

Opinion – Building the EU Narrative Towards Great Power Status

Written by Ino Terzi

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INO TERZI, APR 18 2022

In an unexpected turn of events, the war against Ukraine seems to have provided the push EU foreign policy needed to find its bearings and show its teeth. EU foreign policy has often been the subject of criticism for its lack of purpose, vigour and persuasiveness, as a result of the absence of common defence and security mechanisms, and EU's inability to align member-states' foreign policy priorities under a common agenda. In an effort to construct a common basis, the EU has structured its foreign policy around peace, the promotion of democracy, rule of law, fundamental freedoms and human rights, including action against climate change and for environmental sustainability. Though seemingly universal, those values may appear irrelevant and idealistic, and have thus failed to unite member-states under a coherent foreign policy. This is made apparent by EU's confused and incoherent stance towards Russia and China. Under the pressure of recent events, however, this appears to be changing.

Today's EU leaders could be writing the next big breakthrough in the history of European integration. But while previous integration leaps were decided and implemented by decision-making elites, often too technical and nuanced to enter public debate, the world of international politics is loud; if the EU wants to be a big player, it needs to find its voice.

In retrospect, Russia's war against Ukraine was the greatest affirmation of the need for an EU foreign policy that Europhiles could hope for. As member-states rallied around the EU flag in the face of the Russian threat, the EU was able to show unity and unprecedented determination in its response, through sanction packages, financial support to the Ukrainian military and the first activation of the Temporary Protection Directive.

However, Russian aggression sparked foreign policy changes that extend beyond a narrow perception of security and defence. It showed Europeans why safeguarding international law and promoting democracy, rule of law, freedom and human rights deserve to be foreign policy priorities, above short-term economic gain. It proved that EU's green energy policy is of practical geopolitical importance, providing alternatives to Russian oil and gas. In essence, by making it clear that peace in Europe cannot be taken for granted, it demonstrated the true value in the seemingly idealistic pillars of EU foreign policy and the importance of staying true to what the EU aims to defend.

The Strategic Compass reflects this desired shift towards a more assertive and coherent EU foreign policy. Its stated goals include building rapid deployment and crisis response capabilities, improving resilience towards hybrid threats and reducing security-compromising dependencies. Furthermore, it attempts to provide more clarity with regard to allies, partners and threats. It clearly identifies Russia as a threat, but perceives China as a potential partner as well as rival, highlighting EU's duty to ensure that China's rise does not compromise global security, the rules-based international order, EU interests and values.

With the strategic compass, the EU seized its moment of empowerment and produced a document that shows an admirable desire to act like a global power, but still falls short of *being* one. The EU has the financial capacity, international experience and soft power capital to be a global power. What it lacks is a vision. The strategic compass falls short of providing that, as it is generally conceived as a reactive document, aimed at responding to external threats. The good news is that the building blocks are already in the Strategic Compass: investments, partnerships, a

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basis for common security and defence. What is more, EU values paint a clear picture of what the organisation's vision for the world is. What is missing is for the EU to take ownership of the world it needs to create and present itself as the agent that will make it happen, using its values as the axis along which its foreign policy decisions will be taken.

If there is ever a moment for the EU to launch a grand strategic vision, this is it. EU's resolute response to the war against Ukraine caught its rivals by surprise and raised its status in the eyes of the international community, as well as its domestic audience. The EU needs to highlight its resolute response, and frame it as the start of a new era of foreign policy, in which the EU will be taking decisive action in support of its stated values.

The EU needs not only to create, but also to effectively communicate this narrative to three distinct audiences, through three distinct, but coherent messages. Firstly, it needs to communicate to the governments of rival actors its determination to use power in support of its values. Secondly, it needs to communicate its brand identity, structured around its ideals, to the global public audience. This will allow it to highlight common values with existing allies, and fight in the 'battle of narratives' (in the words of the Strategic Compass) against authoritarian regimes. Lastly, the EU needs to communicate its grand vision to its own public audience, point to Europeans' common interest, which after recent events is more palpable than ever, and present itself as the solution. The successful communication of this new narrative would increase confidence in the EU, and as a result its ability to develop the foreign policy instruments that will in turn support this vision.

The history of the EU as a global power can only start where EU modesty ends. The EU is starting to demonstrate the self-assurance of a great power, but to truly be one it will need to go beyond its technocratic approach, commit to a robust identity and value-based vision, which should be communicated to the world, and to its own audience.

About the author:

Ino Terzi is a foreign policy analyst, focusing on transatlantic relations, strategic communications and international security and has researched national narrative construction at the University of Cambridge. She has worked for the Delegation of the EU to the US and has published articles for E-International Relations, the Institute for Strategic and European Analyses, and the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence of the University of Macedonia.