

THURSDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2015

Members present

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Lord Balfe
Baroness Billingham
Baroness Coussins
Lord Dubs
Lord Triesman
Lord Tugendhat (Chairman)

Examination of Witness

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO, former Director-General for External and Politico-Military Affairs, General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union

Q11 The Chairman: Sir Robert thank you for coming before us today. You are in a sense the father not of this particular enterprise but of the idea of a European security strategy from the work you did and the many things you have written since, so we are very glad that you could come to the first of our evidence sessions. As I am sure you realise, this is a public session and everything is being taken down. It is the first of the Committee's sessions in this exercise.

Reflecting on your experience, what are the key lessons to be learnt, and what guidance would you offer to Mrs Mogherini in drafting a new foreign policy strategy?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: Thank you, it is a pleasure to be here. Perhaps I can just make a couple of comments about the 2003 document. When it was drafted and Javier Solana presented it to the Council, we did not attach the term "strategy" to it. It was not a strategy. Somebody else, as an amendment that was agreed by everybody, called it the "European security strategy". It would probably be better described as a European security concept. It set out the aim and what we thought were sensible goals for the European Union, and said a little bit about what we

needed to do to get there, but a real strategy ought to be much more specific about the steps that you are going to take.

One should never undertake such an elaborate, complicated exercise as this without knowing why you are doing it, or ask a question without knowing what answer you want. At the time we did this, we did it primarily because the European Union was deeply divided over Iraq, and the purpose of producing this document, now usually called the European security strategy, was to remind the European Union of how much they had in common and of the things they had in common, which were things where we also had very significant areas of commonality with the United States but also some significant differences. The point was simply to bring the European Union back together after, in foreign policy terms, one of the most damaging splits that we had had.

The Chairman: In the light of that, what advice would you give?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: My advice is to know what you want to get out of it. As I am sure the Committee knows, there is a preliminary document, a sort of survey of the world, and when you read it you can catch glimpses of some objectives. For example, two or three times it refers to a lack of flexibility in the way in which community development programmes are operated, which is true. They are very clumsy and very slow. There are references to lack of co-ordination and coherence. If I were Mrs Mogherini, my objective would be to try to find something. In the first strategy, our aim was to bring the member states together, and it would be a very good thing if one could find a way of bringing the institutions of the member states together so that you do not find yourself in a continual war between people who think that what matters is politics and people who think that what matters is development. Actually, the two are not so different. Another objective would be to find better ways of making the member states and some bits of the Commission function together. That is a big objective, because the European Union has so much capability in so many different areas, such as energy. If you can make it work together, it is an extraordinarily powerful machine.

Q12 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: I am not sure about this, as you are saying that a strategy was not intended, but it was endorsed by the Council. Did it have any practical use as a mandate to foreign policymakers and officials? Was it ever translated into EU action and, if so, how?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: I do not think that there was ever an occasion when somebody said, "I wonder what we should do about the problem in Burundi?", and looked at this document to find an answer. It set a direction. Now and then, I have been in the Council when one or two people referred to it as evidence for their case. It signalled a change in that what it underlined particularly—this is my memory of it anyway—was that the threats that Europe faced, which turn out not to be true these days, were not so much threats from conventional warfare but were either above the level of conventional warfare, namely nuclear proliferation, or below the level of

conventional warfare, namely terrorism. Both have been growth areas. I think they would have been growth areas without this document, but still it helps to give people an intellectual framework. So I cannot name anything specific, but I think it helped to set a direction. I think that the effect of bringing people together and healing the wounds of Iraq within the EU was a very important result.

Q13 Baroness Coussins: Some commentators have suggested that there is not actually much appetite for an EU foreign policy strategy among some member states—notably the UK, France and Germany—and that that reluctance is compounded by a lack of interest among EU officials too. Do you understand this to be the case, and, if it is, what exactly are the reservations, and who is in favour of it?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: Generally, the UK is instinctively cautious about grand strategies. Sometimes I used to think, working in the Foreign Office, that the UK was superb at tactics but less good at strategy. It is a question of intellectual tradition. If you are German, you are normally looking for a Gesamtkonzept; if you are British, you are normally asking, “Well, what should we do next?”. Maybe the answer to that question, although I never remember the quotation from Keynes correctly, is that you are following what appears to be common sense but is actually some defunct theory. For me, the real point of strategy ought to be that when you have decided what you want to do, you should equip yourself to do it, so at the end there should be some decision about where you are going to put resources.

To go back to what I was saying before, the EU started a major effort on questions of proliferation. Although the initiative for negotiation with Iran was launched initially by Britain, France and Germany, this became a major part of the EU’s work. In other ways, the EU became a great supporter of the chemical weapons convention and things like that. So in the end we put resources into those things, and there are things now that the EU needs to put resources into. Sorry, I think I have lost the thread of the question.

Baroness Coussins: I was after which member states were more in favour of a foreign policy strategy as opposed to the precise reservations of those that are not so much in favour.

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: To be honest, it is often a question of intellectual tradition. It always seemed to me that it was the states from the north that were in favour, while those from the south tended to be a bit more ad hoc in their approach. This is a good moment to think a bit about this, because the European External Action Service was created maybe four years ago, with enormous difficulties. This is not a bad moment to ask yourself where we want to go and whether we have the right instrument to do so.

Q14 Lord Triesman: Given what you have said about the 2003 exercise, and the fact that this time round it is potentially a rather different one, as it moves forward how

do you envisage keeping the states and national Governments engaged in the process and committed to seeing it through to becoming something valuable?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: This is being done very differently now, and I think that is right. Mrs Mogherini seems to have created quite elaborate structures for debate and involving the national Governments all along. In 2003, we did something very quickly behind the scenes with rather minimal consultation but in the end with quite a lot of consent. In this case, having the serious debate is probably more important than the product. If you want to produce big changes in a big lumbering institution, you need to build up a consensus within the member states and the institution itself, and you do that by having the debate. Exactly how she is doing it I do not know, but I have a distant impression of a very large infrastructure on this exercise, as evidenced by the fact that they have produced their picture of the world that we are having to deal with, which I found a sensible, well-produced document. They have done that well in advance and are allowing a lot of time and space for debate. Countries such as the UK always play an enormous part in these things.

The Chairman: With the UK doing what?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: The UK, if it wants to be, will always play a large part in these debates. Once, in a particularly boring meeting, I asked a long-serving colleague in the Council Secretariat to make a list of member states in the order of impact she thought they had in the discussions on foreign policy. She put the UK second and France first. I asked her why, and she said she thought that the UK got its way more often than any other state but the French were so good at defending ridiculous policies that they deserved extra credit for it.

Q15 Lord Dubs: I want to go back to the question of strategy. We have partly dealt with this, but what do you think are the likely divergences between member states on the substance and process of drafting a new foreign policy strategy?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: On the substance, there is a standing division between member states that look east and those that look south. You always have to do both; both the east and the south are important. On the question of process, I am afraid I do not know, because I would have to be there. Mrs Mogherini looks to be doing an extremely inclusive process. For me, looking back, the thing that was really missing and that needs to be done now is to ensure that you have the Commission fully on board. Last time this was about the Council; this time I think it should be about the Council and the Commission together, and about bringing them together.

Q16 Lord Balfe: What do you think are likely to be the UK's priorities and red lines, how would you assess the involvement of the UK in the process so far, and how do you think it can add value to the evolving discussions?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: The UK has always been one of the most important players in foreign policy questions. The Foreign Office, the armed services and the intelligence agencies all have a first-class reputation in Brussels. The most obvious of

all the UK's red lines has always been something to do with defence. It was the UK that had somebody go round counting desks in the civilian military planning cell, because it was afraid it might turn out to be a military headquarters. The UK has sometimes demonstrated an obsession about the EU not competing with NATO. It has sometimes taken this too far. There is no way the EU could compete with NATO. One of the real awkwardnesses in Brussels is that the Turkey/Cyprus problem unfortunately makes it very difficult for the EU and NATO to work together. There is one thing that the EU and NATO do together, which is the still surviving, very small military presence in Bosnia, which works better than almost anything else we do. Everybody knows this. There is a natural relationship there that unfortunately, thanks to Turkey/Cyprus, we have never been able to make function properly. That is always the big red line for the UK. I think it is a pity. I think the EU ought to be doing much more joint military procurement. I am not in favour of a European army, but I am in favour of a European rifle. You would get big production runs and so on and you could save gigantic sums of money. European countries spend enormous sums of money on defence with scandalous collective waste, but this is not the view of the UK Government.

Q17 The Chairman: The UK is about to embark on its own strategic defence and security review. That seems to be a fairly permanent process in any case. Do you feel that that exercise is going to have any political or practical implications for the UK's participation in the wider EU exercise?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: In doing that review, it would be very sensible to look at the European context and to look at Europe and the EU as well as NATO. With the referendum coming up, I have no idea what will happen. That is going to be a political matter.

Q18 Baroness Billingham: You used the word "political" for the first time today, which I found very interesting. We have not mentioned politics at all in this discussion, but I think they are absolutely crucial. When looking at the member states individually and collectively, if you were drafting this strategy, what would you set out as the key foreign policy priorities for the Union?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: First, inevitably it is the neighbourhood, in a very large sense. It is the east and the south, particularly at the moment the east. On the question of Russia and Ukraine, I do not know what historical comparison one should make. The number of cases where states have acquired territory by force is tiny. The fundamental rule is that political international stability is essentially based on territorial sovereignty, so a breach of that rule is fundamental and, for me, frightening. Until order is restored there, it will be very difficult to feel comfortable. If I had to name one priority, that is it. In a more general sense, the EU is surrounded by weak states. The Russia/Ukraine problem is partly about the weakness of Ukraine as well as the particular politics of Mr Putin's Russia. I do not know whether the EU could have done better. It may be that we wasted 20 years with Ukraine, but Ukraine

certainly wasted 20 years. We have weak states to the east, and we have a whole series, layers, of weak states to the south that are producing different kinds of problems. Weak states are weak in different ways and there is no single recipe, but we ought to be thinking of strengthening governance, legitimacy and all those things in our neighbourhood, which is a long-term project.

Baroness Billingham: We wrote a report recently, which you may have seen, which was critical of the role that we played between Russia and Ukraine. We used the words “sleepwalking into”, which have been challenged. What you have said is absolutely right. We have to start looking further ahead. It seemed to us that the opportunity was missed. If it was missed there, who is to say that it is not going to be missed elsewhere within our firmament?

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: I strongly agree with you. Your report is read far outside these shores. Somebody in Vienna recommended it to me. I do not think your word “sleepwalking” is wrong. One of things the EU ought to do better than it does at the moment is admitting mistakes and trying to understand how it made them. This is true of national Governments as well. This is a really important case. One of my answers to this question is that I do not think that the EU as currently constituted gives a sufficiently important place in its organisation to the people on the ground, the delegations. The only people who can really think about Russia are not in Brussels but in Moscow. They are the ones who are following it day to day and who hear the nuances that you do not get reported in the press. Brussels tends to think it is the centre of the world. I would like to get people to go back to the more old-fashioned view of diplomacy where you take your embassies abroad very seriously and make sure you have the best people there. They are the people who have time to think.

Baroness Billingham: We said exactly that. That was one of the criticisms that we made.

The Chairman: I am delighted to hear about the person in Vienna.

Q19 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: Is it feasible for the EU to see itself as acting on the global stage, as the Council has mandated the high representative to take into consideration in drafting this? You have already half-answered this by talking about regional and neighbourhood priorities.

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: If you are not seen to be effective in your neighbourhood, you are not going to be taken seriously further abroad. On the other hand, the EU is taken seriously further away, and we ought to be aware of it. China is, very curiously, one of the strong supporters of the European Union, no doubt for its own Chinese reasons. It would like to have something to offset the US.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: You talked a lot about the eastern part, but you acknowledged that the south is important. It would be useful if you gave assessment

of EU action in the southern neighbourhood and what you diagnose as the key weaknesses or inhibitors of EU action in the MENA area.

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: It has been a big mess for a long time, but that is true of most national policies as well. For a while, if you asked what was the real motivation of a lot of policies—I am thinking particularly of the Maghreb—you would find that for a lot of countries the real motivation was probably migration and stopping flows of people. The Arab spring took everyone by surprise. It took the rulers of the countries by surprise too, so you cannot blame yourself for all surprises. We concluded afterwards that we should have taken less notice of the Governments and more notice of the societies, but like it or not the Governments are there and you have to deal with them. I do not believe in an overall strategy for this area because the problems are so particular. Libya is very different from Tunisia, although the two are related. All I can say is what I said before: you must have people on the ground who really understand the places and you must listen to them. This is not just in the countries of the Maghreb but in the layer of countries behind them in the Sahel. In the Middle East, it is not just about Syria, it is all the way through, but it is not an area where I have any expertise I am afraid, so I am not good at answering that question.

There are places much further away where the EU can play and has played a very constructive role. I have some involvement in Burma where the EU ran a rather good policy and had quite a lot of impact. There, the future is still completely open, but on the whole the EU has played a constructive role. At least, when I ask friends of mine who counts in Burma, leaving aside China and Japan, they normally say the UK and the EU.

The Chairman: Presumably one reason why the EU may have played a constructive role in Burma was that there were no conflicts of interest between EU member states, so it was relatively easy to form a common position.

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: Actually, there was a continual struggle. There were no conflicts of interest, but there were a lot of conflicts of attitude. There were those led by the UK, including the Netherlands and Sweden—perhaps I should say the Protestants—who thought that we should be extremely tough with the military regime in Burma and were always in favour of sanctions. Then there were those at the other end who said, “We agree that this is a lousy Government, but the only way to influence them is to engage with them”. You can make a solid case for that as well, so the EU finished up with a policy, which you might find slightly strange, of having sanctions but providing considerable amounts of humanitarian aid. I do not think it was a bad policy because we did both: we had sanctions, but we still engaged. Therefore one of my conclusions after a long time in Brussels is that the diversity of member states’ views is quite a good thing, because the compromise you reach is usually in the middle and that follows the Aristotelian principle that virtue is about avoiding extremes.

Q20 The Chairman: The agenda at the moment is dominated by the refugee crisis. If one was taking a pessimistic point of view, one might think that the differences in approach and the view that this has exposed, coming on top of all the problems in the eurozone, would overshadow what I might call the Mogherini exercise and make it impossible to get off the ground. On the other hand, one might argue—and I am putting two extremes here—that after the experience of this summer, and with another summer like it in a few months' time, an element of urgency will be injected into the exercise. I wonder where you would come down between those two extremes.

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: This is a very big problem and it is not going to go away quickly. It is in an acute phase at the moment, but to be honest it is probably the beginning of a problem that will never end. The supply of people who would like a better life, the knowledge that a better life might be available somewhere, the industry taking money from these people to get them to Europe—all these things have grown very rapidly, and I do not see much chance of them ending. I doubt if the problem is going to be solved very quickly, either. Already in the preliminary documents some attention has been given to flows of people, but I think it is going to be a long-term problem. I am not sure that we are going to find the solution to it very quickly. Part of the solution comes back to my remarks about weak states and the need to find ways—this is an incredibly difficult thing to do but you set yourself a standing objective—to strengthen the legitimacy and efficiency of your neighbours. In many cases, though, it is almost impossible to do that. Still, at least you know what you want to do, and then if you know that you find opportunities.

The Chairman: I fear the consequences of a situation in which Germany is taking a very strong line in one direction while other states feel that this is not a matter of generosity but of imposing German views on them at their expense. There is a contrast between Germany's open arms on the one hand and, on the other, Denmark advertising in the Middle East saying, "Don't come". That creates considerable tension.

Sir Robert Cooper KCMG MVO: I can only agree. The latest question is about the states in the former Soviet Union. Denmark has had rather a good record in taking refugees, but it has now run into domestic political problems. As it happens, I was in Copenhagen at the weekend. Denmark is a country of great diversity, with a lot of people evidently of different backgrounds who are very well integrated in Danish society. Still, it is a small country, and you can understand why, if you are that size and have a rather cosy national identity, you tend to worry about being swamped. If you go to Poland, there is almost nothing in Poland but Poles. Everybody speaks Polish and is Catholic. They say, "Well, we've never had immigration. We've always had emigration". So it is a shock for them as well. The only thing I would say is that it will take a long time, longer than the timetable of this security strategy, for a functioning policy to evolve. You do not hear much about immigration from China, but you find small towns in Italy where there is now an extremely large Chinese

population. I do not think that there is a magic solution. It is going to be a major factor from now on, but I do not think the German solution is going to be the right one. The other lesson I draw is caution about intervening in the Middle East. Part of the trouble in the Middle East is that it is awash with weapons left behind by people who intervene.

The Chairman: Thank you very much indeed. We are most grateful to you and will continue to read whatever you might be writing on this subject in the forthcoming months.