

# 40 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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Many good ideas have been offered for the new EU Global Strategy (EUGS), including with regard to strategic concepts, priorities, and the (in)famous toolbox. Clearly, it should be about making sure that skilled diplomats are best able to solve problems when they arise. But it is also important to ask: what is the wider script they should follow?

### Two constituencies, three themes

We need to pay more attention to two critical constituencies at the margins of the EUGS debates: the young generations who will be its long-term beneficiaries and the people outside Europe who are on its receiving end. While it would be unwise to generalise about either of these two constituencies, they do tend to share a number of features, including seeing Brussels 'from the outside' as both an object of contestation and a source of recognition, a recognition which is often withheld.

It would be nice to ask both groups what they think about Europe's external *finalité* more often. While middle-aged Europeans can hardly pretend to speak on their behalf, we can at least say what

we hear. Three themes stand out:

First, *prevention*. There is a silver lining to the lack of direct accountability of EU institutions and EU leaders acting together: they can be the guardians of long-term interests and pursue sustainable integration. The benefits of preventive action are usually invisible which is why it is best pursued collectively.

Second, *citizens*. Let us not get carried away with citizen-centred foreign policy; the 'state' is not going anywhere. But at least let us pursue a citizen-minded foreign policy. In the long run, empowering actors for change on the ground tends to be great value for money.

Third, *memory*. We would also do well to critically acknowledge, when and where we can, the echoes of our imperial past around the world. This means understanding the way we are often perceived in Asia, Africa or Latin America, by the same rising powers we are trying to court. Our paternalistic impulses often hinder our capacity for influence in our non-European world. Seen from the outside,

European countries enjoy levels of development that ensure enduring (if diminished) EU influence due in no small measure to capital accumulated through colonialism.

This acknowledgement must be enriched by the very different stories of our member states, including those that were on the receiving end, from Ireland to Greece, and from Poland to Romania.

*‘The EU may be a post-imperial power in decline, but this decline is relative and slow. A post-imperial power is not a Switzerland writ large.’*

## A post-imperial power

Europe’s post-imperial condition is about managing the tension between our tendency to reproduce these colonial legacies and our aspiration to transcend them. We need to put more effort and imagination into the latter and act as a post-imperial power with the constraints, duties and opportunities that this implies.

In this spirit, we must stop picturing our so called ‘neighbourhood’ in concentric circles, defined primarily by who can best play the game of ‘convergence-for-access’. We must give up governing others ‘at a distance’, and stop turning a blind eye to the social injustice inflicted on populations by local elites while rewarding corrupt oligarchs for paying lip service to EU demands.

We must start by tackling the fear of difference in our midst and reflect this state of mind in our foreign policy. This may mean allowing countries in the ‘neighbourhood’ we share with Russia the right *not* to choose between us – letting them come up with schemes for mutual accommodation and determine themselves the localised order which affects them as subjects of their own space rather than objects of competing spheres of influence.

A post-imperial EU must better navigate between

the respective pitfalls of intervention in Libya and non-intervention in Syria *inter alia* by turning the responsibility to protect into a doctrine of effective anticipation rather than military force, helping citizens to hold governments to account as peers in

an international effort to defy abuses of all sorts. Shoes are usually better than boots on the ground, especially if we can place ourselves temporarily in other people’s shoes.

Citizen empowerment is also key for effective post-imperial rule of law support focused on consistency between what we do within and outside our borders. Let us forget blueprints and concentrate on end users. We must be more ambitious in our criticism of arbitrary power and more humble in our claim to design remedies. And when we speak of democracy outside Europe, let us concentrate on people’s right to be freely involved in the contestation and pursuit of power in their own country; *a right to politics*, as Hannah Arendt would say.

The EU may be a post-imperial power in decline, but this decline is relative and slow. A post-imperial power is not a Switzerland writ large. An ambition to transform the world for the better can find its expression in the tools and mindset of ‘mediating power’ both among and within states. This will continue to be our best contribution to cooperation between regions and within multilateral bodies, rather than a spurious claim to constituting a ‘model’.

Ultimately, we will never live up to the expectations of our children and the rest of the world. But let us try.

