, notably because of the absence of strategic debate and lack of prioritization and initiative. But Kissinger himself, for all his criticism of Europe, would not be able to take any grand initiative if confronted with a *fronde* of unable and unwilling Presidents and Ministers, who are concerned more with the prestige that national policies can bring than with the ineffectiveness resulting from a lack of European policies. He had to deal with only one Nixon, after all.

Finally, if all else fails, we can always blame the Chinese or, depending on the dossier, the Russians, for the absence of success. But while they do often undermine our policy, we forget that we make it all too easy for them to do so if we are too divided to devise an unambiguous policy ourselves. In the field, resolute *strategy* usually wins out over wishy-washy *presence*.



## THE PRINCE

More important than shouldering (much of) the blame, is assuming responsibility. Member States will have to assume a lot more responsibility, for what was the bedrock of European strategic thinking has now also become a fallacy: we can no longer count on our prince from America to save us from each and every danger. Not that the prince does not care for us anymore: if once again the territory of Europe itself were directly threatened, he would charge to the rescue, because that directly concerns American vital interests. But absent such a threat, the real focus of US strategy is now on Asia and the Pacific. Princes have a thing with dragons after all – fair maidens like Snow White tend to get boring if a maiden they intend to stay. Consequently, in case of crises in our broad neighbourhood Washington expects Europe to take the initiative and respond with its own means, at an early stage, with US support in specific areas (notably intelligence), in order to prevent escalation and the drawing in of more substantial US assets.

US action in recent crises in Europe's southern periphery bears out the reality of this "pivot", not so much of American military assets (most US combat troops had already been redeployed) but of the focus of American strategy. The intervention in Libya in 2011 was still more of an American operation in a European guise. Europeans for the greater part had to rely on American strategic enablers (precision guided munitions, air-to-air refuelling, intelligence) without which they would have faced great difficulties to run such an air campaign, but Europeans initiated and had to convince the US of the need of the intervention – usually it's the other way around. And the American message afterwards was clear: Europeans ought to be able to wage such an after all limited campaign, on their doorstep, alone – one can hardly disagree. The 2012 intervention in Mali conformed much more with American expectations: Europeans initiated an intervention and saw it through with US involvement largely limited to intelligence. Even the major US role in addressing the civil war in Syria today testifies to the reality of the "pivot", because it is a role which it didn't seek. When President Barack Obama declared the use of chemical weapons to be a red line beyond which the US could not remain inactive, this was a polite way of saying that the US was *not* going to get involved in the conflict, since the calculation in Washington clearly was that nobody would be foolish enough to cross this line. Alas, once a red line is drawn, one can always count on someone to step over it; hence the US was drawn in against its intention.

The implication is clear: those European governments that are still denying the reality of the shift in American strategy, intimating that we have seen and heard it all before, are engaging in a dangerous exercise of wishful thinking. "Before" was during the Cold War, when the European front in any case was central to

US strategy; today the US sees China as its most important strategic competitor. Europeans may be justified in preferring not to think in such terms – designating enemies can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy – but cannot escape the consequences: we *will* sometimes be on our own. Denial of this unpleasant (but entirely logical) fact of life is not going to help us prepare for it.

Unfortunately, neither of the recent crises has really been addressed by Europe collectively. In Libya and Mali, intervention was initiated and implemented by ad hoc coalitions; the EU came in only afterwards. EU sanctions have been imposed on Syria, but at heart Member States differ decisively about the way to deal with the war: arming or at least otherwise supporting the forces of the opposition, in order to safeguard influence after the hoped for fall of the Assad regime, or continuing to sit the fence, for fear of handing power to jihadist elements now dominant in the very much divided rebel camp. In all three cases, Britain and/or France are at the core of (attempts to create) ad hoc coalitions that undertake a “European” action, which after the facts inevitably draw in the EU, which alone has the instruments and means for post-intervention stabilisation. This is not a viable model for the long term. On the one hand, neither Britain nor France can seriously hope to supplant US power and always bear the greatest share of the burden of European military action – they simply no longer have the means. On the other hand, a Union in which Paris and London perennially decide when and where to intervene, while the other Member States can decide to join or to abstain but don’t have real influence on French and British decision-making (just like Europe as a whole has little impact on American decisions of war and peace) is not tenable.

The same conclusion is evident once again: collective action under the political aegis of the EU, guided by a focus on interests, is the only viable option. Soon enough, the choice will no longer be between national or collective action, but between collective action or no action at all.



## THE CASTLE

The prince's pivot exposes yet another fallacy: the CSDP and NATO are not competing castles in the same shire that should therefore be jockeying for influence – they are but wings of one and the same castle that defends the shire as a whole. Unfortunately, a fallacious focus on institutions has generated a reductionism that is detrimental to the quality of the European strategic debate. Nearly every issue is automatically reduced to the question of the desired competences and prestige of the preferred organisation. Falsely perceived as a zero-sum game, it has led to a ridiculous beauty contest between NATO and the CSDP. Fighting Somali pirates? Europeans deploy on two separate operations. Joining capability development efforts? Europeans engage in two separate schemes, Pooling & Sharing and Smart Defence. European governments are perfectly capable, furthermore, of defending contradictory positions on one and the same issue depending on whether they sit in a NATO or an EU meeting. Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the mightiest security organisation of them all?<sup>4</sup>

At a stroke, the US pivot has rendered this debate entirely obsolete. It is often presented as if the EU is divided but fortunately NATO at least always has a clear strategy and the will to act. In fact, *the US* usually has a strategy which it then, because the Europeans are indeed divided, imposes on NATO. But the US will not take the lead anymore in responding to crises in the European periphery; they expect *us* to take the lead and initiate a response. Without the preponderant US lead, NATO is nothing more, politically speaking, than that same quarrelling bunch of Europeans that also makes up the EU. The question is not therefore whether in a given crisis it is up to NATO or the CSDP to act, but whether *Europeans* will act. If they do, they will make use of NATO, or the CSDP, or other EU instruments, or, most likely, a combination thereof – the specific circumstances of each contingency will determine which instruments are apt and available to be put to use. If they don't, then nobody will make use of any of these, including NATO, whose great asset, its command and control structure, will just be sitting idle.

Whether we act through NATO or the CSDP, “we” in an increasing number of cases is likely to mean “we Europeans”. Trying to design a strict division of labour between NATO and the CSDP is a futile exercise therefore, because they are but instruments. One doesn't lay down in elaborate detail which competences one accords to the different tools in a toolbox – rather one tries to have as comprehensive a toolbox as possible and select the right combination of tools from it in function of the problem that needs solving.

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4. Credit for this image must go to Alexander Mattelaer, who clearly caught the author's vibe.

There are many instruments available in NATO, the CSDP, as well as in other parts of the EU, in the UN and at the national level, but there is only one Europe to serve. Logically, Europe ought to have one view on which instruments it needs and what it expects them to be able to do. Specifically, Europeans cannot have one view on intervention and the use of force when they meet in the EU and another when they meet in NATO. The President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, tried to steer Europe in the right direction when in 2012 he called for a debate among the Heads of State and Government (to be held in December 2013), not about the CSDP, but about “the state of defence in Europe”. The crucial question to be answered, which has become rather urgent because of the US pivot, is: which responsibilities is *Europe* willing to assume as a security provider, regardless of whether in a specific case it will act through the CSDP or NATO or both. The problem is that there is today no recognized forum where Europeans can meet and take decisions about their role in security and defence in both NATO and the EU – it’s always either/or. The preparation of the December 2013 European Council proves how difficult it is to overcome the reductionist fallacy: even though Van Rompuy wanted it to be about “the state of defence in Europe”, it was then prepared via the usual channels, i.e. EU channels, and thus risks ending up to be just about the CSDP after all.

The European Council is an EU body, of course, but they are our Heads of State and Government, meeting in an intergovernmental context, adopting not binding law but political declarations. Surely they can agree to state explicitly that they will regard their conclusions as political guidance for their governments’ positions in both the EU and NATO. But before they can agree on anything, they need to have a thorough substantial debate. Dare one say: a strategic debate?

## THE FAIRY TALE

This brings us neatly to the last fallacy: European governments will not be able to overcome any of these fallacies if they continue to refuse to engage in the strategic debate. Precisely because they are so divided today, they need a fairy tale, a story-line, a narrative, to tie it all together and stipulate what it is that they want to do together: a strategy.

Europeans do not have to do everything together. The aim is not to upload everything to the collective European agenda. The point of strategy is precisely the opposite: it is to make choices, to set priorities. What we don't need is a compilation of all the priorities of all of our national foreign policies; that would yield a Christmas tree but not a strategy that can be acted upon. Nor is there a need to say a little something about every imaginable subject of EU external action; we have [www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu) for that. An EU strategy for foreign policy or external action is to focus on a short list of key priorities, which all 28 Member States see as priorities, and on which collective action brings the greatest added value because none of the 28 can see them through on its own. Guiding all of our collective external action for every 5-year legislature (and term of office of the High Representative), this would be grand strategy – grand enough to also guide European positions in and on NATO when we use that instrument.

Europe may not be widely seen as a strategic actor, but most people in the world do agree that Europe is a good place to live. That points us to what Europe has achieved: through a unique combination of democracy, capitalism and “big government”, it has created a much more equal society than can be found in most other places around the world, which provides the greatest security, prosperity and freedom to the greatest number of its citizens. But not yet to all of its citizens, so although this aspiration to equality is anchored in the Treaty on European Union, an aspiration it remains. We must take great care that in our eagerness to save the Euro, we don't destroy the social model which the Euro was meant to serve – not to threaten. It's the social model that binds citizens to the European *idea*, not the Euro: the intuition that even though one doesn't quite understand how it works, the EU is good for one's wellbeing. We are in great danger of arriving at the opposite: that people still don't understand how the EU works but they feel it threatens their wellbeing; in some Member States this may already be the case.

The fairy tale does not start in a faraway land therefore, but has to start at home: Europe has a great deal of work ahead to consolidate and then to deepen its social model. At the same time, this internal strategic challenge is at the heart of our external strategy. On the one hand, the conditions that have to be fulfilled for Europe to achieve this, its fundamental purpose, constitute our vital inter-

ests.<sup>5</sup> The way to generate the priorities of our grand strategy for foreign policy is to assess the global environment and identify the most important threats and challenges to these shared vital interests. Foreign policy is about interests, as stated above, but on the other hand, the European idea continues to shape the *way* we pursue them: not as a zero-sum game, but in such a way that we don't harm the legitimate interests of others. The best way of achieving international peace and security is to convince other governments to provide for the security, prosperity and freedom of their citizens just as we provide for our own. We must be willing to use coercion and the use of force, or the credible threat of it, but only as a last resort.

The debate about the need to write a common fairy tale risks becoming a never-ending story, but fortunately a decision-point is in sight. When a new High Representative enters office after the May 2014 European elections, he/she should make this his/her first priority. Even if he/she would not be explicitly mandated to do so by the European Council, he/she would still be well advised to start the 5-year term with a clear set of priorities, in whichever form they are written down: a European Global Strategy, a new European Security Strategy, or maybe just a speech – but then a really good one.

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5. Which I have defined elsewhere as: (1) preventing threats against Europe's territory from materializing; (2) keeping open all lines of interaction with the world, notably sea lanes and cyberspace; (3) assuring the supply of energy and other natural resources; (4) managing migration, to maintain both a viable workforce and a viable social system; (5) mitigating the impact of climate change; (6) strengthening international law as a fundament of international stability, notably the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and (7) preserving the autonomy of decision-making by preventing undue dependence on any foreign power. See "Peace without Money, War without Americans: Challenges for European Strategy". In: *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, 2013, No. 5, pp. 1125-1142.

## CONCLUSION

Common Foreign and Security Policy, Common Security and Defence Policy: as with a Democratic Republic, the more the need is felt to explicitly stress it, the less common/democratic it probably actually is. There is no magic wand that will allow us to conjure up a European strategic consensus out of nowhere. But there is no reason for pessimism either. Governments cling to their prerogatives, but they are also pragmatic. We have seen in the wake of the Eurozone crisis that in spite of the initial national reflex of many capitals, and reluctant though they still may be, the agreed way out of the crisis is another step in European integration – a very big step even. The long-term trend toward ever closer Union thus continues. Slowly, because most Member States will not think of Europeanising an issue area until the moment when they have no other options left – but then they will, including in foreign, security and defence policy. Perhaps quicker than we might expect, given the enormous pressure on defence budgets today.

So, will they live happily ever after? The key is that in every fairy tale they live happily ever after *together*.