

# Going Global? Europe's Foreign Policy Ambition and its Limits\*

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## **Resumo**

### **Uma Europa Global? Ambição e Limites da Política Externa Europeia**

Existem várias razões para a debilidade da política externa da União Europeia. Neste artigo, defendo que uma dessas razões resulta da falta de pensamento e empenhamento estratégico da União Europeia. Os países europeus – tanto através da UE como da NATO – têm identificado correctamente o crescente desafio resultante da globalização. Este traz vastas oportunidades e novas ameaças, que a Europa deve explorar e confrontar.

No entanto, apesar da avaliação estratégica ser a correcta, a política adoptada é errada. A Europa necessita de recuperar o seu propósito, mas através dos seus próprios esforços políticos.

## **Abstract**

*There are many reasons behind Europe's weak foreign policy footprint. In this article I will argue that one critically important cause is Europe's lack of strategic thinking and engagement. European countries – both via the EU and NATO – rightly pinpoint a growing challenge in the shape of globalization. It brings vast opportunities and distinct new threats, and Europe must exploit these opportunities just as it must confront the threats. However, while Europe has its assessment right, it has its politics wrong. Europe needs to recover its purpose by its own political efforts.*

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European countries continue to labor in favor of stronger common foreign policy institutions. The vision is simple – to gain greater influence and help shape a benevolent order – but the politics are difficult. There is first of all a plethora of common institutions that are proving hard to reform. The European countries have gone through about a decade's worth of constitutional reform in the EU, resulting in the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force in December 2009. In NATO, and prodded by the United States, the European allies have sought to “transform” the Alliance ever since 2001-2002. Neither reform track has proven amendable to major change. In the EU, the making of a new president and foreign minister have solved little in terms of complexity, rather adding to the existing many layers of authority competing to drive policy.<sup>1</sup> In NATO, transformation has lost its breath and sense of direction and the Alliance has wisely sought to take stock rather than driving forward blindly: a new Strategic Concept is due out in November 2010. It will confirm Europe's vision to become relevant on the big international issues but not efface the underlying questions regarding organization, capacity, and ultimately political will.

There are many reasons behind Europe's weak foreign policy footprint but in this article I will argue that one critically important cause is Europe's lack of strategic thinking and engagement. European countries – both via the EU and NATO – rightly pinpoint a growing challenge in the shape of globalization. It brings vast opportunities and distinct new threats, and Europe must exploit these opportunities just as it must confront the threats. However, while Europe has its assessment right, it has its politics wrong. European countries instinctively emphasize globalization as a kind of managerial challenge whereby the EU and NATO must work comprehensively with each other and other organizations such as the United Nations in order to manage complex problems. This is liberal management according to which cooperation can tame radical politics (in the shape of nationalism, religion, or ideology) and bring progress. Those who cooperate are reasonable actors who share a liberal commitment. The problem with this line of thinking is its neglect of history and culture and the way in which actors – Europe and others – gain purpose not only by subscribing to a grand idea (liberalism) but by looking into their own histories. Europe today is all grand idea and no history, to put it bluntly: it is not clear what “Europe” – or “the EU” or “NATO” – means in a globalizing world. Unsurprisingly, policy that is bereft of meaning will also be bereft of purpose and impact.

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1 The new offices created by the Lisbon Treaty are formally entitled President of the European Council and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Europe cannot fix this problem by tinkering with institutions or embracing the UN to solve problems in Somalia, Yemen, the Ivory Coast, or somewhere else. Europe needs to recover its purpose by its own political efforts. This is difficult but not impossible, as the conclusion suggests. Section 1 of the paper describes the globalization orthodoxy to which the EU and NATO subscribe and which inspires current reform efforts. Section 2 turns to Afghanistan and the troubles the Afghan mission reveals in terms of European and Transatlantic unity, which in important ways run counter to the orthodoxy. Section 3, the final section, examines the deeper causes of the clash between ambition and capacity and suggests pathways of real reform.

### **Europe's Globalized Mission**

In the course of the new century, following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, it became fashionable to suggest a radical make-over of both the EU and NATO. These institutions should cease being focused on Europe and its geostrategic approaches but commit in earnest to underlying democratic ideals and embrace a wider and global mission. European countries did move into action, though they also sought to leave their distinct mark on the global engagement. Europe saw the same threats as the United States, which was clear from NATO's Article 5 declaration and the European Security Strategy propelled by the EU's Javier Solana, but the approach to them differed.<sup>2</sup> The ESS distinguished itself by its emphasis on "effective multilateralism," an outlook that entered also NATO as the United States prepared for war in Iraq and the Alliance split on the issue.

The United States has been a consistent and important source of Europe's global orientation. President W. Bush made it a priority of his presidency, which brought controversy to NATO summits in Riga in 2006 and Bucharest in 2008 on the issues of global partnerships and Ukraine and Georgia's membership, respectively. But the agenda has not only been presidential. Influential opinion-makers have sought to push the United States to seek a "world of liberty under law" - as the Princeton Project of 2006 put it - and some members of Congress, Senator McCain foremost among them, picked up the idea of a League of Democracies and promoted it.<sup>3</sup>

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2 The threats identified in the December 2003 ESS were terrorism, WMD proliferation, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime. *European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World* (Brussels 2003).

3 G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter directed the Princeton Project on US National Security, whose final report was *Forging a World of Liberty under Law* (September 2006).

The push did not always bear fruit. NATO's partnership policy did not gain a global architecture, and Ukraine and Georgia remain outside both NATO and the EU. The League of Democracies has come and gone, and President Obama's multilateral bent has brought relief to Europe. Yet the push continues. President Obama is no less global in his outlook than his predecessor and he wants US allies and partners to join him in missions outside Europe. European countries, it is expected, must continue to break out of the confines of European security and organize real and important contributions to security missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Having warmly welcomed his presidency, European countries will find it harder to say no to Obama.

The EU is willing but not so able. President Van Rompuy finds his authority contested for the simple reason that his formal powers are new, growing out of the Lisbon Treaty, and has found his energies consumed by the Euro crisis that at one moment threatened the common currency itself, a key pillar in the European edifice. The new high representative, Catherine Ashton, has had difficulties getting her foreign service off the ground, with the European External Action Service being the object of power struggles among the old EU institutions. In September 2010, the internal quarrelling spilled over into the UN and undermined the EU's campaign to upgrade its observer status in the General Assembly. The EU's new players, President Van Rompuy and High Representative Ashton, though intended to enhance the EU's voice and influence now that the EU has become a legal personality (previously it was only the European Community), thus remain on the UN back benches next to the Vatican and other negligible actors.

NATO has likewise been willing but not able, though maybe slightly more able because the United States is inside the organization to drive affairs. At one point NATO was stuck. This was in 2003-2007 when the War on Terror divided the allies to the point that they gave up on renewing their 1999 Strategic Concept. Instead they settled for an improved military guidance in the shape of the 2006 Comprehensive Political Guidance - which eschewed the big political issues, its title in spite. This could not last and the Alliance decided in Bucharest to hold off the process of change until the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit of April 2009. Conveniently, it put the Alliance past the W. Bush presidency. Still, the 2009 Declaration on Alliance Security (DAS) set off a new Strategic Concept process and importantly made globalization the key issue to confront: "our security is increasingly tied to that of other regions" and NATO is "facing new and increasingly global threats."<sup>4</sup> The DAS was a North

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4 NATO, *Declaration on Alliance Security*, 4 April 2009.

Atlantic Council (NAC) document and it framed the subsequent work delegated to an experts' group under the chairmanship of Madeleine Albright. Like the NAC, the Albright report proceeds from the view that "the world has changed" in a globalizing direction.<sup>5</sup>

The sum total is that Europe accepts the global challenge but has difficulties organizing its response. The EU is mainly working along economic and financial lines and could potentially make a distinct contribution to the global architecture here. Key EU members participate in the G8 and G20 but they need to agree among themselves, and they need to rework financial governance inside the EU in order to stabilize the Euro. NATO seeks to keep up with the pace of globalizing security threats. NATO's Secretary General consistently tries to settle regional issues by reaching out to Russia as well as the EU with offers of new partnership in order to push the allies to wake up to the new reality of global threats. If we can only settle the regional issues, the Secretary General is in effect saying, then we can focus on the real business of global security management.

### **Afghanistan: A Story of European Limits**

To an extent Europe can rely on the United States to provide leadership because securing stability in relation to Russia and Germany is an enduring American interest. The trouble for Europe is that these enduring purposes have become inescapably intertwined with global missions. Afghanistan tells us why. It tells us that the United States is more than ever compelled to consider Eurasian security issues in their entirety. It may still entertain the idea of Eurasian "strong points" - an original idea behind NATO's creation - but globalization has connected the points and demands an integrated strategy for the "world island," as Halford Mackinder once labeled Eurasia. Afghanistan has thus become the meeting point for the US' global terrorist concerns and its European alliance policy. It is a meeting point with weaknesses.

*Unity of Effort.* NATO is supposed to become a more open organization in order to enable the Comprehensive Approach - a type of open-ended cooperation among multiple security actors laboring in common to solve security problems. It is a wide agenda, involving not only military-related organizations but in principle every organization able to impact on the security situation. Consequently, NATO seeks

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5 Group of Experts, *NATO 2020: Assured Security, Dynamic Engagement*, 17 May 2010.

partnership with the UN and its plethora of functional agencies and organizations and, at a European level, with the EU and the OSCE, the regional handmaiden of the UN.

This is the design, and it enjoys widespread political backing. The problem is that it does not work. The comprehensive approach in Afghanistan has failed to take off for a variety of reasons, and today the Afghan ground organizations are either American or ISAF/NATO. The EU has never really made a significant contribution to the mission, and the UN has struggled but largely given up coordinating the effort, which it is otherwise supposed to do. In Afghanistan today the UN is playing an important role in the diplomacy of Kabul, it should be recognized, but its muscle and impact in respect to national development is negligible.

This can be explained with reference to various historical facts related to ISAF but behind them lurks the reality of a dysfunctional UN-NATO relationship. Key members of the UNSC - Russia and China - do not trust NATO, and neither do large portions of the UN general secretariat staff, which embodies the Cold War outlook that NATO's business was war where the UN business was reconciliation and peace. UN Secretary General Ban-ki Moon risked considerable capital when he in September 2008 signed a cooperation agreement between the UN and NATO secretariats. His staff urged him not to sign, and Russia declared the whole deal illegal. The declaration could not be published, though it soon leaked, of course.

This leaves NATO - and all the allies and ISAF partners - in an unfortunate position. It wants the UN to take the Afghan lead but it cannot and may not want to. NATO troops are dying in a UN mandated mission but the UN tends to see the mission as NATO's and place itself somewhere in the middle between NATO and the Taliban. This historical sense of evenhandedness, upheld by the UN but disparaged by NATO, undermines the sought after unity of effort and offers food for thought for proponents of the type of broad and multilateral engagement that characterizes European diplomacy.

*Unity of Command.* NATO and notably the United States have in consequence done more to assume control of Afghan affairs and provide leadership. But this fall-back option is not without flaws. NATO never acquired the unity of command that the ISAF mission needs. ISAF's expansion happened within a fragmented command organization plagued by caveats and burden sharing debates. ISAF's history is thus the history of how willing allies operating in regional command south and east strove to involve other allies to the north and west more, and how these allies resisted being put to work in a project they never fully accepted politically. ISAF was balkanized from day one, in other words.

Improvements have been made. The London conference of January 2010 reinforced NATO's Senior Civilian Representative, newly appointed British Mark Sedwill, and made him a political lead in the phase of transitioning to Afghan lead in the PRTs and in security operations. Moreover, Sedwill works with a stronger and more focused US civilian effort led by Ambassador Eikenberry and a reinforced military (ISAF) leadership - with General Petraeus taking command in the summer of 2010.

Still, the improvements have not brought unity of command. Kabul operations - political as well as military - have improved but Brussels affairs in the political-strategic headquarters have not significantly. The NAC has devolved leadership to ISAF in Kabul and hopes the renewed COIN (counterinsurgency) strategy, including its encouragement of reconciliation and reintegration, will pay off. The NAC is supporting the effort but is unable to really direct it because the sense of mission is not there. The problem is compounded by the additional investments made by the Obama presidency, which makes it even harder for the NAC to assert collective leadership, and the desire of some allies such as the Netherlands and Canada to begin exiting the mission.

*Strategic Outlook.* To a large extent the problem boils down to one of outlook. Fearing the disintegrative effects of different outlooks, the allies eschew political and strategic debate. Some European allies, Germany notable among them, clamored for more strategic debate in the midst of the Iraq war and Atlantic controversy. It was a good point - even if the criticism made everyone look bad.

NATO has been notoriously poor at discussing grand strategy. It intervenes in debates once they have found a focal point (Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, or some other point), and the NAC then struggles to make sense of it. Typically, it defines an operation and then busies itself running and controlling it. The context of the mission does not enter into the equation. The NAC does not deal with the regional politics of Afghanistan and ISAF: it is strictly bound by its ISAF mandate, though it need not be. Nor does the NAC discuss the politics of the Middle East or the Caucasus - that important stretch of territory lying between ISAF and itself.

NATO-EU relations weigh in on this. France typically resists freewheeling discussions in NATO because their political ambitions are vested in the EU. Germany, historically bridging the two, is no advocate of a global NATO and therefore blocks attempts to bring in big issues, be they Middle Eastern war and peace or China's rise. Things do not look brighter when seen from the citadel of the EU Council of Ministers where the same dividing lines appear. Rotating EU presidencies emphasizes large projects for their regions - the High North, the

Eastern dimension, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean – but the EU has found no way to integrate them. This competition among political projects helps explain why the Lisbon Treaty institutions headed by Van Rompuy and Ashton have not (yet) brought about the unity hoped for.

### **The Balance Sheet: Globalization is No Purpose**

Afghanistan will not be a model for future operations. It has been too heavy and difficult, and NATO needs an infusion of political purpose now that the Afghan mission – NATO's most important mission ever – by virtue of necessity has boiled down to US leadership. The EU has been largely absent from Afghanistan and is in need of real operational visibility.

Globalization fits the bill for both organizations, as we saw. NATO's purpose, we hear from the Alliance, is really to manage globalization. NATO's next round of Multinational Exercises (MNE) is set to focus on "the global commons" and NATO will, no doubt, eagerly work to realize the Comprehensive Approach that never took off in Afghanistan. The EU will define globalization more broadly, emphasizing the economic and financial dimensions that speak to its advantages.

Both organizations will likely fail to address the one overriding source of misfortune in the Afghan affair and which is political purpose. Unity of effort and command have been absent because the purpose was never there, and this is comes back to the same set of countries that make up the EU as well as NATO. It is of course tempting to follow the orthodoxy of the Comprehensive Approach and push the task of coordination into UN hands: it makes sense at some level because the UN toolbox is the widest one and because complex problems (combining security, governance, and development) require complex solutions. At another level it is politically naïve. If NATO cannot muster the political strength to drive a coherent effort in Afghanistan, there is no reason to expect the UN to be able to. War – in all its guises – is an inherently political phenomenon, and its resolution requires political purpose and commitment that global technicians do not have in their toolbox: it is in the hands of political leaders.

European countries have in effect bought into a liberal logic that mistakenly believes that politics is a dirty business and that the world would be a better place if we could somehow control politics from the outside. This liberal project came of age in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and sought to rein in politics (hitherto dominated by warmongering princes) via economic change, constitutional government, and social progress. Liberals thus built a wall between themselves and their supposedly



progressive agenda on the one hand and the world of dirty political deal making on the other. The result was catastrophic. The political vacuum they created was soon exploited by powerful populists who enthusiastically led their nations into world war.

NATO's strength through the Cold War was its understanding that liberalism had to be political – that liberalism had to engage its enemy (Communism) in a contest of values that included an explicit military dimension. The EU, in contrast, has never invested liberalism with a power dimension because the EU was supposed to be the antithesis of power – the permanent solution to Franco-German rivalry and balance of power contests. During the Cold War this created a clear division of labor between the two organizations, and the EU could invest itself with the idea that it was a “civilian” power – an idea that today also appears in the literature as “normative” power. The EU is therefore poor at thinking politics in terms of power and devising strategies for handling it. To the extent that the EU's common security and defense policy (CSDP) is conceived of as a counter-project to US policy, it merely enhances the irresponsible “civilian” ideology and degrades Europe's capacity to deal with real problems.

Worryingly, NATO is drifting in the same direction as the EU – in the direction of seeing politics as something that can be managed from without with the aid of economic, institutional, and social tools. NATO is not there yet but the direction is unmistakable. Consider the DAS and the Albright report, along with most NAC statements: they identify processes that must be managed (i.e., proliferation, terrorism, energy security, cyber security, missile defense), not actors that must be confronted. NATO focuses on the “supply” side – the fact that globalization makes access to certain capabilities easier – but not the “demand” side defined by certain actors' intention to provoke international change, even if by violent means. This is particularly worrisome because this is NATO, a military alliance which is supposed to focus on the real issues but which cannot. Politically inhibited, NATO's masters direct the organization to plan for the full spectrum of operations – and since this is not possible, to search for solutions by way of multinational projects and role specialization – and plan for comprehensive cooperation with the UN, which will reinforce its reluctance to identify culprits and confront them.

The solution to all this is to take politics seriously. It can be done first of all by asking the deceptively simple question: what does the West mean today? The answer will involve NATO because NATO as a transatlantic body is the most obvious institutional home to the West but it will also involve NATO-EU relations. Western leaders need to make sense of the big picture, not the details of this policy and that institution. If they cohere at the strategic level, institutional reform and

policy impact will effort if not effortlessly, then with comparative ease. It is a big question, of course – the meaning of the West – and answers may be hard to come by. To focus attention and advance common thinking, Europe could agree to three initiatives:

- First, it should launch a common and permanent maritime presence in the Indian Ocean which is its gateway to booming Asia. It will take Europe beyond the occasional anti-piracy mission and focus its mind on the pillars of international order and notably the political and strategic implications of China's rise.
- Second, it should invest in outer space capabilities that sustain and protect IT economies. Outer space is part of the global commons, as is the maritime space, and investments here force stakeholders to develop a wider policy for, again, the international order.
- Finally, it should continue investing in Special Forces for counter-terrorism operations, which it currently is under the NATO umbrella, but the effort should be doubled now that operations past Afghanistan will cause a shift away from heavy and intractable COIN operations. Special Forces operations will be less taxing on European forces and public finances but help generate common Western understandings of adversaries and political stakes.

If European countries engage these questions and tasks, it might revive its underlying Western purpose and durably reform itself and common institutions – both the EU and NATO – for the future. It will not be easy but with the right leadership, it can be done. The easier option is to define the multilateral and benevolent management of globalization as Europe's new purpose. It will be uncontroversial but it will also accelerate Europe's evolution into a blunt tool in the UN's vast and ineffective toolbox.