**Meeting External Challenges: ‘strategic autonomy’, ‘joined up policy-making’ and the EU’s search for a ‘strategic compass’**

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ABSTRACT

This chapter develops the notion of ‘crisisification’ as a key embedded part of the EU’s external action, and examines the ways in which it has been exemplified in the framing, development and evaluation of the Union’s Global Strategy. It begins by outlining the ways in which the broad range of external challenges faced by the EU might shape its approach to external action, proceeds by examining in detail the ways in which the Global Strategy and its development have reflected attempts to frame and re-frame these challenges, and focuses in on the efforts to define a ‘strategic compass’ for the Union, drawing on a range of illustrations to test the assumptions and instruments of such an approach to external challenges. The Conclusion revisits the ‘crisisification’ framework as a means of evaluating the EU’s approach to external challenges, and relates it to the crisis in Ukraine as a ‘test case’ for the EU’s achievement of a strategic crisis response capcity.

**Introduction**

One of the key arguments in this volume is that the identification, processing and resolution of crises has become a key part of the European integration process. In this argument, a key component is that of ‘crisisification’ as advanced by Mark Rhinard (2019; see also his chapter in this volume): the ways in which the search for crises or dangers, the nature of crisis decision-making and the resulting securitisation of EU decision-making has become embedded in the European project. As a result, the argument goes, there is a need to reconceptualise key aspect of EU politics: specifically, agenda-setting, collective decision-making and issues of legitimacy. Crisis decision-making and crisis management raise issues of participation, of urgency and of high-stakes political activism that cannot be contained in the essentially deliberative models of EU policy-making that have evolved during much of the life of the Union and its predecessors.

Whilst these arguments might seem challenging and even surprising to those whose main focus has been on the ‘internal’ development of the Union and its institutions, they are in many ways less novel to those whose main preoccupations have been with international politics, international political economy and the making of foreign policies. The study of international crises and crisis management is a long-standing element in international relations, and has developed its own distinctive approaches. Some of these are essentially connected with the Cold War and an assumed US-Soviet confrontation, but others have adopted a far wider set of scenarios and assumptions. The post-Cold War period has seen growing attention to the ways in which crises have changed, become more linked and complex and have expressed the changing nature of international and national security (political, military, economic and cultural) (M. Smith, 2018). This means that the conventional theories of international relations – realism, liberalism, Marxism and others – have either been re-shaped in themselves or have been joined by economic, sociological or culturally-based theories that encompass a far wider range of phenomena, actors and processes (Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome, 2021: Part II).

In important respects, these challenges to conventional theories and approaches have responded to changes in the world arena itself. The impact of globalisation (and potential ‘de-globalisation’), the growing recognition of major power-shifts, the digitisation and mediatisation of key international processes and the competition for influences between a changing array of actors have become key influences on the changing approach to international crises. Most importantly for the argument here, the external action of the European Union and its predecessors has been shaped from the outset by the reality and the perception of crisis in the external environment, and increasingly by the linkages between ‘external’ and ‘internal’ crises. This means that the argument in this chapter has a rather different starting-point from those identified by other chapters: external crisis has been a shaping factor of ‘European foreign policy’ and more broadly of external action since the 1970s at least, and the institutions of external action have been shaped continuously by this set of forces.

This is not by any means to say that the notion of ‘crisisification’ and allied ideas are irrelevant to the argument in this chapter. They are differently relevant, since the focus here is explicitly on the external challenges faced by the EU, on the ways in which these have shaped or encouraged institutional and policy responses, and on the ways in which the EU has equipped itself to address the changing challenges of the 2020s. Thus, the linked crises of globalisation and multilateralism are key conditioning factors in the Union’s responses to problems of climate, migration, energy, health and a host of others (see especially chapters by Moulton and Burns, Buonanno and Webber in this volume). At the same time, the impact of global power shifts, encapsulated in but by no means limited to the rise of China, has constituted a growing geopolitical and geo-economic force and source of potential crises that has to be confronted or adapted to by the Union (Alcaro, Peterson and Greco, 2016; Brown, 2018). In addition, the ways in which global communications have become subject to powerful non-state forces and organisations, and the complex interplay between these and state power in a range of issue-areas, is a strong influence on the development of both the EU’s diplomatic practices and its external actions, and another potential source of crises.

This chapter takes this situation of international turbulence and complexity as its starting point, and identifies the ways in which it has led to a series of interlinked external challenges for the EU, some of them acute and urgent and others long-term and chronic. It then examines the EU’s attempts to from a strategic response – or set of responses – to these challenges, especially through the Global Strategy of 2016 (European Union, 2016) and its successor documents, as well as through responses to specific crises either of a geopolitical or a geo-economic nature. Finally, it explores the EU’s search in the 2020s for a ‘strategic compass’ to guide its response to challenges and crises, and asks whether this is an example of additional ‘crisisification’ in the EU’s response to external challenges, especially in light of challenges such as that posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022). In doing so, it also relates to issues of leadership within the EU, as dealt with by Bulmer and Peterson in their contribution to this volume, and to questions raised more generally in the Introduction to the volume.

**Crisis and the evolution of the EU’s external action**

Central to an understanding of the evolution of ‘European foreign policy’, and more broadly of the Union’s external action, is the recognition that external challenges and crises have played a recurring and often catalytic role in the development of the policy domain. The development of European Political Cooperation (EPC) in the 1970s and 1980s, the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the 1990s, the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) since the turn of the millennium, the post-Lisbon establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the elaboration of the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP) have all in different aspects reflected the occurrence of external crisis or the salience of external challenges, Notably, this includes crises in Europe itself (including arguably the most important of all, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War), the Union’s ‘neighbourhood’ (both eastern and southern), sub-Saharan Africa and other key regions; but it also includes major sectoral challenges in international political economy, including those of environment, energy and the politicisation of trade and commercial policy (Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome, 2021: Part IV). Additional challenges have occurred in relation to human rights, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the demand for economic sanctions in a wide variety of geopolitical and geo-economic areas. The development of EPC and the CFSP, and then CSDP, have embodied a demand for institutions that can scan the global context, coordinate the foreign policies and external actions of member states, and express the accretion of new roles for the Union; at times, they have also implicitly suggested that crises and conflicts can be functional for the development of EU external action, by crystallising such demands and generating institutional responses.

Partly, this expansion of crisis recognition and coordination has reflected the widening and deepening of the EU itself. The expansion of membership into the early 21st century has expanded the geopolitical and geo-economic reach of the Union, and created a new security perimeter with a wider range of potential challenges and potential demands for external action (M. Smith, 2006). At the same time, the functional expansion of the Union, into areas such as environmental policy, and the continued deepening of European capacities in trade and commercial policies have created a profound engagement with the global arena in issue-areas characterised by task-expansion and turbulence, whilst the growth of extensive linkages between arenas and issues has created the demand for ‘joined-up policy-making’ expressing the developing role(s) of the Union. Thus, the development of post-Cold War Europe has created crises ranging from Kosovo and former Yugoslavia, through Georgia and the Caucasus to Ukraine; the geo-economic development of the European and the global arenas has created major challenges emerging from the global economy and from the cross-cutting power shifts that have characterised the 21st century. These have been crises and challenges affecting not only the institutional and material capacity of the Union, but also what might be termed its normative capacity; the tension between material and normative aspects of the EU as a ‘power’ is persistent and unresolved (M. Smith, 2019).

It might be argued in this context that the ‘external’ is fundamentally different from the ‘internal’ in the development of the EU’s relationship to crises and challenges – that the untamed and turbulent nature of the external environment poses unique challenges that can be distinguished from those arising within the Union itself. This is an attractive but untenable position in the current and recent contexts, since the prevalence of linkages between theoretically separate domains and issue areas is one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary world politics, and *par excellence* of the global political economy and the growing global cultural and media system. One of the implications of these trends has been a consistent set of pressures working towards the politicisation and securitisation of new issue-areas, and the growing recognition that it is impossible to separate policy areas or policy arenas. The impact not only of geopolitical change but also of financial changes and turbulence, and most recently of challenges to the global health care nexus, has created new conditions not only for the EU but also for all other actors in the world arena (Helwig, 2021). The EU has thus experienced not only the domestic impact of international crises but also the external impact of domestic crises. Whilst one manifestation of this has been the attempt to rationalise and stabilise the Union’s external environment – for example through regional strategies and bilateral strategic partnerships – another set of implications can be seen in the development of new mechanisms for scanning the external context and for providing resources for EU decision-makers. This constitutes in principle a direct link to processes of ‘crisisification’ to which I will return below.

It is clear that the salience of strategic analysis at the level of the EU has been one of the key characteristics of the Union’s external action in the 21st century, but that this has also been accompanied by the development of more sharply defined mechanisms for the processing of specific crises and challenges. Thus, at the strategic level, and since the European Security Strategy of 2003 (European Council, 2003), there has been a continuous flow of strategic frameworks, putative strategic partnerships, inter-regional institutions and the development of a wide-raging strategic diplomacy aimed at promoting the role of the Union and managing key aspects of the world arena (Smith, Keukeleire and Vanhoonacker, 2016: Part III). Whilst this is open to the criticism that the EU has many strategies but no central strategy, and that there is a gap between the ambition of strategic action and the reality of often severely qualified capacities to act, there is no doubt that the EU has been able to position itself as a source of strategic analysis both in relation to the external milieu and in relation to its own member states. It has also been able to forge mechanisms, at least in principle, through which it can link its external action to those of other significant multilateral actors – the key examples being the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the African Union. In very different ways, these organisations have been a focus for the development of synergies between EU-level strategy and multi-institutional responses to crises and challenges arising in the external world, including for example the EU-level adoption of UN mandates for civilian and military missions to conflict areas and the attempts through Berlin Plus to link NATO assets and EU activities. As indicated above, the EU has also developed a suite of more specific crisis-response mechanisms, located specifically within the EEAS but also expressing the external exposure of many other Brussels institutions (as indicated in many other chapters in this volume).

It would be tempting to draw from the discussion above the conclusion that the EU has equipped itself both at the strategic and at the tactical level with a promising range of crisis identification and crisis management mechanisms. At the global level, and to a significant degree within the EU’s neighbourhood, these mechanisms have a strongly multilateral tinge, expressing the Union’s commitment to global governance in the broadest sense and its normative positioning as a champion of collective action for stability and conflict management. But even in these areas, the EU’s leverage varies wildly because of its incomplete status as a geopolitical actor and because of the ways in which multilateralism has been challenged and diluted in the 21st century, both at the global and at the regional level. Another key limiting factor in the early 21st century has been the nature of the relationship between the EU institutions and the Union’s member states: whilst in areas of global political economy, there is a clear strategic competence for the Union, in matters of national and international security, the position is much more qualified. Whilst at a number of stages it has been argued that external action can act as an ‘antidote’ to internal crises and setbacks (see for example Gnesotto, Grevi and Ortega, 2005), the linkage mentioned above, between the external and the internal in the EU’s response to external challenges, can constitute a significant brake on the capacity for collective Union action.

It is in this context that we can move to a more detailed analysis of the ways in which the EU’s external actions have been ‘strategised’ or ‘crisisified’ over the period since 2016. The argument thus far has focused on the range of forces that have entered into the development of ‘European foreign policy’ and broader Union external action in the early 21st century. As part of this broad process, the key question for analysis in terms of this volume relates to the potential for processes of ‘crisisification’. Is the process described here one of cumulative embedding of crisis identification and crisis management as a set of practices at the EU level, and if so what are the implications? If ‘crisisification’ had taken place in the period before 2016, it seems clear that it was uneven, patchy and sometimes non-existent in the realm of EU external action. The essential elements or symptoms of ‘crisisification’ can be identified – effects on agenda-setting, on processes of decision-making and on the legitimacy of crisis or conflict management actions - but the evidence here suggests they were strongly circumscribed by a combination of internal and external constraints including the nature of geopolitical and geo-economic change, the role of EU member states, the activities of other multilateral institutions and the ways in which external challenges and crises presented themselves. The question now is, to what extent has the development of the EU’s Global Strategy and its institutional framework for crisis management since 2016 provided the basis for effective responses to the challenges faced by the Union, and is there evidence that this process has given rise to conditions of ‘crisisification’?

**The Global Strategy and beyond**

The starting point for those engaged in the development of the EU’s Global Strategy was established in an analysis published by the EEAS in 2015 (EEAS, 2015). At its core, this analysis placed the changed global context: a world that was ‘complex, connected and contested’, and which in terms of the argument here could also be seen as a world in crisis. This crisis could be seen as long-term and structural, requiring a strategic approach to questions of EU external action; but it could also be seen as the source of a potentially global range of short-term conjunctural crises and challenges, requiring agility and adaptability on the part of the Union and its key outward-facing institutions. The analysis itself was a direct effect of the ways in which the EU’s institutions and practices had evolved during the period since the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty, especially in terms of what might be termed strategic diplomacy: the bringing together in the EEAS and its relationship both with the Commission and with the Council Presidency of the resources with which to construct a system of deliberation, representation, communication and negotiation and to pursue both long term and short term actions in the global arena (M. Smith, 2015). Whilst the first HRVP (High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission), Catherine Ashton, had focused mainly on consolidating the EEAS and its role within the Brussels institutions, she had not been able to escape external challenges, the most pressing of which had initially been the ‘Arab Spring’. This series of crises in the Middle East and North Africa had coincided with the establishment of the EEAS, and generated an intense set of EU initiatives aimed at stabilising the region whilst supporting the evolution of fragile democracies. By 2014, it had been joined on the list of external challenges by the conflict in and over Ukraine – a crisis even more closely linked to the EU’s notion of the ‘neighbourhood’. Ashton spent time and resources on the attempt to establish a ‘comprehensive approach’ both to such regional conflicts and to natural and humanitarian disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti that had coincided with her initial appointment as HRVP. Perhaps as a consequence of the groundwork undertaken by Ashton, her successor, Federica Mogherini, a former Foreign Minister of Italy, was able to develop more expansive and more challenging ambitions.

*Formulating the Global Strategy*

The new ambitions of the HRVP and the EEAS expressed themselves between 2015 and 2016 in what can be seen as a quintessentially deliberative process leading to the publication of the Global Strategy in June 2016 (Tocci, 2017). Essentially, the development of the GS was founded on a series of seminars held in different member states and between different groups of national and EU-level actors. One of the key aims was thus to establish the ownership and by implication the legitimacy of the eventual product, in a period when the status of the Union was under threat both from the process of Brexit and from the development of new populist and nationalist movements in a range of member states. A key consideration was thus the establishment of input legitimacy (through the process of consultation) and throughput legitimacy (through the process of deliberation and construction of the strategy), with the question of output legitimacy crucially dependent upon the implementation of the strategy itself. This in turn meant that the term ‘global strategy’ had at least two faces. On the one hand, it was global in its external ambitions and potential reach; on the other hand, it was global in the sense that it would need to engage all of the resources of the Union in the effort to promote and defend the EU’s external interests. Securing the commitment of all relevant Brussels institutions, and of the member states, was thus a central part of the GS, since only through this commitment and its maintenance could the appropriate resources for strategic diplomacy be extracted and deployed.

The process of deliberation and commitment was thus clearly shaped by the need to secure acceptance of the GS within the Union. But it was also moulded by the continuing dynamism of the external context, both within the wider Europe and at the global level. By 2016, it was widely accepted that this was a context of challenge and crisis, as outlined earlier in this chapter. Part of this set of challenges was geopolitical, emanating from the power shifts and turbulence generated by the rise of ‘emerging powers’ such as China, Brazil and India and the ambitions of ‘resurgent powers’ the most obvious of which was Russia (M. Smith, 2013). The literature on power transitions argues strongly for the likely occurrence of conflicts between emerging or resurgent powers and those more focused on the perpetuation of the status quo; in this context, the EU could be placed squarely in the group pf established powers desiring to retain stability and accommodate change gradually rather than subscribing to radical upheaval (Brown, 2018); the GS in this light could be seen as the basis for more active identification and management of external crises. This conservative nature was partly expressed in the EU’s commitment to multilateralism and the liberal international order, and to mechanisms of global and regional governance based on the assumptions of negotiated rather than imposed or spontaneous order (M. Smith, 2019). The problem for the Union in its efforts to adopt a new strategic posture arose from the fact that these commitments and mechanisms were under threat from revisionist powers such as China, Russia and India (and later, under the Trump Administration, from the USA, which was at the centre of the liberal international order itself). This was accompanied by a series of short term conjunctural crises (in the Caucasus and eastern Europe, in the Mediterranean and Middle East, and more distantly in the Indo-Pacific) that could be seen as symptomatic of the uneven power transition in which the Union was embroiled – both within and outside Europe, and in the political, economic and security domains. This set of interacting forces contributed to what might be seen as a ‘polycrisis’, not just for the Union but for a range of other actors, and accentuated a series of cross-cutting issues – migration, climate change, financial (see chapters by Buananno, Moulton and Burns, and Schild in this volume), energy, cyber – which called not only for long term deliberative action but also for short term responsive action (Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome, 2021: chapter 1).

*The Global Strategy: principles and ambitions*

In what ways could the EU’s Global Strategy be seen as addressing the external challenges outlined above, and their linkages not only with internal EU challenges but also with the challenge of diplomacy and crisis management? At the most general level, the GS proposed three key interrelated elements: ‘principled pragmatism’, a ‘comprehensive approach’ and ‘joined up policymaking’. The first of these was an attempt to square the circle between the EU’s self-presentation as a ‘normative power’ conducting policy according to certain key principles, and the need for an approach based on a form of realism, taking into account material power and factors such as geopolitics and geo-economics that have been noted above as part of the continuing challenge of external action. The second element – the ‘comprehensive approach’ – had been initially pursued by Catherine Ashton in her period as HRVP, but was here given new force by its association with the ‘global’ element of the GS – the approach would entail actions bringing together many aspects of the Union’s resources, and would also imply a rounded approach to the management of external issues, for example in the management of conflicts in developing areas where stabilisation went alongside the need for governance reform, the addressing of human rights issues and the provision of longer-term technical assistance. The final element – ‘joined up policymaking’ – was a logical implication of the search for a global and comprehensive strategy, but also reflected the fact that the initial phase of the EU’s new diplomacy after the establishment of the EEAS had been characterised by turf wars and inter-institutional hostility.

At another level, the GS put forward three ambitions that had clear links to the Union’s ability to manage the multiple crises with which it was confronted. The first of these was the EU’s search for ‘strategic autonomy’ – a phrase which has led to much analysis and speculation since 2016. What, exactly, did this term mean, and what would be its implications for the EU’s capacity to address the key external challenges? In one sense, the quest for ‘strategic autonomy’ can be seen as directed at the United States, and at the need for the Union to be free to develop its own diplomatic roles and direction. Whilst the USA has often been seen as a key actor in the promotion of European integration, it can be and has been seen as a key limiting factor, constraining the European desire to cut free and achieve an independent role. The fact that the publication of the GS was rapidly followed by the installation of the Trump Administration, one of the most overtly challenging through its antagonism to the European project, only added an extra edge to this understanding. But there was also a second potential implication of the phrase ‘strategic autonomy’: that the autonomy sought was in relation to the EU’s member states, and that freedom of action in the external sphere should not be constrained by a lack of consensus among them. Given the development of significant differences between member states in the post-2016 period, often linked to EU-US relations or to relations with other external ‘targets’ such as China or Russia, this understanding of ‘strategic autonomy’ is heavy with potential conflicts and tensions.

Alongside the notion of ‘strategic autonomy’, the GS put forward two key elements in the stabilisation of the Union’s external environment: the cultivation of resilience and the development of partnerships. The first of these referred specifically to the promotion of resilience and stability in the EU’s ‘neighbourhood’ to the east and the south, and focused on the development of economic, political and security structures both at the regional and at the national level. As such, it bore a strong resemblance to the practices analysed by Stephan Keukeleire and his co-authors under the rubric of ‘structural diplomacy’ (Keukeleire, 2003; Keukeleire and Delreux 2015), through which attention to the domestic structures of key target countries is seen as a key means of intervening for the promotion of stability and the management of conflict. In respect of the development of partnerships, the GS advanced a three-level approach. The first and most global level included partnerships with the United Nations system, which have historically been instrumental in promoting EU involvement in conflict management: the EU as a sub-contractor for the UN in dealing with conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, operating under UN mandates. But the concept of the EU as a partner for global organisations has a much more general application to a host of areas of global governance – human rights, climate change, development, migration and so on. Partnerships were also a key element of the GS approach to inter-regional relations, such as those expressed in strategic partnerships with the African Union, ASEAN and others, and economic partnerships within the Cotonou framework with a large number of groupings in Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific. Finally, the idea of partnership was expressed in the search for bilateral strategic partnerships, which have become a feature of the diplomatic universe not only in the EU but also for other major ‘powers’ in the global arena (Ferreira-Pereira and Smith, 2021). Whilst their impact in any specific bilateral relationship has been variable and sometimes questionable, there is no doubt that they form a significant element of the EU’s search for ‘connectivity’ in the global arena.

*Implementing the Global Strategy*

From the discussion above, it can be seen that the GS constituted on the one hand a consolidation of the EU’s ambitions for an expansion of its global actorness, and on the other hand the basis for a new set of questions about the Union’s capacity to address key global and regional challenges. It encapsulated a redefinition of the EU’s ‘security perimeter’, it laid the foundations for a new expansion of the EU’s international activism, it built upon the existing recognition that there was a strong link between elements of internal and external stability, and it formalised the extent to which the economic, political and security elements of EU external action should be coordinated and ‘joined up’. At the same time, however, it sharpened questions about the capacity of the Union to mobilise the appropriate resources for its expanded external activity, the extent to which new areas of external action could be legitimised and the ways in which the Union could address key sources of challenge. To take four concrete examples: first, as already noted, the GS was followed within six months by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, with a set of policies and a style of politics in many ways antithetical to those espoused by the Union and expressed in the GS. On the one hand, this could be seen as positive for the development of ‘strategic autonomy’, but on the other hand it could be seen as a grave threat to the EU’s capacity for meaningful independent action. Second, the GS co-existed with a period in EU-China relations when a series of questions about human rights, regional security in the Indo-Pacific and the subversive effect of the Belt and Road Initiative in Asia, Africa and Europe became sharper and more immediate, but when equally there was a drive for new forms of economic cooperation with Beijing. Third, the GS was introduced in a situation where EU-Russia relations were in a state of deep freeze as a result of the crisis in Ukraine and other examples of Moscow’s adventurism, but where a number of EU member states were more or less enthusiastically dependent on Russian energy supplies and on the construction of pipelines to make them more available. Finally, the strategy had to confront the continuing challenge of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, generated following the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 and after, and linking regional conflicts with economic, social and cultural effects felt most keenly through the migration and refugee crisis from 2015.

It is clear even from this brief discussion that the implementation of the GS has been faced with a series of challenges linking the external and the internal, the economic, the political and the security dimensions of external action, and the material damage of crisis and conflict with the normative aspirations of the Union’s general self-conception as a ‘force for good’ in world affairs. How has the Union attempted to equip itself for the management of such contradictory challenges? On the one hand, this story does not begin with the Global Strategy – the institutionalisation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the Common Security and Defence Policy and other aspects of external action had been evolving since the late 1990s, partly as a result of deliberation and strategizing and partly as a result of entanglement in external crises such as those in sub-Saharan Africa that had led to the mounting of more than two dozen military and civilian missions over the period 2000-2016. But the atmosphere of multiple crisis that had intensified since the global financial crisis and the crises in the Caucasus of 2008-2009 led to a new intensity of institutional development. At one level, as Stephen Blockmans and Loes Debuysere have pointed out (2021), this was at the level of ‘architecture’ and institutional engineering, but at another level it was about the operationalisation of new and existing arrangements to meet the challenges of the turbulent global environment. Thus, there was a drive to improve the Union’s capacity for conflict prevention, emphasising early warning systems, the sharing of analysis and the deployment of civil and military resources in general. Alongside this, there was a commitment to improve mechanisms of coordination with other institutions, most notably the UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in an effort to ensure the effective coordination of actions, whilst relationships with NATO fluctuated especially in the period of the Trump Administration, when US policies threatened an unravelling of the Atlantic Alliance. There were those in the EU, especially Emmanuel Macron, the French President, who called for the effective abolition of NATO and a much-strengthened EU security and defence policy, but this position was not shared by others within the Union (Mallet, Peel and Buck 2019).

The institutionalisation of the EU’s approach to external challenges was also expressed in the activation of new areas in existing treaties. The arrangements for Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) between EU member states were given active attention from 2017 onwards, as were new aspects of defence cooperation including defence industrial cooperation (Biscop, 2019: chapter 6). Not coincidentally, these initiatives occurred after the British referendum of 2016 and the decision in favour of ‘Brexit’ – the British had generally been opposed to the development of new forms of defence and security cooperation in the EU that might be seen as challenging NATO. Perhaps most significantly from an ‘internal’ perspective, the development of an integrated approach to external conflict, enabling the EU to intervene at several phases of conflicts, with instruments including security and defence policy, diplomacy, development policies and human rights instruments, has been a key feature of recent years (Blockmans and Debuysere, 2021). In many ways, this is a continuation and intensification of the ‘comprehensive approach’ first developed under the aegis of Catherine Ashton, but with a new impetus and more freedom to innovate at the institutional and the operational level. This type of development entails the restructuring of organisations including the EEAS itself, and the development of new mechanisms for coordination across institutions within the EU framework. As Blockmans and others have tellingly pointed out, though, all of the institutional innovations are moot without the political will among member states to allow them to operate – which takes us back to the arguments about the implications of ‘strategic autonomy’ both within and outside the Union.

*Towards a ‘strategic compass’?*

This discussion has a set of apparently contradictory implications, it seems. First, the Global Strategy can be seen as a bringing together of existing practices and understandings, but also as a major leap forward in the EU’s self-definition as an international actor, and the generator of new debates about such notions as ‘strategic autonomy’. Second, it is clear that there have been important areas of innovation in the EU’s approach to conflict management and intervention, including those designed to make enhanced resources available to EU Missions and to the diplomatic system of the EU, but it is also clear that these are relatively toothless without the generation of political will that might enable ‘strategic autonomy’ in respect of the EU’s relations with its member states to be operationalised. Third, even given these advances or consolidations, the EU continues to confront a series of linked and often intractable challenges from external sources, including those that link external to internal challenges, and this contributes to the view that the EU continues to be marginalised when ‘hard power’ or coercive diplomacy is at issue. One effect of these contradictions is to intensify the search for new structures or concepts that might enable the Union to transcend what are seen as its current limitations.

One such concept is that of the ‘strategic compass’ designed to give new direction to the EU’s engagement with key external challenges. At the root of this idea is the ongoing discussion about the EU’s ability to achieve ‘strategic autonomy’ and better focus its external actions, especially in security and defence policy but also in foreign economic policy and diplomacy more generally (Duke, 2018; Biscop, 2019). This shaped the proclamation by the incoming President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in late 2019, that the new Commission would be ‘geopolitical’ in its makeup and functioning, and associated ideas that the Union should self-consciously assert its role as a ‘power’ (Rachman, 2019). The new post-2019 Commission also created a post of Commissioner for Crisis Management, focused primarily on internal issues and such areas as disaster management, but also with a remit to coordinate with other EU bodies, including the EEAS On the security and defence side, the commissioning of a wide-ranging threat assessment exercise during 2020 led to a largely pessimistic evaluation of the Union’s capacity not only to become engaged but also to shape events when it did become involved (Fiott, 2020, 2021), and thus to the notion of a ‘strategic compass’ as a means of organising and anticipating both the need for and the shape of any EU involvement in security and defence issues. This debate also generated new thinking about the potential relationship between the EU and NATO and the ways in which this could be optimised to deal with crises and conflicts (Biscop, 2021). On the political economy side, the new context generated ideas about ‘open strategic autonomy’, designed to emphasise the Union’s willingness to enter into processes of cooperation and institution-building but also its commitment to defence of its own interests (Helwig, 2021). The net result of this wave of strategizing was difficult to identify at the time of writing this chapter, although the French Council presidency in the first six months of 2022 promised confirmation of the ‘strategic compass’, but the key significance of an open and continuing debate about strategic action on the part of the EU had been recognised both by the Brussels institutions and by member states, including by France and Germany. As well as questions about capacity, resources and organisation, the debate was bound to confront the question of direction: if the EU were to develop a new, more assertive and dynamic approach to international issues including the main challenges outlined in this chapter, where might that approach lead? The question is relevant not only in operational terms, but also in terms of the organisational and policy-making dynamics exposed by the idea of ‘crisisification’ and in relation to the major crisis precipitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

**Conclusion: a ‘crisisification’ of EU external action?**

As set out by Rhinard (2019, 2022), the notion of ‘crisisification’ implies a number of key activities and organisational changes. At the centre of the process is the initiation or consolidation of horizon scanning: an activity, as we have seen, which is inherent in many of the developments that have taken place in the context of external action, and particularly since the development of the EU Global Strategy. Whilst the external context is perhaps less knowable and more challenging than what might broadly be termed internal policy domains, and whilst EU member states in many cases have highly developed processes of scanning and planning for national security, there is no doubt that since the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and especially since the publication of the GS there has been a strong and sustained movement of scanning activities to the European level. This has been strengthened by the growing ‘crisisification’ of internal policy domains in the 21st century, and by the reality that many challenges and crises cannot neatly be assigned to the internal or the external policy setting. Alongside the scanning process, the growth of coordination mechanisms within the EEAS and associated institutions has contributed to a broadening and at least potentially to an integration of information and evaluation resources, as exemplified in the comprehensive’ and ‘integrated’ approaches outlined earlier in the chapter. Although member states retain control of significant material and institutional resources, there has been a general move in the centre of gravity as regards the meeting of external challenges, with the growth of information-gathering, planning and financial support at the EU level. Nevertheless, the debates centring on ‘strategic autonomy’, ‘assertiveness’ and the ‘strategic compass’ reflect a feeling that more is possible and more should be possible in the conditions of the 2020s.

This is the point at which the implications of ‘crisisification’ for policy-making can be explored in more detail. As set out by Rhinard, the key areas of impact are on agenda-setting, decision-making and legitimacy. In respect of the first, it is clear that there has been a very active attempt by those operating at the EU level to shape the policy agenda in external action over the period since 2016, and that this has generated (or been accompanied by) a shift in the channels through which crises are identified or anticipated. To a certain extent, this has been a frustrating exercise, since the overall conclusions remain uncertain and often negative. But this very negativity constitutes a further spur to create a new external action agenda, not only in ‘European foreign policy’ but also in key areas of political economy, including trade, environment and energy. The search for a ‘strategic compass’ and the widespread adoption of ‘assertiveness’ as a key policy aspiration are evidence of this trend, but in line with the argument earlier in this chapter these initiatives create their own uncertainties and risks, partly as a consequence of their impact on the expansiveness of EU ambitions. It bears repeating that the external challenges faced by the EU are inherently more intractable than at least some of those generated internally, although the increasing linkages between the two domains create their own complexities. These linkages – as exemplified in the ramifications of the Covid-19 crisis and its bringing together of scientific, societal, security and economic challenges (see Webber in this volume) - might well form a substantial agenda for further research in this area.

On processes of decision-making, the search for institutional ‘fixes’ that can create coordinated policy responses to external challenges has been a notable feature of EU external action, especially in those areas where there is still a strong strain of intergovernmental decision-making. The elaboration of routines, the development of budgetary and material resources and the adoption of mechanisms for policy coordination is both notable and limited – notable as part of a longer-term process of institutionalisation at the European level, limited by the persistence of national structures, alternative organisational channels such as NATO, and as a result destined to be incomplete for the foreseeable future. As recorded in this chapter, there is still a strong element of deliberation in EU external action, especially at the strategic level, but this is now accompanied by an unfinished process of ‘crisisification’ at the institutional level, which in many cases is accompanied by the intervention of new actors and forces. This in turn might be seen as an unanticipated effect of the linkages generated by external challenges: rather than becoming (or remaining) exclusive, decision-making in EU external action may well have to take account of a broader and less conventional range of participants than has traditionally been the case in foreign policy.

Finally, when it comes to considerations of legitimacy, it is clear that action taken at the EU level in response to external challenges of the type discussed in this chapter remains only conditionally legitimate. From the beginning of the European project, there has been a tension between the transfer of competences to the European level in areas of political economy, and the retention of significant powers at the national level in areas of ‘high politics’, security and defence. As a result, the extent to which the Union can represent member states in responding to external challenges and crises has always been a matter of negotiation between member states and the Brussels institutions, and there has always been the possibility of defection from agreed positions by individual states or groups of states. The evidence of the 21st century is that in many respects this situation still persists, but there is also evidence that it has been moderated by a range of factors, including the actions of outsiders such as the USA (and now the UK), the nature of challenges within the EU’s neighbourhood and the increasing linkages between areas in which the Union does have competence and those in which its role remains qualified by intergovernmentalism. The tensions generated by the need for rapid action in conditions of external crisis have not disappeared, and in some ways the changing nature of external challenges has amplified them.

Does this enable us to make a clear judgement on the extent to which ‘crisisification’ has changed the nature of EU responses to external challenges? One element of a judgement would be that there has been a clear tendency towards the increased ‘Brusselisation’ of external action, but that this is not necessarily the same as ‘crisisification’ – action is more generally taken through European channels, but there are qualifications to be entered about the ways in which action is initiated or ratified, and there are persistent limits to the perceived legitimacy of EU actions. Another part of the judgement would concern the nature of the global context in which external action is pursued: it has changed and is changing at a challenging pace, and the agenda for EU policies is not set only within the EU. The EU may be better-equipped to respond through its system of diplomacy and through its mechanisms for policy coordination, but the load they can bear is still relatively limited (it has to be noted that this statement is true potentially of most if not all states within the global arena). The EU has many more of the elements of a ‘real’ foreign policy than it did at the turn of the millennium, but the extent to which it can bring these to bear on external challenges, either from other ‘powers’ or from broader processes of global change, remains uneven and aspirational rather than consolidated and predictable.

Uncertain responses by the EU and its member states to events in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal in September 2021, and in eastern Europe and more specifically Ukraine during 2022 provided vivid and often troubling evidence of this gap between aspiration and reality (on issues of leadership see also Bulmer and Paterson, this volume). In the case of Afghanistan, the hasty US withdrawal created conditions in which the EU commitment to post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation was thrown into question. This challenge in turn paled into insignificance alongside the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Ukraine had long expressed its commitment to joining the EU, and had concluded a deep and comprehensive association agreement with the Union. The crisis impacted all of the areas outlined in this chapter: the linkage of political, economic and security challenges, the linkage of internal and external challenges, and the need for a ‘joined up’ EU response underpinned by the political solidarity of all member states (for detailed analysis see Seibel in this volume). Crucially, this last requirement was (at least initially) met, and the Union was able to shape an agenda for a comprehensive response, centred upon severe sanctions but even including the financing of arms supplies to Ukraine through member states. On the face of it, therefore, the crisis not only reflected the changing conditions of EU external action as described in this chapter, but also a new level of legitimacy for collective external action in crisis conditions and a new level of coordination with organisations such as NATO in the implementation of crisis response measures. How deep and sustained this set of changes might be is of course impossible to predict, but its occurrence in the context of wider debate about the EU’s ‘strategic compass’ and the implementation of the Global Strategy was fraught with implications, both for the development of a ‘real’ European foreign policy and for the accompanying costs and risks for the EU and its member states.

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