The Comprehensive Approach and European Union External Action: Focus on the EU Official*

Lars-Erik Lundin

PhD in Political Science and International Relations, he was a former Swedish diplomat (1976-1996) and served in the European Commission from 1996-2009 and as EU Ambassador to international organizations in Vienna. Currently, he is a Distinguished Associate Fellow at SIPRI, specialized in European security policy. He is an elected member of the Swedish Royal Academy of War Sciences.

Abstract

This article was finalized shortly after the UK referendum announcing a Brexit and the European Council receiving a new European Union Global Strategy for foreign and security policy. Momentous times when "business as usual" hardly is an option inside EU institutions. The approach to the topic is broader than the topical issue of comprehensiveness in conflicts and crises. An effort is also made to take into account the actual working conditions of EU staff at headquarters in Brussels and in the field. The author argues that key messages to staff to apply a bold and ambitious comprehensive approach, will now be necessary and the academic and think-tank community needs to be helpful to this end.

Resumo

A Abordagem Abrangente e a Ação Externa da União Europeia: Perspetiva de um Representante Nacional na UE

O presente artigo foi concluído pouco depois do referendo no Reino Unido e do Conselho Europeu ter acolhido uma nova Estratégia Global da União Europeia para a Política Externa e de Segurança. A abordagem adotada nesta análise posiciona-se para além dos limites da abordagem abrangente aos conflitos e crises. Neste sentido dar-se-á atenção às condições funcionais presentes nos quarteis generais da União, em Bruxelas e no terreno. O autor debate a necessidade dos funcionários europeus adotarem uma abordagem abrangente, corajosa e ambiciosa, reconhecendo-a como um requisito, devendo igualmente as comunidades académicas e de analistas pertencentes a think-tanks corresponderem a este importante desafio.

* The paper is dedicated to those European Union officials who, in such difficult circumstances, continue to try to provide added value to EU external action in widely different policy areas of relevance to security.

Background

The paper is a spin-off effect from the interviews that the author carried out in the EU institutions in preparation for a handbook on EU and security published in 2015 (Lundin, 2015). Scores of group discussions have fed into the analysis with: actual or prospective EU officials working as CSDP leaders, heads of political sections in EU delegations, desk officers in one of the external relation DGs of the European Commission, Member State Ambassadors posted to a key multilateral organization and local agents doing political reporting on behalf of an EU delegation. Above all, it is of course influenced by the author's experience as an EU official from 1996-2011.

The essay refers to many categories of staff. It includes administrators deployed to headquarters and to delegations, who in their work primarily apply a geographic perspective to external action policies, with just a few also working on the multilateral level. It includes a limited number of desk officers at headquarters focusing on thematic issues such as human rights and the rule of law. It includes the entire arm of EEAS, the European External Action Service that is in charge of CSDP, the common security and defense policy, including civil-military missions and explicit security policies, such as counter-terrorism and conflict prevention. It notably also includes staff in several other structures in charge of implementation of external action policies based on the community method, including the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR), the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development

(DEVCO), to name a few of the most relevant DGs in the Commission – there are others, such as those dealing with trade, maritime, energy, environment, cyber and other thematic policies of relevance to security. It is important to note that in many security contexts, just to take one example – trafficking and migrant smuggling – the principal interlocutors from the EU structures work in internal DGs in the Commission.

Wishful thinking regarding further short-term reforms or new resources is left aside. Instead, the focus is on low hanging fruits both for the hierarchy and for staff itself. How can the responsible units produce more, sometimes with less staff?

Officials Face Increasingly Difficult Challenges

The current situation facing EU structures as regards security contains a paradox. The general public in Europe, strongly influenced by populist tendencies, often blames the EU for not having done enough to counter serious security-related problems, notably irregular migration.

At the same time, there are many arguments put forward to the effect that the EU should not do more but rather less in the future.

As regards hard security, skeptics point to a more important role of NATO, not least given the NATO Summit in July 2016 in Poland. As regards border security many advocate more focus on national frontiers. As regards Ukraine, many see the leading role not to be on the level of the EU but belonging to a few important Member States. And the determination to ask the EU to take a leading role in the Middle East is simply not there. The High Representative (also Vice President of the Commission, HR/VP) after some years of hesitation was asked to put forward a European global strategy to the European Council in June 2016. This strategy may, however, become even harder to implement than the initial perceptions about the conditions for implementation of the 2003 European Security Strategy. In 2003 the number of issues on the table was much smaller. And the European Union counted on the possibility to work in close collaboration with at least two strategic partners, the United States and Russia. Now the relationship to Russia is defined as a strategic challenge rather than as a partnership (HR/VP, 2016) and the ability of whoever is elected President of the United States, for instance, to get a trade agreement with Europe ratified is very much in doubt. And what is more: the two remaining American presidential candidates agree on the absolute requirement of Europe taking more of the burden concerning defense and security in and around Europe.

In a rational world, this would lead to serious preoccupations in Europe about how to mobilize the necessary political will to deal with the security challenges ahead. In a real world political leaders seem to focus more on to what extent they will be able to maintain power on the national level. And they will need to take into account very much increasing skepticism of their constituencies about the role of the EU.

On the level of the top hierarchy of the EU structures in the real world, the central preoccupation may in this situation be how to do damage limitation concerning maintaining essential solidarity between the EU Member States in implementing already agreed decisions – for instance on how to share the migration challenge. As noted by European Council President Donald Tusk on Twitter in April 2016: "Solving the root causes of migration cannot be ignored but too often sounded like an alibi for doing nothing in Europe."

The Natural Reaction when Faced with Difficulties: Look Down

The posture of the EU official in such a situation may lead to even less attention to the need for a comprehensive approach to external conflicts and crises than before. The fatigue when it comes to speaking in a language of grand strategy may be overwhelming unless efforts to beef up morale are deployed by the top hierarchy and by supporting efforts from the outside.

The EU official is in any case faced with substantial difficulties from his or her personal perspective when it comes to security. Especially as regards officials with a background in the Commission, he/she has typically not been recruited to the EU

on qualifications relating to security in a broader sense. In many cases, particularly as regards temporary agents recruited from the Member States, he/she may not be very familiar with what the EU actually can do on security at large; without a significant experience of working with the EU, the structures in Brussels may be perceived as black boxes. For example, it took some time before the military experts in the EU came to the view that it was important to cooperate with the Commission on something more than the financing of small civilian projects in the field.

It was only in a few specific contexts that a large number of EU officials dealing with security problems from different perspectives came to the understanding that wider coordination is a necessary condition for success. The most cited case in point may be the Horn of Africa and piracy. But in that context, it also soon became apparent that to develop real coordination on maritime security a lot of actors need to work together. It would take time, and it would be difficult to determine who has brought the most significant contribution to the table. In the case of maritime security, which was a cross-sectoral policy product together with the European Commission more than 300 stakeholders were involved including major international players such as the United States, Russia, India, and China (Lundin, 2015). Not least the importance of private sector contributions became more than obvious.

It goes without saying that no individual EU official will be able or advised to push for such a level of coordination in an area without substantial support from the hierarchy. The hierarchy cannot give such support without being very selective when implementing the European global strategy. It also, goes without saying that the HR/VP is not likely to make such recommendations unless there is intense political pressure from Member States and unless there is substantial evidence through reporting from the field that such an ambitious approach makes sense.

The EU Mobilizes in Crisis: the Need for Three Compelling Messages from the HR/VP to Staff

The golden opportunity for the EU official to make a difference through advocating an early, bold and ambitious, comprehensive approach comes before and during a crisis. Wishful thinking would have it that crisis would be prevented through early action as proposed in the EU global strategy. For that to happen there are, however, at least three important messages that the EU hierarchy needs to send to staff.

First, that people need to think ahead and look widely seeking to enhance situational awareness. An essential element in staff evaluations should, therefore, be willingness and ability to discuss lessons learned and appreciate the importance of the work of others inside and outside the EU. Unique focus on EU visibility and the implementation of the project in which the EU official may be engaged in, should not be sufficient. Each EU official needs to adopt a learning attitude, not only through engaging in training – the budget for training, particularly, in EU delega-

tions is very limited. Each EU official needs to be enabled by his/her hierarchy to use resources on the Internet to familiarize him or herself with the link between what he/she is doing and what others are doing. Only through such an effort can the potential of wider coordination be identified. And only through such knowledge can the proper role of the EU, often as a catalyst in very complex environments, be proposed. Routine reporting to the head of delegation, weekly or monthly reports to headquarters may be useful, but the proof of their effectiveness will be the content and the extent to which important messages are received vertically and horizontally in the organization, including in communication with Member States. For this to happen a lot of work will need to be deployed on wider analysis which may not need to be sent immediately but rather form the basis for contingency planning. Thinking ahead also needs to include contingency planning as regards crisis coordination. A looming crisis initially may be perceived to signal failure, and it's only natural that whoever feels in charge of the policy relating to the crisis will try to do whatever can be done to prevent it from escalating him or herself. Sharing responsibility with others is not an easy decision. Early contingency planning in this regard can help to win back time otherwise lost in establishing effective coordination including both crisis management expertise and other relevant services. The rivalry in the past concerning who should be in the lead in emergency coordination should be possible to overcome.

Secondly, the hierarchy will need to take some responsibility for the risks that security work entails for individual officials and express confidence in their ability to do multitasking. The current predominant focus in EU training is on how to respect information security regulations and how to promote sound financial management (EEAS Human Resources Report, 2015). Both these types of training focus on what not to do. But the HR/VP has to stress that she and many other leaders in the EU structures need to know. Otherwise, the risk is that essential knowledge never is communicated, that non-action is deemed a safer alternative in a difficult security situation, which also could include potential threats to an official. More widely, it is also important for the top hierarchy to express general confidence in the ability of staff to act on behalf of the EU. It is important to counteract the tendency to focus on the HR/VP alone beyond setting up of a cluster of Commissioners in support of EU external action. The role of EU Special Representatives, EU heads of delegations and many other actors who can help to communicate and coordinate must be upgraded, including by entrusting important functions to Member State representatives. In this sense, this essay concurs with the recommendation made by Sir Robert Cooper in a recent publication stressing the importance of individual EU ambassadors and of better cooperation with the Commission (Cooper, 2016). For him, as well, the issue of implementation of the European Union global strategy is now to a large extent a question of organization. Regarding external communica-

tion increasing emphasis thus needs to be put on the uniformity of the message that the EU sends, not on who delivers it.
Third, the hierarchy, not least in the Commission, will need to stress even more firmly that project budgets, are to be seen as a raw material that needs refining as any other raw material in modern society. The prevailing trend over more than a decade to package assistance in substantial portfolios, sometimes being delivered to a partner government in the form of budgetary support, needs to be reviewed. The fact that the international community pays for at least two-thirds of the national budget of Afghanistan (Craig, 2014) does not in itself cater for success. In many security-related areas, it is just impossible to achieve the desired impact without working with the money. The area of the rule of law, including human rights, is a serious case in point where simplistic notions of conditionality often don't work. Clearly, this puts the requirement on a political ex-ante evaluation of proposed projects much higher than has been the case in some security-related areas over the last years. Especially in the intergovernmental sphere, the hesitation to do a serious analysis of impact and feasibility before taking decisions has been unyielding. The responsibility for dealing with resource problems, including how to cope with shortages regarding staffing, has often been pushed down to the level of heads of delegation and directors. The EU needs to undertake serious reviews of the implementation of policies more often.

The Potential Negative Power of an EU Official Should not be Underestimated

The author, after significant interaction with EU officials over the last years, following on to his background in the EU, assumes the following: the main instinct of the typical official will in a period of uncertainty be to play it safe, first of all respecting the rules and procedures of the organization. Security policy is, however, an area, which requires initiative and calculated risk-taking. It is not enough just doing what you are told. It means to favor action over non-action. Here it is important to note that the negative power of many officials in the system is significant. The hierarchy may promise things to be done, for instance by committing funds to implement projects, missions or operations. But there will be scores of officials needed to implement these instructions swiftly. If they play it safe, implementation will be significantly delayed or not taking place at all. As regards the realization of the European Union global strategy, playing it safe will mean waiting for not only general but also operational and precise instructions – putting it to the hierarchy to take the risks.
Security policy in the EU is only slowly becoming explicit and comprehensive – and internal security has come first.
The history of EU involvement in security is not very encouraging, although significant steps forward have been taken in the last decades. For a very long time, the

notion of the EU as a peace project was not explicitly endorsed in the EU's treaties. Integration and its role for peace were seen as an implicit goal unto the end of the 90s. When the European Security and Defense Policy was set up after British – French agreement at the bilateral summit in Saint Malo in 1998 (Lundin, 2015), the focus was not on what the EU could do as whole for security. Rather a dedicated service was set up in the Council Secretariat governed by consensus rules and financed through a minuscule budget. The entire EU budget, which is handled by the European Commission, was not explicitly to be used for these purposes. The European Commission as a consequence did not widely use concepts such as security policy or crisis management until a few years later, after 9/11 (Lundin, 2015). This practice turned out to be untenable when the West and the world faced terrorist threats requiring a considerable upgrade of internal as well as external security structures in the EU.

Leaders could no longer afford to be passive regarding the need for a comprehensive approach. The first major example was indeed 9/11 when the EU structures were required to search for every possible contribution to a comprehensive action plan, stretching existing competencies to the limit. For the first time, the United States not only looked for European burden sharing in defense but also looked for harmonized European systems governing internal security. Significant efforts were deployed to deal with the situation even before the Lisbon Treaty entered into force at the end of 2009. What had been an embryo of internal security services before 9/11 grew into several directorate generals. And security approaches to some community policy areas turned into significant thematic initiatives in many sectors ranging from cyber, energy, climate change, migration, organized crime and counterterrorism, et cetera. The internal security strategy first adopted in 2010 enumerated a finite number of priorities and set out operational implementation plans in particular areas. Further steps were taken in this direction in 2015, particularly as regards irregular migration.

Comparatively Modest Ambitions on the External Side

But on the external side goals remained much more modest. The first HR of British nationality, also acting as VP of the Commission after the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty, graciously accepted a role as defined by Member States: the entire EEAS was to be set up not as a change management project with strategic ambitions regarding resources and organization. No, in her own words, it was to be an aircraft to be assembled in flight, while implementing a consistent reduction of staff with 1% for each budget year. One-third of the administrators was to be recruited from Member States. And available resources in the system coming from the European Commission and the Council Secretariat had to be distributed thinly across the world. Fewer than 1000 administrators (EEAS Human Resources report, 2015) had

to be spread across more than 130 delegations as well as across the entire service at headquarters level. The main ambition to have at least a few administrators also in the smaller EU delegations led to the need to reduce some strategic capabilities existing before the entry into force of the treaty: significantly by abolishing the significant planning unit serving Javier Solana in the Council Secretariat. EEAS also attempted to reduce support staff to EU Special Representatives. The need to give attention to the main thematic challenges with the Commission could not be given priority. For instance, when cyber security developed into a policy of importance initially only one single national expert in the EEAS could be deployed to work on this topic.

The Need for a Helicopter Perspective in External Action

When looking for success in external action of relevance to security it has for more than a decade been obvious that one needs to focus on the end state after major operations and projects. When so doing the issue is less one of successful project implementation or the safe return to the base of a military unit. The issue is more about the net EU impact on the situation, as a catalyst for change in an enormously complex situation on all levels. What for a long time made decision-makers in the EU hesitate about the usefulness of an EU global strategy was of course precisely this complexity and constant change also on the strategic level. What is more, experiences before and after the Arab Spring also illustrates the need to look back to lessons learned. And every local situation needs to be put into a wider regional perspective. Effective implementation requires coalition building, which means identifying other relevant actors in every situation. In the end, a helicopter perspective needs to be developed when pursuing security-related endeavors.

Comprehensiveness as a policy and as a method (in French '*approache globale*') is a natural part of the effort to promote effective leadership by zooming out and develop a strategic overview of what needs to be taken into account when implementing a strategy or policy. This insight has been growing gradually over several decades inside and outside the EU. Thus there was an explicit reference to the need for a comprehensive approach by the American administration (i.e. Richard Armitage) when referring to a lack of effectiveness in Korea policy towards the end of the 90s. The need for a comprehensive concept of security including human rights and democracy was a standard feature of the EU approach to the OSCE particularly after the Cold War, which means seeing the comprehensive approach as a policy. Conflict prevention mainstreaming was set out as a goal for all external policies by the European Commission in 2001 and can be seen as a comprehensive approach in terms of method. In the absence of agreement on the proposal to develop a global strategy for the EU much effort was put into the comprehensive

approach to external action in the years leading up to a communication from 2013 followed by an action plan for 2015, selecting some geographical cases. The new Neighbourhood Policy was not included in the action plan. Instead, a case-by-case approach was developed with an emphasis on countries outside the neighborhood. To some extent, the notion of a comprehensive approach is also related to the discourse on the coherence of EU external policies. This requirement, which has been an element in EU treaties before Lisbon, was, of course, a central part of the negotiations ahead of the Treaty, which entered into force in 2009. The notion that the EU punched below its weight was a standard argument in this context given the fact that many see the EU mainly as an economic power.

Who Can Help and What Can the Official do for Him/Herself?

So one would have thought that resources should be put at the disposal of the EEAS to be able to develop sufficient training programs to enable people to understand how others work. The global strategy will be helpful, of course, in this regard but more targeted efforts will be necessary. Budgetary constraints lead to pessimism about what realistically the system can produce in the form of training programs.

To deploy personnel without training is of course anathema in CSDP. The European Security and Defense College is essential, and exercises are important. CSDP staff needs sufficient training.

Not much of this can be said for staff training in other areas. European Union Member States typically recruit diplomats as future generalists. And there are many other specialist personnel categories in the Commission and the EEAS that have received no more general security training, beyond the understanding of more formal security regulations governing the security of information and infrastructure.

In the EEAS there is training for instance for heads of political sections in EU delegations in order, not least, to improve political reporting. But this is only the beginning. The proof of the pudding will be to see the comprehensive approach perspective applied in concrete cases.

The Role of Think-tanks and the Academic Community

For the literature produced by think-tanks and others to be useful, it needs to be presented to the expert readers in the correct way.

Experts, particularly in the field, but also desks at headquarters are not likely to take advice seriously if they detect a lack of understanding of the real difficulties to work in the field. The way experts perceive the messages coming from the think-tank community is fundamental for the impact these messages are going to have. Doing evaluations of field work is easier said than done. The risk is that the intended

readership approaches the evaluation from a damage limitation perspective: how can I influence the evaluator to give a more positive image of my work?
So it may be that more or less the same study with the same recommendations in substance may be received very differently by the intended readership; whether there is respect for the difficulties of working in the field or not. It is also fundamental if that the person bringing the message is seen as representing a special interest; be it regarding more money to be allocated to a specific sector or for that matter more resources to be assigned to a particular type of research.
As a former practitioner in EU structures and on the level of a Member State, it is also important to note that objections to the validity of the recommendations of a particular case study often may be very practical and close to the personal situation of a practitioner. There may be problems in the hierarchy; there might be very simple constraints regarding financial or administrative/legal rules. A comprehensive approach which does not refer to the importance of such internal constraints is therefore not likely to be seriously taken into account.
A practitioner also more often than not may point to a lack of time when being asked to coordinate more, to apply more comprehensive approaches, to write more analytic reports. He or she may readily acknowledge the potential usefulness of such endeavors but may quickly add that this is an academic endeavor rather than something that he or she realistically can implement. He/she may also add that, of course, such wider ambitions may be useful but do not belong to the job description of the practitioner in question.
The moment think-tank experts researchers preach a message rather than seek to help the practitioner to do a better job is, therefore, likely to be the time when the practitioner stops reading or listening.
In the end, the practitioner may benefit mainly from two types of contributions from the outside: (1) providing a frame of reference for organizing incoming information; (2) assistance not in terms of actual learning but in how to find information quickly by zooming out more widely than in the past.
To succeed in creating situational awareness in a wider sense, using a helicopter perspective, this requires more or less daily efforts on the part of the official. To make this possible presence on social media, for instance on Twitter is likely to be crucial.
In the end, arguably, it is only with such a wider situational awareness that the official is likely to interact with confidence inside and outside the EU in a proactive way on security, willing to take calculated risks in support of EU Global Strategy implementation.

References

Cooper, R., 2016. *The EU's Global Strategy: Three Quotations*. *Dahrendorf Forum* [online], available at http://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/the-eus-global-strategy-three-quotations/ [accessed 23rd June 2016].

Craig, T., 2014. Afghan official says the government has nearly run out of money, needs US bailout. *The Washington Post* [online], available at ww.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-official-says-the-government-has-nearly-run-out-of-money-needs-us-bailout/2014/09/16/73d9e0fe-3daa-11e4- [accessed 23rd June 2016].

EEAS, 2016. *Human Resources Report 2015* [online], available at https://eeas.europa.eu/background/docs/eeas_hr_report_2015.pdf [accessed 23rd June 2016].

HR/VP, 2016. *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* [online], available at http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf [accessed 30th June 2016].

Lundin, L-E, 2015. *The EU and Security: A Handbook for Practitioners*. Stockholm: Santerus.