From 'Resilience' to Strategic Autonomy: A Shift in the Implementation of the Global Strategy?

Pol Bargués

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing scepticism regarding the implementation of the European Union Global Strategy (2016), which builds on the idea of fostering resilience to the east and south, in a neighbourhood increasingly threatened by governance breakdown and violent conflict. Scholars highlight the vagueness of resilience, as well as the existing contradictions between policy sectors and member states' preferences, as key elements constraining EU foreign policy. In response to these shortcomings, the idea of 'strategic autonomy' is currently being deployed to entertain a geopolitical EU and implement the Global Strategy more efficiently. This paper discusses how the idea of strategic autonomy is used, contrasts it with that of resilience as envisioned in the Global Strategy, and highlights some unforeseen risks for the EU external action: 1) strategic autonomy might be unrealistic in the short term and thus widen the gap between capabilities and expectations; (2) intervening geopolitically can also imply a move away from aspirations to foster resilience in a constructive and cooperative way with other partners.

Pol Bargués is research fellow at CIDOB, Centre Barcelona for International Affairs, where he coordinates the Horizon 2020 project on EU's external action (EU-LISTCO). In his research, Bargués explores and contributes to debates in international intervention, peacebuilding and resilience. More specifically, he has examined the evolution of EU external action and has specialised in interventions in post-conflict countries such as Bosnia and Kosovo.

He is author of *Deferring Peace in International Statebuilding: Difference, Resilience and Critique* (Routledge 2018) and co-author of *Mapping and Politics in a Digital Age* (Routledge, 2019). He has published in numerous academic journals, including Review of International Studies, Global Society, Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, Third World Quarterly, Cambridge Review of International Affairs. He is co-editor of Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding and Routledge Studies in Intervention and Statebuilding (Taylor and Francis). He is also Associate Editor for New Perspectives (Sage).

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, less than four years after the publication of the Global Strategy, the vision of the former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Federica Mogherini, was put under stress as the world turned upside down. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the European Union (EU)'s vulnerabilities in the health sector and generated economic consequences that may set back investment in security and defence. Abroad, tensions flared up between the United States and China, while nationalist perspectives that favour state-centric (rather than multilateral) actions burgeoned in Europe and elsewhere. The great powers continue upgrading their nuclear arsenal, raising fears that the 'world is in the throes of an arms race' (Maulny 2020). Also, Eastern and Southern Partnership countries are affected by order contestation (CO) derived by geopolitical tensions and hold areas of limited statehood (ALS) affected by multifarious risks that have a destabilizing impact on governance and conflict both for the neighbourhood and the EU, as demonstrated by EU-LISTCO research findings (Fahmi and Sasnal 2020; Kakachia and Lebanidze 2020).

While the Global Strategy was initially valued for operationalizing a 'principled pragmatism' framework, combining norms and interests, through the idea of fostering resilience abroad (Tocci 2020), we have noticed a growing dissatisfaction within EU policy circles and academic analysts. Some of the limitations identified respond, in part, to the vagueness of resilience, as well as the existing contradictions between policy sectors (as Cadier et al. (2020) have shown, EU security concerns in Tunisia, migration management in Bosnia, or economic interests in Libya have undermined prospects for enhancing societal resilience in these countries).

In consequence, an emerging perception is that the path initiated by Mogherini with a preference for strengthening resilience (through the means of long-term, non-linear approaches and the mobilisation of bottom-up diplomatic resources and partnerships) is too soft and ambiguous for a world which is increasingly dominated by great power rivalry and contestation. While the Global Strategy already responded to a complex and contested world where the European project and the liberal international order were growingly questioned, the shock of 2020 has aggravated geopolitical tensions and brought major uncertainties in ALS and CO (Flockhart 2020; Newman 2018). Thus, a wide consensus in the literature is that the EU needs a bolder strategy to develop autonomy and coherence in security and defence instruments to then take actions to foster resilience in ALS and CO and ultimately have greater impact in a post-liberal world order (Biscop 2020; Sabatino et al. 2020).

The EU has recently embraced the 'language of power' in foreign policy, as an attempt to meet the demand for greater assertiveness (Borrell 2020a). Josep Borrell replaced Mogherini as HR/VP on December 1st, 2019, with a clear ambition to implement the Global Strategy. In the initial months of his mandate, Borrell endeavoured to further diplomacy and find collective responses to global challenges. However, as the pandemic has accelerated socio-economic uncertainties and great power contestation, Borrell has placed greater emphasis on the concept of 'strategic autonomy', which he defines as 'the ability to think for oneself and to act according to one's own values and interests' (Borrell 2020b). Although the concept has received particular attention since the early 2010s, in debates concerning the possibility of building an EU defence industry independent from NATO, Borrell makes it central to correct the shortcomings of EU foreign policy. He also expands its meaning beyond the traditional sectors of defence and security with the aim of being influential, geopolitical, and defending Europe's interests: 'we need to close many capability gaps and loopholes and to be present and active in areas where our interests are at stake (Borrell 2020d). Yet a question emerges after an emphasis on geopolitics and the widening of strategic autonomy: is it compatible with or a departure from the idea of fostering resilience underpinned in the Global Strategy?

In this policy paper we assess whether the increasing emphasis on strategic autonomy in the process of implementing the Global Strategy represents a move away from the vision set up by Mogherini and anticipate whether it may have implications on the aim to strengthen resilience to the East and South. We build on previous research done at EU-LISTCO, engage with key recent academic publications, as well as analyse a sample of EU latest reports and essays written by Borrell in the last year. We divide the policy paper in two sections: a first where we dissect the key elements of resilience under Mogherini's Global Strategy and subsequent documents, and a second examining the logic that have led Borrell to make strategic autonomy the foremost concern to implement the Global Strategy. While it is too early in Borrell's mandate to reach conclusions, we pursue two contributions:

First, we clarify the concept of strategic autonomy. We argue that, rather than a change in the opposite direction, it is meant to complete the realist foreign policy shift that began with the publication of the Global Strategy, where the EU recognized the need to be more pragmatic to adapt to an international conjecture of complexity and uncertainty. It is a concept which acknowledges greater antagonism between great powers and wishes to revert Europe's loss of capacity and influence. So, acquiring strategic autonomy in all policy sectors would imply greater integration of instruments and perspectives among member states, as well as the possibility of being more forceful and strategic in taking action and building resilience in global affairs.

In the conclusion of the policy paper, we build our second contribution. We seek to open a debate on the unforeseen risks that obtaining strategic autonomy may bring for the EU external action. While it gives a certain horizon of unity and strength in the medium term, it might be unrealistic and thus widen the gap between capabilities and expectations. The second risk that is drawn is that the EU might be refusing (or suspending) a resilience-oriented foreign policy of sustained and bottom-up actions when putting a premium on geostrategic interests and concerns. Rather than leading to cooperation and multi-lateral solutions, the focus may turn out to be on unilateral actions to contain the threats that emerge in a troubled neighbourhood.

1. 'PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM' AND THE IDEA OF RESILIENCE SET UP IN THE GLOBAL STRATEGY

The Global Strategy was carefully designed to 'navigate this difficult, more connected, contested and complex world' (EEAS 2016: 13). This perception of complexity, Nathalie Tocci explains, was the result of the instability, violence and fragility of neighbouring countries, as much as the growing unease with EU's liberal and democratic values and norms both inside and outside the union (Tocci 2020). The neighbourhood seemed unstable and conflicts like Syria and Libya had local, regional and global implications (EEAS 2016: 29):

> "To the east, the European security order has been violated, while terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself. Economic growth is yet to outpace demography in parts of Africa, security tensions in Asia are mounting, while climate change causes further disruption" (EEAS 2016: 7).

Moreover, the Global Strategy was conceived in a very convoluted moment, as it was published only a week after the Brexit referendum and a few months before Trump won the elections in the US, which reinforced the trends of Euroscepticism and antiglobalism (Larik 2018).

In response to a world in disarray, the EU external action pivoted around the vision of 'principled pragmatism', combining a 'realistic assessment of the strategic environment' as well as an 'idealistic aspiration to advance a better world' (EEAS 2016: 13, 16). A far cry from the aspirations to become a leading normative power that could export liberal values, as expressed in the early 2000s, the Global Strategy appeared more modest in its aims and more cooperative in its methods (Barbé and Morillas 2019; Morillas 2019). A key to advance in this 'principled and pragmatic' direction was the idea of resilience, which was defined as 'the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises' (EEAS 2016: 23).

Although resilience already appeared in the 2012 Commission Communication on food security and the Resilience Action Plan 2013-2020, it developed more consistently in the EU Global Strategy (2016) and the 'Joint Communication on a Strategic Approach to Resilience' (2017). Notwithstanding that resilience has a variety of interpretations among different EU member states and even within EU policy documents (Joseph 2018), it represents a move away from 'quick-fix' and 'top-down' interventions of statebuilding and democracy promotion (Börzel and Risse 2018). Therefore, a resilience-informed foreign policy has built upon two axis that reinforce each other:

(1) *Long-term, sustained action* – The approach to foster resilience to the east and south provided a common compass and shared language to different policy communities that had traditionally understood their work as separated and ruled by specific institutional logics (Tocci 2020). Resilience would bridge all discrepancies: under the same umbrella of fostering resilience to fragile societies, development or peacebuilding agents concerned with long-term fixes would link their tasks to those working for more immediate security logics. Resilience was a policy framework to bring together all EU policy communities, actors and institutions and represented a step towards a 'joined up' external action (EEAS 2017:49).

The idea of achieving internal cohesion in different policy sectors has been key to involve multiple actors and use all instruments at disposal to tackle all phases and dimensions of conflicts and crises (Bargués et al. 2020). The interdependence and complexity of conflicts and crises were seen to require sustained engagements to tackle root causes and address unpredictable, non-linear effects in the future. As the Joint Communication on a Strategic Approach to Resilience puts it, there is 'the need to move away from crisis containment to a more structural, long-term, non-linear approach to vulnerabilities, with an emphasis on anticipation, prevention and preparedness' (EC & HR/VP 2017: 2). The Global Strategy similarly referred to a 'multifaceted approach to resilience', which consists in assisting fragile societies in many policy areas through a sustained and resourceful action. The EU's complex intervention in the Sahel region, where diverse tools have been complementarily deployed, shows how these ideas translate into practice:

> "different instruments, including CSDP missions, complement each other in bolstering the resilience of local states and societies. Humanitarian aid helps tackle the immediate crisis of displaced people, while development cooperation addresses the longer-term root causes of poverty, further complemented by actions for job creation, access to education, health and climate mitigation" (EEAS 2017: 15).

(2) *Bottom-up and cooperative action* – The approach to foster resilience consists of interventions that are 'bottom-up' and include cooperative ways of addressing crises. Bottom-up strategies respond to the recognition that local actors need to own and lead crises recovery plans. Therefore, instead of imposing an external idea of resilience or merely pursuing an elite-driven approach to governance reform, the EU pursues a 'multi-level' approach where different actors cooperate (EEAS 2016: 29). The idea is to bring together international and national policymakers, as well as diverse civil society groups and the private sector, to share their experiences and views in pursuit of collective answers to local, regional, and global affairs (Göldner-Ebenthal and Dudouet 2017). Although critical scholars have pointed out that the EU has failed to enact a truly bottom-up approach, where local actors own and lead the process of building resilience (Ejdus and Juncos 2018), remarkable initiatives include the annual Brussels conferences on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region' that have been organized since 2017 to support the UN Geneva talks on Syria. Similarly, the project 'Iraq and its Neighbours: Enhancing Dialogue and Regional Integration in West Asia' promotes multi-level dialogues through a series of bilateral and multilateral workshops that bring together civil society representatives from Iraq and its immediate neighbours: Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait.

Linked to this new brand of multi-level diplomacy, Mogherini increased the EU's visibility abroad and emphasized connectivity between the EU and all the regions of the world to work towards multi-lateral solutions. In sharp contrast to the isolationism of the US under the Trump administration, Mogherini understood that the EU had to be present abroad. More than her predecessors, she travelled on numerous occasions to Africa, Asia, and Latin America to communicate the EU's policies and actions and strengthen partnerships with other countries and regions. Reacting to international developments, she also made constant statements and declarations to increase the visibility and voice of the EU. Rather than seeking to enforce European norms and values abroad, she pursued partnerships and collective answers, making multilateralism central: 'We will continue to be a principled, reliable, consistent and cooperative global player, a point of reference for multilateralism', asserted Mogherini (2019) in the first International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace in April 2019.

In sum, in a connected and complex world, Mogherini constructed a foreign policy that was principled and pragmatic at the same time, experimenting with a *sustained* (long-term) and *cooperative* (bottom-up) way to foster resilience (EEAS 2016: 16–18). However, her term ended in November 2019 with no grandiloquent successes. Unlike her predecessors, Javier Solana, who could claim the glory for ending the Balkan wars and conducing complex statebuilding processes in Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia, or acting as a peace mediator during the Russo-Georgian war in 2008; or Catherine Ashton, who could boast about creating the EEAS in 2010, leading the negotiations to freeze Iran's nuclear programme in 2013, and mediating between Serbia and Kosovo who reached an agreement to normalize the relations in 2013, Mogherini's record is seen as less exuberant. Although she had a prominent role in the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 to reach the agreement in 2015 or in the ratification of the Paris agreement in 2016, critics have suggested that under Mogherini the EU external action has gradually lost the capacity to lead and influence global affairs, taking instead a much more modest and reactive path (Joseph and Juncos 2019).

In the past years, there is a growing perception that the EU's responses need to be faster and more strategic to foster resilience in the neighbourhood (Biscop 2020). Academics and policymakers tend to agree that resilience is too vague to mobilize coherent and efficient action. As another EU-LISTCO report found out: 'there is a risk that, in spite of the framework documents adopted by EU institutions on the topic, resilience becomes, in practice, a new "constructive ambiguity" in EU foreign policy; that

is, a malleable and vague concept that each member state re-articulates based its own preferences and objectives' (Cadier et al. 2020). It is for this reason, that academics push for greater coordination to enable action: 'Fostering resilience consequently requires a preliminary "resilience audit" in order to better understand existing strengths and weaknesses in each state, region and policy area. The EU can only fine-tune its objectives and instruments and develop targeted strategies if it is equipped with such important and focused knowledge' (Gaub and Popescu 2017: 93). It was telling that in the webinar commemorating the 10th anniversary of EEAS – that had as a title *The EU in a Changing World* and brought into conversation Solana, Mogherini and Borrell – Solana also criticized Mogherini for having lost influence in the world stage. 'We started with much less infrastructure than the one that Federica [Mogherini] had or Pepe [Josep] Borrell has today. I think we had less power but had more influence; probably today the HR has more power, more people at its disposal … but I dare to say we had more influence', he claimed.

In addition to the demands of greater concretion and strategy, there is the observation that the security situation has deteriorated. In 2019, the report assessing the implementation of the Global Strategy issued a gloomy forecast:

> "We now live in an even more contested world than we did only a few years ago. Contestation is playing out in the strategic, economic and political spheres. Strategically, non-proliferation and arms control are at risk. Economically, trade tensions and technological polarisation threaten both to damage the global recovery after the 2008-9 financial crisis, and to make it harder to manage security issues. Politically, we have seen the emergence of different political narratives, some of which openly contest the values underpinning liberal democracies worldwide, and those of the EU itself" (EEAS 2019: 8).

In 2020, the situation got worse still. How did the EU external action react, as instability and conflict intensified, and a world affected by the Covid-19 pandemic complexified?

2. BUILDING STRATEGIC AUTONOMY TO REVITALIZE THE GLOBAL STRATEGY?

Josep Borrell started his mandate in December 2019 and in the early months sought to implement the Global Strategy, following the steps of Mogherini and focusing on strengthening resilience through the pursue of sustained and cooperative actions. In one of his first appearances as HR/VP, at the COP25 in Madrid, Borrell linked climate change to 'multifaceted' problems such as social justice and migratory pressures; he underlined the need for 'collective action' and committed to 'do[ing] everything at my disposal to reinforce our impact and generate truly global cooperation on climate action' (Borrell 2019).

In January and February 2020, before Europe became a Covid-19 hotspot, Borrell visited Belgrade and Pristina to reinvigorate the dialogue to normalize the relations between the two; and then also travelled to both Teheran and Washington, consecutively, to preserve the deal and help to ease the tensions generated when a US military strike killed the Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq. Like Mogherini, he also developed and strengthened the partnerships with Africa,

Latin America & the Caribbean, and Central Asia, always promoting cooperation in a variety of key policy areas – from trade and climate change to security and migration. He kept connected with the world when travel restrictions due to the pandemic were imposed and wrote almost weekly in a blog titled 'A window on the world' to be visible elsewhere and communicate a common narrative of the EU. His are the half-ironic, half-adventurous words that sum up EU's ambition and willingness to dissociate from Trump's anti-globalism: 'we need to make multilateralism great again'.

However, in 2020, the pandemic of Covid-19 triggered dangerous dynamics in international relations that jeopardized the strategy that Mogherini had envisioned, such as the spiralling of great power rivalry between the US and China, the widening of social and economic inequalities or the disruption of conflict-affected societies like Libya, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen (Bargués 2020; Biscop 2020). Even if the victory of Joe Biden in the US elections and the beginning of the distribution of the vaccine in December was a beacon of hope for many (Stiglitz 2020), for Borrell the crisis is deep-seated. As he argues:

> "[The] crisis of multilateralism did not start just recently with the election of Donald Trump. Which means that it will probably not end up with that of Joe Biden. I see mainly three reasons for this crisis: the multiplication of actors; the return of national sovereignty, above all with actors such as China, Russia or Turkey; and the increasing complexity of problems, which implicitly makes their resolution ever more difficult" (Borrell 2020c).

This perception of complexity and the return of geopolitical tensions has led Borrell to emphasize the need for a further pragmatic, realist turn. 'The geopolitical upheavals we are witnessing today underline the urgency with which the European Union must find its way in a world increasingly characterized by raw power politics. We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be' (Borrell 2020a). The point highlighted in this section is not that Borrell has swiftly turned the Global Strategy around. Rather, we seek to suggest how Borrell's doctrine is reinvigorating the idea of 'strategic autonomy' to unite and develop capacity to act alone, if necessary, in times of increasing complexity and multipolar contestation.

The concept of strategic autonomy has gradually acquired greater significance in European parlance in the past decade, generally in relation to the need to build a defence industry independent from NATO. It was mentioned only in passing in the Global Strategy, as important for the EU to be self-sufficient and obtain peace and security: 'An appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe's ability to foster peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders' (EEAS 2016: 19). Since then, strategic autonomy has gradually gained importance in the subsequent developments and implementation of the Global Strategy. The EU Council has operationalized new instruments to deepen defence cooperation such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) in November 2016 or the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in December 2017. Also, the European Commission has promoted the creation the European Defence Fund (EDF) that uses EU budget to finance research and development of defence products and technologies by enterprises, research centres, national administrations, international organisations and universities. Although the implementation of these instruments is still embryonic and haunted by political constraints (such as NATO's scepticism or critique of EU's apparent decoupling), these instruments boost the strategic autonomy of the EU to become an international security actor (Sweeney and Winn 2020).

Yet, Borrell is determined to take strategic autonomy to the next level. While the Global Strategy showed calculation, demanding an 'appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy', Borrell thinks the more generally autonomy the better. While the concept usually refers to increasing capability in defence matters, he has widened its meaning to encompass all policy fields (Borrell 2020b). Again, the trigger seems to be the pandemic:

> "It is crucial for the strategic-autonomy discussion to expand far beyond the issues of defense and security. As the coronavirus disease crisis has shown, issues such as public health and economic interdependence are no less important... The Covid-19 crisis has revealed the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of interdependence, and the vulnerability of Europe. Science, technology, trade, data, investments are becoming sources and instruments of force in international politics" (Borrell 2020b).

For Borrell, 'the weight of Europe in the world is shrinking' and the interconnectedness of the world's problems opens opportunities as well as discloses Europe's vulnerabilities (Borrell 2020d). A degree of autonomy in all areas is thus desirable:

> "Strategic autonomy is the conceptual framework that Europe needs to understand these issues and how they relate to one another. Viewed in isolation, face masks and medicines are not strategic products. But the strategic calculus changes when the production of such items is concentrated in just a few countries. The same applies to the sourcing of rare metals, social media and other digital platforms, and technologies such as 5G" (Borrell 2020b).

The key question for this policy paper is whether the centrality of strategic autonomy in the implementation of the Global Strategy may contradict the direction of resilience taken by Mogherini in the genesis of the Strategy. The idea expressed by Borrell, that 'the Union must learn quickly to speak the language of power', is often criticized by commentators, as a deviation from an external action dominated by norms and principles (Weiler 2020). An insistence on achieving autonomy could possibly imply an inward-looking move to cut off global interconnections and dependencies, while also being reluctant to embrace sustained and multi-level, multi-lateral initiatives. Yet, Borrell does not see strategic autonomy as contradictory with building resilience. We interpret it as a double movement of first looking inward, to build capacity and coherence, and then outward to intervene abroad decisively, being able to sustain interventions and partnerships.

For Borrell, or so it seems, the first step to acquire strategic autonomy in all policy sectors and avoid depending on others in world affairs is looking inward, for greater cohesion and cooperation between member states. While all High Representatives have perceived the division of Member States as a burden to undertake efficient and rapid action, the growing internal contestation and politicisation of EU foreign policy, which adds to the current international conjecture of instability and turmoil, has made the building of a joined external action a foremost priority (Barbé and Morillas 2019; see also, Cadier and Lequesne 2020). This is one of the reasons why Borrell reiteratively argues that most EU foreign policy actions ought to be decided by qualified majority, rather than unanimously by all its members.

He also stresses the need to work on a gradual alignment of the variety of perspectives that Europeans have on international relations: 'The more Europeans agree on how they see the world and its

problems, the more they will agree on what to do about them' (Borrell 2020e). This cohered understanding is vital to manage foreign crises successfully.

> "From the Sahel and Libya to the eastern Mediterranean, there is no shortage of crises that demand a strong European response. The task for the EU is to define a common position from which it can act in the interest of maintaining regional stability. To succeed, Europe must develop its own framework for monitoring and analyzing threats, so that it can move quickly from threat assessment to operationalization and response. That is why we are now developing a Strategic Compass" (Borrell 2020b).

Drawing on an intelligence analysis of the full range of threats and challenges the EU faces, the Strategic Compass will provide coherence into European defence when adopted by member states in 2022 (EEAS 2020).

The second step to build strategic autonomy is a commitment to taking action. For Borrell, deepening strategic autonomy in all policy sectors does not imply a withdrawal from the international arena. Far from isolating from the rest, the EU must step into the great outdoors: constantly engaging in global affairs. As he puts it, the opposite of strategic autonomy is 'complacency', neglect of duty (Borrell 2020e; 2020b). Also, importantly, he does not imply that once autonomy is acquired, EU's interventions will be unilateral. On the contrary: 'The EU needs to achieve this kind of autonomy, while at the same time strengthening our alliances and preserving our commitments to multilateralism and openness' (Borrell 2020b). Indeed, the threat scanning that will lead to the Strategic Compass is meant to define concrete priorities and enable action in four clusters that further the Global Strategy's vision: crisis management, resilience, capability development, and partnerships (EEAS 2020). In short, Borrell acknowledges that in a complex world with increasing contestation and antagonism, the EU must be autonomous to be able to find a balance between cooperating 'with others whenever possible' and acting 'alone when necessary' (Borrell 2020e).

The two moves taken by Borrell to develop strategic autonomy – a quest for internal cohesion to then act strategically in foreign policy – should not be understood sequentially; the two feed into each other reciprocally. The cohesion of member states' views on foreign policy will lead to a more capable external action, as much as acting abroad will draw together the EU and defy Euroscepticism. In doing both at the same time, Borrell seeks to reenergize what Mogherini attempted with 'resilience' (the quest for a framework to coordinate all actors and policy fields and intervene in a sustained and cooperative way with partners) by correcting its apparent weaknesses. In response to the critiques of vagueness and irrelevance (Korosteleva and Flockhart 2020), Borrell insists on strategic autonomy to nurture further internal coherence, build capacity, and take action in ALS and CO. 'If we do not act together now, we will become irrelevant as many have argued cogently' (Borrell 2020d). Strategic autonomy is becoming the distant horizon to be longed for, which will keep EU foreign policymakers occupied:

> "Strategic autonomy is not a magic wand but a process, a long-term one, intended to ensure that Europeans increasingly take charge of themselves. To defend our interests and values in an increasingly harsh world, a world that obliges us to rely on ourselves to guarantee our future" (Borrell 2020d).

CONCLUSION

Strategic autonomy seems to be emerging as the key concept to operationalize the Global Strategy in a (post-)Covid world. It permeates through all policy sectors, not only defence and security, and seems apt to build greater coherence and capacity for action. In this sense, it seeks to overcome the shortcomings identified in the 'principled and pragmatic' vision of the Global Strategy, where resilience appeared as too vague and elusive for policymakers (Cadier et al. 2020). As it is currently framed, therefore, in bringing forth a double move – growing strong internally to act constructively in foreign policy – greater strategic autonomy may be useful to sublimate the 'principled and pragmatic' vision of the Global Strategy. However, the unforeseen direction that we seek to grapple with here also brings in some risks that ought to be considered. While it is too early to reach conclusions on the direction taken by the current external action service, we raise two points to open a discussion that may be useful to EU policymakers as well as academic debates beyond EU-LISTCO.

The first has to do with the shrinking capacity that the EU has to deliver on what it promises. The Covid-19 crisis has revealed a high degree of interdependency most European policy sectors have with external countries; the crisis has fuelled nationalist perspectives and may force member states to relegate European integration on security and defence to the back burner. So, becoming autonomous strategically seems a daring objective to grow strong and correct the accusations of irrelevancy of the past, yet it reopens the debate on how to close the gap between expectations and reality (Rieker and Blockmans 2019). While external crisis-response capacities have increased since the Lisbon Treaty (2009) and the expectations diminished with the realistic outlook of the Global Strategy, with higher expectations, the gap widens again. Will this be a stimulus to greater capacity-building and integration or instead lead to another phase of utter disappointment and Euroscepticism?

Secondly, strategic autonomy implies finding a balance between 'cooperating with others whenever possible and acting alone when necessary', but this is generally a fragile balance in EU foreign policy. All too often the EU may be then tempted to act alone or negotiate with elites (rather than a whole of society approach) and give priority to the protection of Europe over finding ways of cooperating with others. This bias may definitely become a departure from the ideal of resilience as transformation that EU-LISTCO aspires to (see, further, Börzel, Risse and Stollenwerk 2021). It even seems to represent a move away from the idea of fostering resilience in a constructive way, as promoted by Mogherini, while contradicting one of the central lessons learnt and pronounced in the Global Strategy:

> "We will engage in a practical and principled way, sharing global responsibilities with our partners and contributing to their strengths. We have learnt the lesson: my neighbour's and my partner's weaknesses are my own weaknesses. So we will invest in win-win solutions, and move beyond the illusion that international politics can be a zero-sum game" (EEAS 2016: 4).

It is timely to think of the risks involved in building strategic autonomy. For being strategic may imply to withdraw connectivity, break relations and partnerships, rather than creating new and sustaining or even intensifying existing partnerships. This may also generate further reaction and contestation in the neighbourhood or among other great powers. The bottom line is that the EU may be developing a pragmatism without principles and finally lose its distinctiveness as a normative actor in international relations (Biscop 2020). Whether this is a path that suits the EU will depend on Europeans as much as on an increasingly interdependent world.

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ABOUT EU-LISTCO RESEARCH

EU-LISTCO investigates the challenges posed to European foreign policy by identifying risks connected to areas of limited statehood and contested orders. Through the analysis of the EU Global Strategy and Europe's foreign policy instruments, the project assesses how the preparedness of the EU and its member states can be strengthened to better anticipate, prevent and respond to threats of governance breakdown and to foster resilience in Europe's neighbourhoods. Continuous knowledge exchange between researchers and foreign policy practitioners is at the cornerstone of EU-LISTCO. Since the project's inception, a consortium of fourteen leading universities and think tanks have been working together to develop policy recommendations for the EU's external action toolbox, in close coordination with European decision-makers. The EU-LISTCO Policy Papers are peer-reviewed research papers based on findings from the project.

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