

## **Neorealist contributions to a theory of ESDP**

Presentation at the II. European Security Conference Innsbruck,  
Panel “Contemporary Analytical Approaches to European Security and  
Effective Multilateralism”, 30 September 2006

*Alexander Siedschlag*

University of Innsbruck, Austria

The realist theory of international politics contains a number of promising instruments for developing a theory of the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy, or ESDP. Notably, a realist based theory of ESPD can do a good job grasping a bunch of its current practical challenges – for realism assumes that even in the face of common threats and challenges, states have considerable less interest in binding common decision-making procedures than in solutions which, though being international, increase their own national agency and which ease strain on or even contribute to increase or revalue their own national resources.

From a realist point of view, therefore, ESDP will best and most effectively develop when de-linked from the debate about the finality of European integration and clearly placed into the context of multilateralism, if not multinationalism, in security affairs: Namely, a kind of multilateralism that does not float in the realm of ideas but that is based on empirically ascertainable interests and effects as well as put to test by real, concrete cases of crisis: Put to test both in its ability to politically commit the Union’s member states and in its own functional qualities (on the analytical objectives of realist theories in security studies, see Kolodziej 2005: 127-174; Sheehan 2005: 5-23).

What I cannot outline here but what a comprehensive realist theory of European security policy would include are considerations about the defining moments of EU member state’s foreign and security policies as well as about external stakeholders such as the US or also the UN, which pins quite a few hopes on ESDP when it comes to reforming its system of peacekeeping in a broader sense. Realism, not to forget, looks at ESPD as an embedded system: subject to effects of the world system, such as

transatlantic balance of power) and to effects of its member states' foreign policy infrastructure or internal setting. This also makes it clear that an approach to ESDP from a point of view of the current state of realist, or rather neo-realist, theorizing should be based on methodological collectivism: It is overarching structures and not individuals or brave decisions that form the focus of the neo-realist perspective (cf. Gilpin 1986: 304-5).

However, approaching ESDP from a neo-realist perspective makes it necessary to navigate beyond what continues to be taken for the epitome of neo-realist theory, and that is the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz (1979). Waltz (1979: 91-2) declared only temporary „amalgamations” of national interests, resources, capabilities etc. to be thinkable, strictly dependent on the current shape of the global international-political constellation. For Waltz, sustainable institutional forms on the level of regions or of continents such as Europe, leading to political and capability-related integration in the security realm as well as to a common capability to act on an international scale simply cannot happen as long as the international system is technically anarchic and its units, that is, the states, seek to survive rather than be absorbed by system dynamics. Quite different from Waltz' theory, European neo-realism such as the structuralist, Giddens-oriented approach put forward by Buzan, Jones and Little (1993) and now expanded to what has been known as the security complex approach, the configurational, or Elias-oriented, approach devised by Werner Link from the University of Cologne, Germany, or the constellation analysis developed by Kindermann's (1986) Munich school.

Nevertheless, even Waltz' limited structural realism well explains the conceptual width of ESDP, especially the broadening of its underlying concept of security from mere defence to comprehensive security and conflict prevention as it is reflected in the European Security Strategy of December 2003, entitled “A Secure Europe in a Better World” (<http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>). It is among Waltz' basic assumptions that the main aim of state action in international politics is to increase national and only national security: “The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system [...].The goal the system encourages them to pursue is security” (Waltz 1979: 126). Therefore, states seek to take advantage of changes in international structures and processes – for example in the wake of the end of the cold war and of 9/11 – in order to reach a position in the international

system enabling them to maximize their security in virtually any respect. Given the diversification of present security threats, states are challenged to act on a very wide field if they seek to maintain, if not improve, their relative position in the system and structures of international security politics. As a consequence, from a Waltzian point of view, processes of international security-related power balancing almost naturally expand into new policy areas such as civil conflict management, conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction and nationbuilding.

At the same time, Waltz as well as realists and neo-realists en gros do not expect Europe to integrate as far as security policy is concerned. Given the anarchical organization of the international system, realists altogether do not assume that international institutions can grow to exert sustainable policy-making pressure and exhibit systematic effects on nation states. Rather, as John Mearsheimer (1994/95) has suggested, realists accept international institutions to be there but insist that the states in almost every instant redefine, re-interpret and re-constitute the leading ideas and binding effects of, as well as interests in, these institutions.

In addition, there is the “security dilemma in alliance politics” (Snyder 1984): Acting in co-ordination with others, the condition of anarchy forces the states to take even common decisions under the condition of a veil of ignorance. They cannot reliably assess if their fellow states will want or be able to stand by their commitments. Thus, each state seeking to integrate, which is somehow at odds with realism, must at the same time make sure that in parallel to this very integration, it increases its capabilities to stand and act alone, which is in perfect keeping with the axioms of realism. These facts explain why the majority of EU member states declare ESDP to be a political project for comprehensive crisis prevention but in practice insist that this project hinges upon creating material capabilities in what is still a rather narrowly-defined defence sector. These facts also explain why implementing decisions on the capability-related aspects of antecedent ESDP decisions tend to be much more debated than political decisions about ESDP’s long-term track in terms of scope and finality.

The capability-centred approach to ESDP also exemplifies Gilpin’s (1987) tenet that what states according to realism seek is not so much to maximize their power and capabilities but the resources necessary to gain flexibility in agency. It is exactly in the light of this flexibility in agency that neorealism can explain EU member states’

interests in pooling European resources in the defence sector and in promulgating the principle of “permanent structured co-operation” as it is in the constitutional treaty and was activated beforehand by the European Council. Both the battle groups and the European Defence Agency rest on this permanent structured co-operation.

Grieco’s (1988: 498-501) “voice opportunity” proposition also is among the very core assumptions of a realist theory of ESDP. On the grounds of this proposition, neorealists say: ESDP can only be as effective as it is flexible. For neorealists, ESDP co-operation should rest on specific investments and not merge military with civilian assets or assign essentially civilian task to the military. I am aware that it is ESDP policy to precisely do this and that ESDP can best be described as civil-military co-ordinative value added. I do not deny that but I am just saying that neorealists do not applaud but warn of an over-generalization of specific investments made by EU member states. From a neorealist point of view, effective multilateralism as envisaged by the European Security Strategy can only be expected to be in fact effective if it keeps the variety of national pledges and contributions visible as such a variety.

In this context, neorealists argue in favour of the decision to assign the Political and Security Committee, in which each ESDP state is represented at the ambassador level, the task of monitoring national pledges within the Helsinki Headline Goal Process and within the Civilian Headline Goal Process.

A realist theory of ESDP also contains a couple of recipes for making it safe for the future. A realist theory of ESDP advocates the choice of multilateralism, but not quite in the sense of the principle of “effective multilateralism” enshrined in the European Security Strategy. For realists and neo-realists as well, multilateralism must remain far from a value-entrenched and allegedly systematic one but be interpreted and implemented according to the concrete circumstances of time and place. In order to be really effective, realist would say, multilateralism must be flexible enough to readjust to changing national interests and undogmatic enough not to make us all wise for ever but prudent for the next time – if I may inverse Jacob Burkhard’s famous phrase.

Moreover, realism leads us to reassess the problem of ad-hoc coalitions within ESDP or of a core group within ESDP: Such formations within ESDP do not in the first place put stress on ESDP’s overall coherence but they in fact can contribute to the

security integration of Europe in an event-based way. Policy studies like the one conducted by Gurgul/Sieczak (2005) to provide empirical evidence in favour of this theoretical assumption of realism, as they argue to base EU crisis management on the demands posed by each single case in point and on a thorough analysis of that single case, rather than on alleged common ideals.

For realists altogether, the best basis to make ESDP safe for the future is not to force it into a collective European interest but to base it on best practices (and their ESDP-wide exchange!) derived from reality experience with concrete cases in point. Such a best-practice approach lets the EU member states expect much benefit from their engagement in ESDP affairs, at the same time sparing them from a too strong shadow of the future and need to sacrifice national interests to an EU interest.

In the eyes of the realists, ESDP should also become less bold in its communicative action and should not use what realists deem ideological language in order to claim its position in international security affairs. Realists advise ESDP not to seek global visibility by rhetoric and shop-window type activism but by prudent action with objectives stated strictly in the context of what one is capable to do today rather than what one in terms of long-term vision wishes to become by 2025 or so.

Therefore, the general warning of the classical theory of realism in international politics as coin-phrased by Hans Morgenthau is also something the ESDP and its participating states should heed: „Never bring yourself in a position from which you cannot retreat without a loss of face and from which you cannot advance without undue risk.“ (Johnson 1984: 382)

## Literature

Braud, Pierre-Antoine/Grevi, Giovanni 2005: The EU Mission in Aceh: Implementing Peace. European Union Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper 61, Dezember, <http://www.iss-eu.org/occasion/occ61.pdf>.

Buzan, Barry/Jones, Charles/Little, Richard 1993: The Logic of Anarchy. Neorealism to Structural Realism, New York.

Gilpin, Robert G. 1986: The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism, in: Keohane, Robert O. (Hrsg.): Neorealism and its Critics, New York, 301-321.

Gilpin, Robert G. 1987: The Political Economy of International Relations, Princeton, NJ.

Grieco, Joseph M. 1988: Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism, in: International Organization 42, 485-507.

Gurgul, Dena W./Sieczak, Grzegorz 2005: Towards Complementarity of European Security Institutions: Achieving Complementarity between NATO, EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe, Warschau, <http://www.msz.gov.pl/docs/163/WPR.pdf>.

Johnson, Bernard 1984: Bernard Johnson's Interview with Hans J. Morgenthau, in: Kenneth Thompson/Robert Myers (eds.): Truth and Tragedy. A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau, New Brunswick, NJ/London, 333-386.

Kindermann, Gottfried-Karl 1986: Zur Methodik der Internationalen Konstellationsanalyse, in: ders. (ed.): Grundelemente der Weltpolitik. 3., exp. ed., Munich, 106-144.

Kolodziej, Edward A. 2005: Security and International Relations, Cambridge u.a.

Link, Werner 2001: Die Entwicklungstendenzen der Europäischen Integration (EG/EU) und die neorealistische Theorie, in: Zeitschrift für Politik 48, 302-321.

Mearsheimer, John J. 1994/95: The False Promise of International Institutions, in: International Security 19:3, 5-49.

Morgenthau, Hans J./Thompson, Kenneth W. 1985: Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace. 6. Ausg., New York.

Sheehan, Michael 2005: International Security. An Analytical Survey, Boulder, CO.

Snyder, Glenn H. 1984: The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics, in: World Politics 36, 461-495.

Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979: Theory of International Politics, New York.