

## Britain and the European Security Strategy

The European Security Strategy (ESS) has been given a good deal of attention by foreign policy professionals in the United Kingdom (UK) but has passed almost unnoticed even by informed public opinion. There is no doubt, however, that it has been taken seriously within the official machine, with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and even Number 10 Downing Street all seeing it as significant for the evolution of the EU's external role.

The Strategy itself, as is well-known, went through several drafts and internal arguments. Its final version was notably more cautious than the first, robust document, notably in its reference to the need for 'preventive' rather than 'pre-emptive engagement'. The FCO's tradition of prudence over public statements probably meant that it was happy with this change, which distanced the Europeans from President Bush's own National Security Strategy but the Prime Minister and his advisers may have been less concerned. It should be noted that the main drafter of the ESS in Mr Solana's office was Robert Cooper, who used to be Tony Blair's foreign policy adviser, and who shared with his boss a willingness to envisage a greater commitment to humanitarian intervention, or what some have called 'liberal imperialism'. Other Member States were surely far more unhappy than Britain about being associated with the American doctrine of pre-emptive defence.

Let us examine the key elements of the ESS, first in relation to British views of what the EU can and should do in the contemporary international system, and then in the context of the UK's own, distinctive, foreign and security policies.

*Conflict prevention is obviously better than having to engage in conflict management or conflict resolution*

This notion is now so unexceptionable as to be on a par with motherhood and apple strudel in Europe. If achievable conflict prevention saves lives, money and political embroglios. Only an eccentric, for example, would not think that a strategy which could have avoided conflict in the Balkans, even if it meant keeping Yugoslavia together, would not have been worth some considerable investment. Indeed, this was the EU's strategy right from the time, in the late 1970s, when it became clear that Tito could not survive for long. Britain is now an enthusiastic supporter of the doctrine, but the rub comes over how to achieve prevention, and how far to invest (and where) against what degree of uncertainty about possible future troubles – which may never in fact ensue. Britain has been willing to commit itself seriously to the long-term prevention measure which is EU enlargement, but this is because it coincides

conveniently with the other major UK goal, of diluting the process of integration. Other issues, such as the Barcelona process, where the link to conflict prevention is much more tenuous, produce much more luke-warm responses in London. Britain's own interest is in sharing much more of the cost of foreign operations, without relinquishing its own freedom of manoeuvre. It therefore judges each conflict prevention strategy on its merits, with a general presumption in favour. But support is much more likely when other motives also come into play.

*EU needs a 'strategic culture which fosters early, rapid, and where necessary, robust intervention' (ESS).*

Although 'preventive engagement' is now part of the litany of European foreign policy, the ESS's use of the term 'engagement' is significant in comparison to the bland generality of conflict prevention, a strategy which reached its apotheosis in the 'EU Programme for the prevention of Violent Conflicts' endorsed by the Goteborg Council on 16 June 2001, but was subsequently eclipsed by events in New York three months later.<sup>1</sup> The 'war on terror' has led the EU to reduce the element of meliorism, or idealism, in its approach to conflict. This was one of the very reasons why the ESS was produced: to adapt to new circumstances and to convince the USA that Europe was not totally mired in delusional 'soft power' thinking. Certainly the British saw the ESS's original formulation of 'pre-emptive engagement', with its implications of military actions to forestall possible catastrophes, as having some realistic applications – Kosovo being the proof. Another phrase cut from the ESS first draft, was the view that 'we should have tackled Al Qaeda much earlier', and it is unlikely that the Prime Minister would dissent from that thought. It should not be forgotten – even if words after the event are cheap – that Tony Blair has said that had he been in power in 1994, he would have felt the need to send troops into Rwanda. He did send troops into Sierra Leone in 2000, a success which was to shape his subsequent thinking on Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

*Encouraging rogue states back into international society, while those which refuse will have to pay a price in their relations with the EU.*

The key paragraph in the ESS here states:

'A number of countries have placed themselves outside the bounds of international society. Some have sought isolation; others persistently violate international norms. It is desirable that such countries should rejoin the international community, and the EU should be ready to provide assistance. Those who are unwilling to do so should

<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion of EU conflict prevention thinking, see Christopher Hill, 'The EU's capacity for conflict prevention', *European Foreign Affairs Review* Vol.6,3, Autumn 2001, pp315-334.

<sup>2</sup> See John Kampfner, *Blair's Wars* (London: the Free Press, 2003) pp62-77.

understand that there is a price to be paid, including in their relationship with the European Union'

This form of expression has British fingerprints all over it. As a middle-range power the UK has come to believe in the importance of the idea of international community or society, something the US (as a superpower) has been far more ambivalent about, even before the current Bush administration. And as a country itself still wholly engaged in global politics, the UK is uncomprehending of those who might seek isolation or withdrawal. It has an even longer (if not uncomplicated) history of hostility to those we know call 'rogue states', ie those who jib at the rules of the international community, usually shaped by the more powerful states like Britain. Turkey, North Korea, Egypt, Libya and Iraq have at various times been disciplined by Britain under this heading. The Third Way's attachment to multilateralism in a globalised world strengthens the view in London that universal membership of the international community is desirable in itself and as a form of conflict prevention. This is where the EU's soft power can prove indispensable, through mediation, bribes and training. As an example, Britain has worked recently with its European partners and with the Commission (as with the US) to reward Libya for its willingness to renounce terrorism. Prime Minister Blair was characteristically the first to embrace Colonel Ghaddafi in person.

Yet the sting in the last sentence of the above paragraph, about the price to be paid for refusal to embrace multilateralism, 'including [*sic*] in their relationship with the European Union', is also typical of British views – even if, naturally, it does not apply to the United States, deemed by some of the sharper critics in Europe as the biggest rogue state of all. The UK is willing to envisage sanctions of various kinds to punish recalcitrants, and naturally thinks that collective EU action would be most effective. On the other hand, 'including' represents a hint over the kind of military intervention which the EU is not yet capable of, and which many other states would be always reluctant to envisage. After a short historical reaction to the pains of decolonisation, the UK is back in the habit of being willing to consider limited military actions, especially in conjunction with the United States, almost anywhere in a very expanded (ie including Africa and the Middle East) version of its 'near abroad'.

*Nuclear weapon proliferation is of concern regardless of geographical distance – partly because of possible links to terrorism*

Nuclear proliferation has come back into the center of the West's field of vision, after decades of trusting in a combination of deterrence and the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in parallel with the concern about rogue states and the growing belief that perhaps some interventions in the internal affairs of states

are, after all (and contrary to Article 2.7 of the UN Charter) justifiable and necessary. This was the case well before 11 September 2001, even if the events of that day greatly accelerated the trend. Concerns about Saddam Hussein's inherent unreliability, about North Korean hostility, and about the evident interest of states such as India and Pakistan in nuclear weapons (not to mention Israel) produced the new wave of anxiety about 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD). A few security professionals were also concerned about a little-known group named Al Qaeda...

In Britain the New Labour government showed a surprising degree of concern about nuclear proliferation, perhaps encouraged by the United States, and took a firm line from the outset with Iraq, engaging in the Desert Fox bombing campaign of December 1998. It is therefore not surprising that the ESS should state that 'in an era of globalisation, distant threats may be as much a concern as those that are near at hand', citing 'nuclear risks' of various kinds in North Korea, South Asia and the Middle East. The UK was almost certainly a prime mover ensuring that such phrases were prominent in the final draft. London has always been a prime target for international terrorism, by virtue of its size, high profile, cosmopolitanism and position as a route center, even before Tony Blair decided to align British foreign policy with that of George Bush. The UK now has a genuinely vital interest in keeping nuclear materials out of the hands of terrorists or states which might furnish terrorists with their weapons. Yet it cannot protect itself in this respect alone and relies on both the International Atomic Energy Agency and the European Union for standard-setting, monitoring, and in the last resort enforcement – or rather the legitimisation of enforcement by smaller groups of states. The ESS statement builds on the work the EU has done in encouraging peace-building in the Korean peninsula via the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO), but in truth neither the EU nor its individual Member States, like Britain, can expect to be able to influence trends in proliferation far from their own geographical area, where the 'power of attraction' is not at work.

*A mix of policy instruments is necessary, including military force and intelligence cooperation.*

Until December 1998 Britain stood firmly against the idea that the EU as such should have any of the key instruments of national foreign and security policies. Since the St. Malo agreement that position has been modified, even if NATO retains its central importance and the use of its instruments (with the concomitant US oversight) is seen as being far more likely than any large-scale autonomous European action. Nonetheless, Tony Blair came to the conclusion that Europe lacked credibility while it had no military teeth of its

own, and also needed to reinsure against the possibility that the United States on occasion might not wish to commit its own troops to causes which Europe thought vital. Thus the 'headline goals' and the aim of a Rapid Reaction Force of 60,000 men by 2003.

The ESS prescription of a mix of policy instruments must be understood in the context of the aforementioned commitments to both conflict prevention and a strategic culture fostering the occasional 'robust intervention'. There is no general preference for the military instrument, nor indeed the political or financial capabilities to develop it significantly. Britain is absolutely at one with its partners on this point. Moreover the one seriously neuralgic point for London in this area would be any suggestion that national military or intelligence resources should in some senses be compromised through a process of European pooling. Given the confidence in London in British skills in these areas (notwithstanding recent intelligence failures) such a move would produce uproar among the professionals themselves and among their allies in the press.

What British decision-makers are looking for, however, and which is reflected in the language of the ESS, is an acceptance that if the EU is to act seriously in foreign policy (meaning that it will command the attention of other major players) then it will need more than mere diplomacy, or the limited availability of admittedly large economic resources for political purposes. It will need occasionally to show that it can do tough and dangerous things, and that it can act with discretion and realism. In short, that it can play power politics (*when required*) on more or less equal terms. Thus the ESDP operations in the Congo (July 2003) and now in Macedonia, of which the UK is wholly approving, and the limited but significant moves to improve coordination between European security services in the monitoring of terrorist threats across the ever-larger and freer-moving European civil space.

*The desirability of a unity of purpose and action*

The ESS makes considerable play (in Section III, headed 'Policy Implications for Europe') with the need for EU activities in international relations to be more coherent and decisive. In this it echoes almost all the foundational documents of European foreign policy since the Single European Act – achieving coordination is clearly an uphill struggle. Nor is this just the familiar issue of getting the Member States to speak with one voice, or harnessing their capabilities to those of the Union. The issue of coordination also refers to different issue-areas and the great diversity of EU external actions: 'the challenge now is to bring together the different instruments and capabilities: European assistance programmes and the European

Development Fund, military and civilian capabilities from member States and other instruments.....Diplomatic efforts, development, trade and environmental policies, should follow the same agenda. In a crisis there is no substitute for unity of command'. Better coordination is also desirable between external action and Justice and Home Affairs.

This is one of the more loosely drafted sections of the ESS, in that it blurs together crisis and more routine conditions, and gets carried away by its own language in calling optimistically for the coordination of almost everything under the sun. British pragmatists, let alone Eurosceptics, would be quick to say that not everything needs coordinating, and that in any case there will often be tensions between the logic of EU cooperation and that of cooperation with other partners outside the EU. Nonetheless, the British government could hardly find these calls for coordination objectionable, in that they echo the language of inter-governmentalism not integration. They also imply the primacy of politics and thus foreign policy in the EU's international role, rather than allowing too much autonomy to the Treaty-based common policies run by the Commission. London would be perfectly happy to see, for example, EU development policy more subject to political strategy, both for itself, and because that would strengthen the role of the Council. The phrase 'unity of command', however, seems to have slipped by the usual hawk-like British scrutineers of documents like this. It has uncomfortable resonances of the proposals to create an independent EU military planning cell, and a headquarters, which proved so controversial with the United States once the EU began to absorb the Western European Union (WEU), and which the UK accordingly also opposed. Perhaps in war-time the British would accept the need for a unified command, but just as the Americans insist on their being the means by which unity is achieved when they participate in an operation, so Britain (and France) would expect to call the shots in any significant European military commitment.

*The EU should concentrate on developing 'strategic partnerships with Russia, Japan, China, Canada and India*

This recommendation, near the end of the ESS is redolent of decision-making by committee. Why these countries, and in particular why Canada and India? Why not also, if considering 'pivotal' states, Brazil, Nigeria, Indonesia, South Africa, Australia? Russia, Japan and China are states which all EU Members would agree are important both to foreign policy and to foreign economic policy. But Canada and India look like additions which the British slipped in while the French were not looking and the Germans were indifferent. What, in any case, is a 'strategic partnership'? The EU has had special dialogues and shared Declarations, it is true, with the US, Canada and Japan, but it also

enjoys 'political dialogues' with a very wide range of states and regional groupings. Indeed, this is a strange time for the EU to become discriminating in its diplomacy, given that hardly any other member of the international system wanting a relationship with Brussels in recent years has been turned away. Now even Colonel Ghaddafi has been received there – admittedly after Tony Blair had first blazed the trail with his visit to Tripoli.

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The UK is probably willing to see 'strategic partnerships' develop in EU foreign relations. It is, after all, a term taken from the flabby managerial language of the Third Way. But it will not attach too much importance to the individual countries mentioned. London knows very well that the EU's famous 'Common Strategies' only extended in practice to Russia, Belarus and the Mediterranean, and none of those amounted to a row of beans, so bland and abstract were they. It is not going to follow the ESS in this, or possibly any other detail. What the UK wanted, and why it took such an interest in the drafting, was to give the impression – especially to its American audience – that the EU could finally talk the language of hard power, in this age of terrorism, and that some practical measures of cooperation in the defence of the West, using the many instruments at the EU's disposal, could be prefigured. The Security Strategy will therefore be regarded in London as a rather more serious document than most of its predecessors in the area of European foreign policy, but it still represents far more a broad statement of intent than a set of binding commitments.

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