

Defending Europe

In a dangerous world, the EU can neglect neither military spending nor its relationship with NATO

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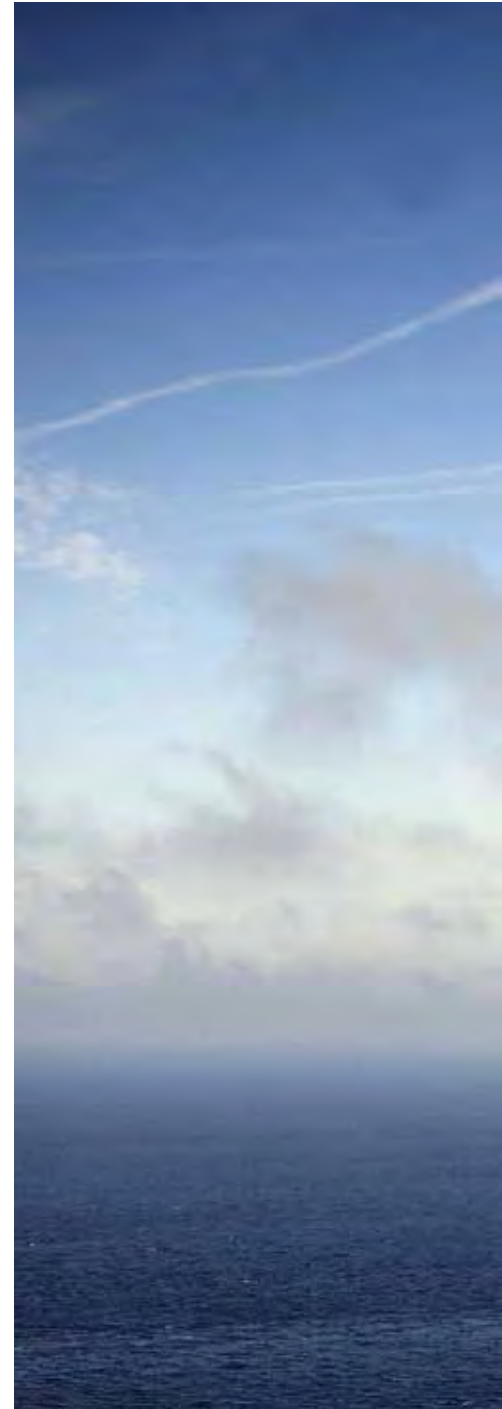
As Hedley Bull expressed his skepticism in 1982, “‘Europe’ is not an actor in international affairs, and does not seem likely to become one.”¹ Europe has – arguably – few or no means of projecting power. The EU is not a classical international power in a multipolar/multinodal world, but an economic power and a normative power – influencing the world by setting an example of democracy, rule of law and welfare. Europe decided to put in place mechanisms and policies that rendered armed conflict virtually impossible and brought peace, stability and prosperity on the continent during the last decades. But what if it was too much? Europe appears to be laying down weapons, and at the same time building a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). In this paper, I will attempt to argue that Europe is currently facing a security crisis based on its strategic shortsightedness, and explore the degree to which capabilities-based security and defense policies might be a solution.

Trans-Atlantic Views

It is useful to see how the perspectives are structured both at the political and public levels, as they appear, first, in a speech given by European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, in March 2010, and second, in the 2010 Transatlantic Trends survey.

First, the EU president supports a more dynamic trans-Atlantic partnership, sharing a vision of global order based on economic integration and common values and interests, in cooperation with other world powers:

“But the trans-Atlantic partnership is special. We do not pursue different visions of global order based on competing values. We are not geopolitical or strategic rivals. Ours is a win/win relationship. The level of economic integration combined with our shared values constitutes a strong foundation on which to build our partnerships. In order for us to play a role, we must acknowledge global interdependence as an underlying reality of our times while reinforcing our partnership. We need to think global and act trans-Atlantic.”²





The Charles de Gaulle, France's only aircraft carrier, sails off the port of Toulon in 2011. Financial shortfalls have persuaded France and Great Britain to collaborate on building future carriers. Britain, once the world's foremost sea power, currently operates no carriers.



Secondly, the 2010 Transatlantic Trends survey³ demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of EU (78 percent) and American (72 percent) respondents felt EU leadership in world affairs was desirable. The survey shows that, despite the public growing tired of the war in Afghanistan, majorities in all countries surveyed still supported NATO being prepared to act outside of Europe – EU (62 percent) and the United States (77 percent). A solid majority of American (60 percent) and EU (59 percent) respondents said NATO was essential for their country's security, and these numbers increased by five points in Eastern Europe.

While Americans (77 percent) and EU respondents (71 percent) continued to feel they share enough common values to work together on international problems, one of the most deeply rooted trans-Atlantic differences can be found in general attitudes toward the use of military force: When asked whether they agree that war is necessary to obtain justice under some circumstances, three-quarters of Americans (77 percent) and only one-quarter of EU respondents (27 percent) agreed. On the other hand, the 2011 results show a convergence in European (86 percent) and American (78 percent) attitudes about the importance of economic power, vis-à-vis military power.

Filling the gap

At this point, a challenge for Europe is to turn the decline in funding into an opportunity for greater cooperation and strengthening the trans-Atlantic

alliance. In “Let Europe be Europe,” Andrew Bacevich⁴ said in support of the “pull out” option: The U.S. should withdraw from NATO and allow Europe to grow, from a security and defense perspective.

Nevertheless, cutting the trans-Atlantic link would mean nothing less than breaking the backbone of European security and giving up on values, if we consider Barroso's point of view. An inward looking Europe⁵ would be – putting it in poker terms – a losing hand.

The winning option, in my opinion, is the one based on further, constant integration⁶ and sharing responsibilities, acting more coherently. The current problem is not so much a technical one – even though there is an increasing gap between the American and European military efforts and capabilities – but political, concerning a common will to look upon things in a similar manner and, in these matters, to act together.⁷ The two bodies – EU and NATO – must act together and complement each other. As NATO's New Strategic Concept states:

“An active and effective European Union contributes to the overall security of the Euro-Atlantic area. Therefore the EU is a unique and essential partner for NATO. The two organisations share a majority of members, and all members of both organisations share common values. NATO recognizes the importance of a stronger and more capable European defence. We welcome the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, which provides a framework for strengthening the EU's capacities to address common security challenges. NATO and the EU can and should play complementary and



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NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, center, encourages Allies to work together to meet security requirements, as Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, left, and U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta listen. The leaders were taking part in a media conference in October 2011 after a meeting of NATO defense ministers.

mutually reinforcing roles in supporting international peace and security. We are determined to make our contribution to create more favourable circumstances.”⁸

Shrinking defense budgets

Europe has not been keen on augmenting its military budgets. Today, things are even more delicate. The growing reluctance by decision-makers and the public, as well, to introduce or accept reforms in the security and defense sector may possibly have major consequences for Europe’s security and defense. Bad strategic choices are a result.

Year after year, Europe’s finance ministers have cut defense spending – NATO’s European members’ contribution declined to 197 billion euros in 2009, from 228 billion euros in 2001.⁹ These ever smaller budgets and reduced-force structures have negative impacts on military capabilities and missions. The Hungarian Ministry of Defense is just one example among others: The 2011 allocations dropped from an already low 1.3 percent of GDP, which may lead to international problems for Hungary, since it will no longer be able to fulfill its role in international missions.

In a letter to *The Times* of London in early November 2010, a group of retired British admirals attacked the decision of Prime Minister David Cameron’s government to scrap Britain’s only aircraft carrier and its entire fleet of 80 Harrier jets, saying the decisions would endanger British national security. And in fact, in Operation Ocean Shield off the Horn of Africa, NATO is patrolling an area roughly the size of Europe with 15 to 20 ships.

The fragmentation of Europe’s defense efforts has proved inefficient. The numbers say it loud and clear: In 2007, Europe worked on four different tanks and had 23 different national programs for armored combat vehicles, with a total number of 89 armament programs, while the U.S., whose budget is more than twice the size of the EU’s defense budgets combined, had 27 such programs.¹⁰

The European security and defense future is not looking good: The Headline Goal has not been achieved, nor have the

EU battlegroups, nor is there significant improvement in coordination or coherence, despite improvements such as the European Defence Agency, the Berlin + Agreements or stability operations. Scary questions arise. Is Europe facing a security crisis at a strategic level? What if America can’t intervene to support Europe? After all, you cannot expect all the people to be impressed with your rhetoric when substance is lacking, as the normative power Europe theory suggests:

“The concept of normative power is an attempt to suggest that not only is the EU constructed on a normative basis, but importantly that this predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics. It is built on the crucial and usually overlooked observation that the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does or says, but what it is. ...Rather than being a contradiction in terms, the ability to define what passes for ‘normal’ in world politics is, ultimately, the greatest power of all.”¹¹

In fact, the European defense mindset has been spelled out by Slovak Prime Minister Iveta Radičová: Defense is “not a priority.”¹² And we know it: In Kosovo, 83 percent of the bombs dropped came from U.S. planes; in Afghanistan, 100,000 of the 130,000 troops are from the U.S.; in Libya, “at least before it abandoned the battlefield, America’s strike aircraft were flying more than one half of the sorties.”¹³

Libya is a concrete example demonstrating the lack of political will and the EU’s limited military capabilities. And yet, Sven Biscop, of the Belgian think tank EGMONT Institute, argues¹⁴ that the EU can still benefit from this crisis if it learns three key strategic lessons:

“1. Stand up for your own vital interests. The U.S. has signaled that it is willing to contribute, politically and militarily, but not to take the lead. And rightfully so, for this concerns Brussels much more than Washington. EU capitals will hopefully realize that more leadership is expected from the EU, at the very least in what it has dubbed its Neighbourhood.

2. Think and act strategically. Defending our vital interests requires

strategy. The first strategic choice is to prioritize the regions where those interests are most directly at stake, and act accordingly.

3. Get the right capabilities. Acting strategically requires capabilities. In the military realm, European capabilities remain deficient. The Libyan crisis hopefully can spur on EU member states to take action. European countries are in the lead, but Europe is not.”

France and the United Kingdom definitely have a role in the ESDP endeavor. Still, the Franco-British engine

of European cooperation isn't as revved up as it once was: “Their commitment to improving the collective capability of European Defence is questionable, since even the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, iterated that ‘Britain and France are, and will always remain, sovereign nations, able to deploy our armed forces independently and in our national interest when we choose to do so,’ ” wrote Oana Topala of the International Security Information Service in Brussels.^{15,16} This idea also emerges from Article 18 of NATO's New Strategic Concept: “The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies.”¹⁷

But even though it appears that the past still haunts Germany, and even if people tend to look at it as Europe's wallet – an important role, I would say – the Alliance seems to be relying on Germany's choices in the military domain. Saying ‘no’ to the Libyan no-fly zone had its political consequences:

A “categorical ‘no’ to the use of armed force is not an option for the largest economic power in Europe. Germany pays the third-largest contribution to the UN, and it has long asserted a claim to a permanent seat on the security council. If this ambition was not already a mirage, it was possibly ‘kicked into the can once and for all’ on March 17,” as former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer argued in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.¹⁸

Nearly all European countries are cutting defense budgets, cashing in – they say – the peace (or security) dividend, investing in health care, education or, lately, in economic reform. The problem is that the rest of the world is not doing so. There are some major “defense” spending countries, with numbers increasing every year,¹⁹ while Europe seems to be unaware that the world is a dangerous place. And Iran, North Korea, Yemen, Libya – to name only a few – stress this idea. And it seems that America is not (yet) tired of pointing this fact out:

“The 10 largest military spenders in 2009 accounted for 75 percent of world military spending, with the USA alone accounting for 43 percent. While the identities of the top spenders have not changed in recent years, their relative rankings have, with European countries falling down the ranking,” the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute said.²⁰

At this point, the problem is: What if the U.S. is involved in major conflicts/wars and it is not able to sustain another one in Europe's neighborhood? Who would “play defence?” Some would argue NATO. Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently gave this warning: European countries should “resist the temptation to use the economic crisis as an excuse for letting the trans-Atlantic defence-spending gap widen



Then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates speaks at a Brussels defense conference in 2011 to persuade NATO members to finance the Alliance adequately or risk military decline.

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NATO Soldiers and EU police take part in a riot control exercise in Kosovo in 2010. Experts fear shrinking defense budgets could curtail such peacekeeping missions in the future.

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any further.” And you cannot have a proper defense with a majority of member states defense budgets at roughly 1.3 percent of GDP, with just a few exceptions.²¹

The numbers show that it shouldn’t be a question of funding – for the past few years, the EU’s GDP has been higher than that of the U.S. In 2009, we have the following GDP figures: the EU, 11.58 trillion euros and the U.S., 10.17 trillion euros.²² Even so, European armed forces spend too much on personnel and insufficiently on research and development (the EU, 8.4 billion euros; the U.S., 57.4 billion euros), investment (the EU, 21 percent; the U.S., 31 percent), and deployability.²³ In Libya, it was the U.S. that provided the fuel, ammunition and surveillance. Europe should be able to do this itself. But it is impossible. It has reduced – as we can see – its military capabilities down to a dangerously low level.

Why defense matters

There are several threats that Europe could be forced to address, with scenarios ranging from serious organized crime issues, as in Mexico, to resource battles in the Arctic, and relations with the Middle East (threats to obliterate Europe by means of ballistic missiles or trade and energy blackmail).

But – arguably – no scenarios are closer than the ones involving Russia. Be it a future Russian nationalist movement acceding in power or Russia holding Europe for ransom over energy disputes, all of these imply the need for efficient military power, but equally for further coherence and unity.

As far as Russia is concerned, these are scenarios to which Central and Eastern Europeans are, according to

history, more sensitive. Supporting this reasoning, the Visegrad Group countries (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland – agreed to form a battlegroup that would be led by Poland, based on a common perception that not all European states are equally concerned about Russian intentions and that regional security groupings are useful in that regard. The Nordic States are also cooperating with the Baltic States and the V4.²⁴

“Central Europeans continue to see Moscow as a security threat and would prefer for NATO to treat Russia accordingly. Germany sees Russia as a business opportunity and an exporter of cheap and clean energy. The two views collided most recently during discussions for NATO’s New Strategic Concept, producing a largely incomprehensible mission statement for the alliance.”²⁵

As a further argument, Poland seems to have “grown frustrated in recent months with the alliance’s reluctance to make permanent security commitments to Warsaw on a range of issues.” Its options include a European battlegroup, an agreement for which was signed by Germany and France, the other two members of the Weimar Triangle. Poland might also push for the creation of “an EU-wide security framework,” to actively pursue a more intense strategic partnership with the U.S. or consider “the option of joining a Nordic security alliance, centered in particular on Sweden and the Baltic states.”²⁶

Prospects for improvement

One way for Europe to narrow the capabilities/expectations gap could be to consider tightening its geographical scope, addressing its neighboring region.



French President Nicolas Sarkozy, left, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, right, and their Polish host, President Bronisław Komorowski, meet as the Weimar Triangle, a major initiative to establish a joint battlegroup.

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Based on its working “small steps policy,”²⁷ the EU could start addressing the issue of ESDP at a “local” level, by engaging in the Mediterranean and the Balkans with economic support, diplomacy and stability operations. One example is a paramilitary presence, such as the Romanian *Jandarmeria* in Kosovo, to secure post-conflict reconstruction and provide local law enforcement training. Knowing that most Europeans are reluctant to engage in military action, it could provide a means of activating European interest for the area, securing its immediate neighborhood.

Another idea is pooling and sharing. And at the end of May 2011, EU defense ministers called for more military pooling and sharing. France and the UK started with their agreement in November 2010 to cooperate in such sensitive areas as nuclear research, force projection and aircraft carriers.

Yet, I would argue that Europe is in crisis at the strategic level, short of a common vision, and consequently lacks a common approach on a clear and present existential danger. Is there really nothing that can bring us all around the table? It looks like it is not terrorism, and it is not necessarily Russia. Nonetheless, Russian intervention in Georgia proved once again that armed forces do matter in the 21st century.

The issue of European disarmament and lack of real interest in research and development (R&D) matters is widely discussed, yet the moment is especially dangerous because the consequences of failure increase every day. The world we live in forces security experts and decision makers to consider constantly changing threats and challenges, permanently reconsidering priorities. Game-changing events occur rapidly, such as the Arab Spring or Osama bin Laden’s death. Europe could be faced with a security situation that it simply would not be able to handle on its own— short of vision and capabilities.

Even if European security and defense perspectives differ from one country to the next, a first move to improve European security and defense would be for the states to start writing checks. A more serious approach would include the development of a more profound relationship between the EU and NATO based on their existing partnership.

But the word of the day should be “change.” First of all, it would involve a shift in military spending and distribution, including more investment and R&D, implementing top technologies,²⁸ and increasing deployability. Second, military structure would have to change toward small but quality-oriented and highly deployable forces “embracing connectivity in order to

coordinate global operations and swarming in order to achieve success.”²⁹ Those structural changes would also include harmonizing and standardizing ranks and tasks (for instance, giving more authority to noncommissioned officers) and assembling the EU battlegroups. A third option is granting a greater role to the European Defence Agency, ensuring common research, common defense procurement and a truly European defense industry.³⁰

Conclusions

National identities and backgrounds, as well as a lack of political will, hinder European security and defense, undermining “the ability of Member States to acquiesce to ‘European’ principles as envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty – namely mutual defence and solidarity.”³¹ Libya is an eloquent example, where states acted on their own (the UK, France, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) via NATO. This Alliance has focused on the “North-Atlantic” as a metaphor for the trans-Atlantic partnership, building a solid Alliance on the lasting concept of trans-Atlantic values.

Europe definitely has its own set of cultural and identity values, but does it lack security values? Some other major questions must be addressed in the future. After all these years will the U.S. still be in charge of all “the heavy lifting”? Is the U.S. military alone losing lives to protect the values we believe in on both sides of the Atlantic? And are we in danger of destroying the trans-Atlantic partnership? What if the biggest challenge for European security and defense comes, in fact, from within the EU?

Armies are not supposed to be charity organizations, offering jobs for the needy, nor an endless source for budget cuts. Giving a speech in Berlin in 2010, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it bluntly: “The demilitarization of Europe – where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it – has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st century.”³² And in 2011, Gates spoke about “the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the trans-Atlantic alliance. Such a future is possible, but not inevitable. The good news is that the members of NATO – individually and collectively – have it well within their means to halt and reverse these trends, and instead produce a very different future.”³³

If NATO/Europe wants to be relevant, the situation should change. NATO must not become the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe with side arms. If that happens, Libya might just as well have served as the burial ground for European security and defense projections. □

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