

Policy Brief

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The New EU Global Strategy and What It Means for Morocco

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Summary

This policy brief reviews the recently published EU Global Strategy, highlighting its main strengths and weaknesses as well as innovations, starting with the concept of resilience. It argues that the document has many strengths for being a compromise text written at a time of deep uncertainty about the EU's own future. The brief also comments on the future of EU-Morocco relations in the new framework. It notes that the strategy perhaps missed an opportunity to reaffirm European-Moroccan ties as part of its larger reflection on cooperative regional orders. However, for the same reason Morocco has now the opportunity to proactively define "partnership" with the EU - a concept that recurs in the strategy but that it is not fully articulated.

On June 28, the European Union (EU) made public the new strategic document that is set to guide the Union's foreign and security policy for the years to come. Delivered by the High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP) Ms. Federica Mogherini, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) is the product of two years of internal reflections involving EU institutions and major stakeholders.¹ Entitled "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe", the document was endorsed by the leaders of the bloc's 28 members after an extensive consultative process which engaged also think tanks and civil society organizations. The document's predecessor, the European Security Strategy (ESS), had been adopted in 2003 when Europe was in search for unity after the US-led invasion of Iraq.² At the time, EU members were split between those, such as the UK, that had followed US leadership and those, led

by France and Germany, which had taken exception with Washington's "unilateralism", questioning the connection between regime change in the Middle East and the fight against international terrorism after the 9/11 attacks.

A review conducted in 2008, after the signature of the Lisbon Treaty (which introduced important changes in EU foreign policy mechanisms, including the post of the HR/VP and the European External Action Service), confirmed the main tenets of the 2003 ESS but also called for greater cohesion and a stronger role for the EU in world affairs.³ Eight years later, with the international system going through dramatic developments, from the global financial crisis to the rise of the BRICS, from the Arab uprisings to the conflict in Ukraine, it should come of no surprise that the EU has felt compelled to

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(1). https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf

(2). "A Secure Europe in a Better World", <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/csdp/about-csdp/european-security-strategy/>

(3). Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy – Providing Security in a Changing World, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/reports/104630.pdf

take a fresh new look at factors of instability affecting the security of its member states and its citizens. What has made an already complex exercise more challenging – and in the critics' view more problematic – are the EU's own internal travails over the same span of time.

A long string of critical, perhaps existential, crises has challenged the EU in recent years, from the Euro-crisis to “Brexit”. In fact, the victory of the Leave Campaign in the UK just days before the scheduled release of the EUGS has led many to argue that publication should have been cancelled or at least postponed in light of a development – the prospective withdrawal of the UK from the EU – that will surely alter the political and economic balances in Europe for the long term. Moreover, Brexit might lead to similar referenda in other EU countries, portending further disaggregation in the years to come.

The commentary provided in this policy brief will touch upon these questions but will focus on the document as is, including its many strengths. In addition to highlighting the strategy's key points – the dense fifty-page long document is harder to summarize than its more concise 2003 predecessor – the brief will also offer some views on how the EUGS relates to Morocco and what the Kingdom could expect from the future of EU-Morocco relations within the new framework. The brief argues that the EUGS could have delved much more into key bilateral relationships both as a way to highlight the contribution of some of the EU's neighbors to European and international security and, perhaps more importantly, to better define the concept of “partnership” - a word that recurs in the document but whose operating principles are only vaguely delineated. As the success of the document will be largely determined by political follow-up and implementation, Morocco has an opportunity to proactively engage the EU in the months to come – in the context of the European Neighborhood Policy as well as in other formats - in search for that clarity and mutual understanding, both of which are needed for a relationship based on equality and common interest.

Main strengths and weaknesses of the new strategy

The strategy has many strengths for being a compromise document bridging the views of twenty eight countries against a backdrop of international instability as well as deep uncertainty about Europe's own future. Its key feature – and perhaps also its main strength – is that the whole assessment is premised on a lucid recognition of the unprecedented challenges the EU and the European integration process are currently faced with. The Forward signed by HR/VP Mogherini goes so far as to admit that not only the purpose but even the very existence of the EU has come under question. There is also a candid acknowledgement of the fact that the world has significantly changed since the 2003 ESS was issued, and that this change was not necessarily for the better.

According to the EUGS, the international system has become a more “contested” place, even as states and societies have become further “connected”. The international arena is not only more pluralistic but also more multipolar and more competitive. China, Russia, and a range of regional actors in their respective contexts have advanced increasingly assertive agendas, pursuing national interests in search for greater strategic autonomy rather than feeling bound to the governing principles of the Western-led political and economic order of which the EU is a major pillar. These trends have already displayed their effects in the EU's own surroundings.

The document recognizes that the EU neighboring regions – comprising countries both to the south and the east of the EU - are today far from being the “area of stability, prosperity, and peace” that from the 1995 Barcelona Declaration to the 2003 ESS the EU had envisaged as a goal well within its reach.⁴ Quite to the contrary, in the East but especially in the South, what is still characterized as the “EU neighborhood” is a deeply unstable, increasingly fragmented or at the very least polycentric environment, cut across by numerous conflict situations and plagued by long-drawn-out developmental and governance challenges. Rather than being protected by a “ring of well-governed countries .. with whom .. enjoy(ing) close and cooperative relations”, to quote the ESS, the EU is today surrounded by an arc of crisis stretching from East to South.

Next to its realism, the second strength of the EUGS is its values-based approach. The EUGS states that the EU intends to navigate the stormy waters of a more complex and contested world through a strategy of “principled

(4). http://www.eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/bd_en.pdf

pragmatism”, one which will not backtrack on values that have defined Europe and European integration for decades. Yet, the strategy intends to deal with the world as is rather than as it should be. The document is remarkably upbeat about the continuing EU influence – what the EUGS sometimes refers to as the EU’s “enduring power of attraction”. However, the EUGS implicitly and sometimes explicitly recognizes that this influence may not always be brought to serve particularly transformative objectives. There is a greater focus on stability rather than change.

The main weakness of the EUGS perhaps lies in the many questions it does not address. Notably, the document does not elaborate on the observation that the European project has never been as challenged. The EUGS mentions that European citizens deserve more and better from the EU, but it does not engage with the question of what exactly did not work in previous approaches. The fact that growing segments of the European public feel distant from Brussels, or even look at the EU as the problem rather than the solution, is left un-addressed. The strategy simply reiterates, instead of arguing afresh, the claim that what European citizens need is a more united and integrated EU.

To critics, the need to more frontally address the crucial question of the limits of European integration has been highlighted in a dramatic way by Brexit. Self-admittedly, the EU HR/VP has calculated that the postponement of the EUGS’s publication after the victory of the Leave Campaign in the British EU referendum would have most likely jeopardized the entire process of strategic review conducted until then, adding to a growing sense of disorientation and crisis.⁵ To some, the release of an ambitious document could even represent a first concrete response to the cynicism of the EU-doomsayers after the British vote. The push made in recent weeks by the EU HR/VP, with the support of some key EU member states, to re-launch plans for deeper EU integration in the field of common defense seems to support this line of thinking.

Nonetheless, in light of the many crises, the EUGS could have addressed in a more deliberate way the crucial link between internal and external factors of Europe’s security. The strategy indeed recognizes that the security of the Union “starts at home”. But this is narrowly presented as a problem of homeland security, therefore requiring new, more aggressive strategies to fight terrorism, including the home-grown type that has become such a direct threat to European lives recent months. The notion that security starts at home, however, could be framed more

broadly. One could even argue that the first strategic goal of the EU under present circumstances is to preserve its unity and protect the integration process from its many detractors, both within and outside the Union. The significance of Brexit, as a trauma but also perhaps as a deterrent, could have been explained in such context.

A second, partly connected, weakness is that the strategy does not seem to fully follow up on the realism that inspires its working assumptions. Notwithstanding the recognized magnitude of the challenge, the EUGS puts forward an extremely rich and far-reaching agenda. While this is largely unavoidable for a document that sets out to be global “not just in a geographical sense”, the risk is only a tenuous connection between interests, priorities, and means. To its defense, the document is clear about the fact that the broad guidelines it offers will be further detailed as part of an open-ended review process. Yet, the question may be a deeper one. The breadth of the strategy, with its long list of objectives all of which are presented as important, reflects the fact that, despite the many attempts to strengthen coherence and streamline decision-making, the EU remains a cluster of institutions dealing with a multitude of issues in a growing number of fields. The all-encompassing document, therefore, invites questions about strategic focus and the ability for the EU to master and prove an “actorness” of its own beyond its many composing parts.

Focus areas and regional priorities

The 2003 ESS identified some key threats: terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime. One of the non-stated goals was to provide a European counterpart and counter-narrative to the 2002 US National Security Strategy, which had been widely criticized for having endorsed a doctrine of preventive military action and unilateralism.⁶ The war in Iraq had become a major dividing transatlantic factor in the context of lively debates about US hegemony in a post-bipolar, post 9/11 world.

In fact, transatlantic relations were very much a matter for consideration for the 2003 ESS. The strategy was not intended to draw attention to differences. Quite to the contrary, it presented the EU as a constructive and capable partner of the USA, starting with the fight against international terrorism. “One of the core elements of the international system is the transatlantic

(5). Nathalie Tocci, Una Strategia per Un Agire Comune, “AffarInternazionali”, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=3545>

(6). <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>

relationship”, the 2003 document proclaimed, “this is not only in our bilateral interest but strengthens the international community as a whole”. At the same time, the strategy more subtly put forward a different, if not alternative, approach centered on the notion of “effective multilateralism”. Multilateralism was seen by many as a distinctive element of the EU international engagement, one which reflected a positive-sum game approach to international politics.

Written at a time when the US is seen by some as not enough engaged in and with Europe, the EUGS reiterates the importance of the transatlantic bond and makes a powerful call for action on issues, such as forward defense, which have been the object of Washington’s pressure on its EU partners for many years. At the same time, the EUGS goes fairly far in candidly stating that the EU nurtures “the ambition of strategic autonomy”. This statement draws on the old debate on whether a more capable, more autonomous EU ultimately serves global security better than a less symmetric transatlantic relationship.

As far as multilateralism is concerned, this concept continues to underpin the EU strategy, yet the emphasis is rather on a “rules-based global order”, a notion that seems more generic. For a document that is notably upbeat about the EU and what it represents, there is definitely no chest-thumping about the West nor about Western or European-derived universal values. Rather, the EUGS invites the EU to focus on cultivating partnerships and preserving “cooperative regional orders”, whether or not the EU and other Western partners are a major factor.

Under the rubric of “cooperative regional orders”, the Mediterranean/Middle East (“A peaceful and prosperous Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa”) is addressed before transatlantic relations (“a closer Atlantic”), and just after the European security order. This is the closest thing to a ranking of regional priorities. Indeed, the Mediterranean space is presented as key to regional as well as global stability. It is also described as the space in which the vulnerability of peoples and the fragility of states is the most apparent. In this framework, the concept the EUGS aims to mainstream is, fairly innovatively, the one of “resilience”. Resilience refers to the capacity to withstand pressures and overcome challenges, including the ability to absorb shocks without being undermined.

Resilience is a much more defined and in some ways more modest concept than others that have been recently used in the jargon of international affairs. Unlike notions such as nation building or democracy promotion, which have

a clear transformative aspect, the focus is on stability. However, resilience is not necessarily a static notion and it should not be confused with a status-quo approach. Strengthening resilience may involve reforming a state in structural ways or even adopting new forms of governance. For sure, however, resilience does not express a preference for a specific type of political regime or economic system. Priority is given to avoiding negative outcomes rather than pursuing a specific normative agenda. One possibly problematic aspect of this concept is that it directly touches upon the internal affairs of foreign countries. In other words, it structurally connects the foreign policy of the EU to the domestic conditions of its neighbors. Although certainly less ambitious than other notions, such as those that would want Europe’s neighbors to gradually adopt European and Western principles and forms of governance, resilience still implies a measure of “interference”.

The positive aspect of the inclusion of this concept in the strategy is that it reflects an overall more realistic assessment of regional conditions and prospects. The EU was until recently seen as the engine of convergence processes that would extend far beyond the EU itself. Through the enlargement strategy and the less binding European Neighborhood Policy, the European integration process would make its effects felt in outer regions like in a series of concentric circles around the EU. In the EUGS, the EU is still presented as the region’s most influential player. However, the power of the EU is now more closely linked to the goal of projecting stability, including by working together with its neighbors to strengthen resilience. The risk of spreading conflict and the challenge posed by failing and failed states have clearly become chief EU concerns.

Under the overarching goal of stability, regional priorities in the Mediterranean are articulated around “five lines of action”. The first one is to support “functional multilateral cooperation”. This will involve stepping up cooperation with other regional organizations and actors in areas such as border security and migration management, counter-terrorism, water and food security, disaster management and infrastructure development. Curiously, the document includes under this item also eminently political issues such as multilateral negotiations to solve the conflicts in Syria and Libya. The Palestinian-Israeli peace process is also mentioned in passing in this section.

The second line of engagement involves deepening sectoral cooperation with Turkey while reaffirming the principles of the EU accession process. While this is one of the few examples in which the strategy focuses on one

country in particular, it ostensibly avoids touching upon some of the sensitive issues. Under pressure from growing flows of refugees and migrants using Turkey as a stepping stone to reach the EU, Brussels reached a major deal with Ankara in March to forestall such movements, mainly in exchange for financial support. The EU agreed to link a revitalization of Turkey's accession process to the EU to the successful implementation of the migration deal – a linkage that might ultimately undermine both objectives. All this took place while reforms stalled in Turkey amidst concerns of a growing concentration of power. The recent failed military coup and the backlash that has followed only underlined Turkey's internal travails and called into question prospects for closer EU-Turkey engagement.

The third line is about the Middle East and the Gulf. A “balanced engagement” is proposed with the Gulf monarchies and their Gulf Cooperation Council. In the same section, it is proposed to continue a policy of engagement with Iran, building on the nuclear deal. Engagement is conceived as a step by step process, which could gradually open up cooperation in key areas such as trade, energy and other issues. Clearly a cautious bet is made on Teheran's rehabilitation as a legitimate international actor and a constructive regional player. The strategy, however, does not delve into why Teheran should mitigate its regional aims now that international pressure on its leaders and the Iranian economy has been reduced with the lifting of sanctions. The EUGS also does not comment on how the EU strategy towards Iran's neighbors, some of which remain wary of Iran's intentions, should be adjusted.

The fourth line of engagement focuses on North Africa or, more precisely and more interestingly, on the connections between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, East and West. Particular attention is paid to “cross-border dynamics”, including security spillovers from the Sahel region. It is undoubtedly in the connections between the Southern Mediterranean rim and the African heartland that phenomena that have engulfed the EU, such as migration, can be better understood and tackled.

The final line of engagement should have been perhaps the first one in order of importance. It is about supporting African peace and development “as an investment in our own security and prosperity”. What is called for is nothing less than a “quantum leap in European investment for sustainable development”.

The EUGS and Morocco

Except for a few countries, the EUGS avoids commenting on bilateral relations. Precisely because more stability-oriented than previous EU documents, however, one would have expected more extensive references to actors that are security providers in their respective regional and sub-regional contexts, Morocco undoubtedly being one of them. A focus on Morocco, moreover, could have helped assuage newly emerged concerns. Against a backdrop of traditionally solid ties, European-Moroccan relations have been partly challenged in recent years by a series of incidents and controversies, such as the implications of current policies for the application of important international agreements, in particular in the areas of agricultural trade and fisheries. Without necessarily commenting on these sensitive issues in any great detail, the EUGS could have nonetheless stressed the need to re-affirm the strategic value of the EU-Moroccan relationship.

Morocco indeed already enjoys one of the closest relationships with the EU among Arab and Mediterranean countries. It was the first one in the region to be granted “advanced status” in 2008 in recognition of its modernization efforts and the decision to firmly anchor the Kingdom's development and security strategies to ever closer cooperation with the EU. In a post-Arab uprisings context, Morocco's “dynamic stability” has represented a key element of attraction for Europe, together with the glue provided by the strong bilateral economic and political ties connecting Morocco with key EU member states such as France and Spain. If Tunisia embodies the still fragile attempt to fast-transitioning to democracy through national compromise, Morocco's long-term trajectory towards a more accountable political system and an inclusive society stands out as an example of steadiness at a time of instability and reform backlash in other contexts. To further articulate the concept of resilience, the Moroccan experience could have been referenced and discussed.

In light of the EUGS clear recognition of a development-security nexus, the document could have drawn attention to Morocco's economic transformation as an encouraging factor. Unlike some of its neighbors, Morocco has laid out the foundations of a market economy open to global business. Important structural reforms were passed in recent years. Efforts to position Morocco as a dynamic leader in renewable energy technology, from thermo-solar to wind, are ripe with positive implications for the

European market as well as the larger region. Against this record, the EUGS could have advanced ideas on how both partners can further collaboration to foster economic change opportunity. The EUGS could have mentioned, for instance, how Morocco would fit into a revamped development strategy for Africa not only as a recipient of aid but also as a possible partner for bringing development to sub-Saharan Africa, leveraging the connections and ties that the Kingdom has already established with a number of countries.

One of the new concepts of the reviewed European Neighborhood Policy is precisely the EU outreach to the neighbors of partners (“neighbors of neighbors”).⁷ In the context of North Africa, the intention is to expand engagement to countries of the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa. Morocco has considerably invested in these relationships in recent years, positioning the Kingdom as a regional hub between West Africa and Europe. Many benefits can be reaped by expanding the energy and food markets to these areas while promoting development in a more synergetic way among main investors and donors.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, from Morocco’s standpoint the EUGS represents an opportunity. The opportunity is offered by a document that is quite honest about recognizing that the EU needs resilient and cooperative neighbors probably just as much as they need the EU. The strategy also makes it clear that the Southern Mediterranean will remain a key area of focus, dispelling fears about a shift of strategic attention to the East or a more inward-looking attitude as a result of the many crises engulfing the EU from within. Morocco and indeed any Southern neighbor of the EU should welcome a document that is realistic about the current state of affairs

but nonetheless keeps an outwardly and internationalist outlook for the EU. Countries like Morocco that have strived to improve neighborly relations despite continuing local tensions should appreciate the many existing references to cross-regional connectivity and the potential for inter-regional cooperation as an instrument for stability, security, as well as growth. These references in the EUGS should give Morocco further leeway in consolidating its position as a strategic bridge between North and South, between the West and the emerging economies.

In that the strategy leaves much to be detailed, moreover, Morocco has a chance to seize the initiative in defining a common roadmap with the EU. This should not only include what the EU and Morocco can achieve bilaterally for their mutual benefit but also what they can jointly do to project stability and foster economic opportunity in the many geographical areas of overlapping interest. Morocco could use this dialogue to also clarify to what extent the attainment of certain common political and economic standards remains part of the agenda of cooperation, thus helping determine whether so-called “EU conditionality” has any major role left in the EU approach to the more plural context the EUGS describes. This idea of partnership – one that requires foreign policy alignment but also a reflection on priorities and shared commitments – ostensibly remains to be fully worked out. The EUGS instead uses the term partnership without ever clearly articulating it or defining it. Yet, as argued in this same publication series, this is exactly the type of discussion which should be taking place between the EU and key Southern Mediterranean actors towards a new strategic agenda for the Mediterranean.⁸

(7). Review of the EU Neighborhood Policy – Joint Communication, http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/documents/2015/151118_joint-communication_review-of-the-enp_en.pdf. See also the Council’s Conclusions: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/12/14-conclusions-european-neighbourhood/>

(8). A. Ait Ali, K. El Aynaoui et al., “Rethinking the Mediterranean Strategic Agenda in an Evolving Environment”, OCP Policy Brief, December 2015 <http://www.ocppc.ma/publications/rethinking-mediterranean-strategic-agenda-evolving-environment#.V9ZfJdJf2JA>

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