

# SHOULD EUROPEAN DEFENCE BE SCRAPPED? (NICOLE GNESOTTO)

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This Synthesis aims at presenting the main ideas developed in Nicole Gnesotto's book *Faut-il enterrer la défense européenne ?* (Should European Defence be scrapped?). The author conducts an in-depth analysis of European defence: its historical development, its difficulties and the future challenges that Europe must address if it wishes to succeed in playing a stabilising role in its area of influence and in living up to its ambitions.

Endeavouring to devise a thought-provoking answer to the question "Should we scrap the attempt, or even the ambition, to build a Europe that is proactive and influential on the international political stage? Should we scrap European defence?", in this essay<sup>1</sup> Nicole Gnesotto conducts an in-depth analysis of European defence: its historical development, its difficulties and the future challenges that Europe must address if it wishes to succeed in playing a stabilising role in its area of influence and in living up to its ambitions.

## 1. An overview comprising both light and shade

Her analysis begins with a historical overview designed to put the present situation into perspective. When the construction of Europe began back in 1957, **security was the province of NATO, under US leadership**. This allowed the European Economic Community to focus on other political priorities, such as economic prosperity and the democratisation of its member states. Every attempt to forge a common security and defence policy (all of which originated with France) eventually ran aground. Thus the construction of Europe moved forward for over fifty years **blithely ignoring the strategic realities surrounding it**.

After the fall of the USSR, the end of the two-bloc world prompted **a revisiting of Europe's strategic and defence priorities**. The outbreak of conflict in Yugoslavia and the United States' involvement on a more minor key than had been the case hitherto, both suggested that the Europeans should shoulder greater responsibility in their area of influence.

With the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, Europe emerged from its "strategic slumber" by inaugurating a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) in Article 5 of that treaty. But it was only towards the end of the 1990s, with the risk of genocide in Kosovo, that the Europeans, encouraged by the political will enshrined in the Franco-British alliance, decided at a summit in Saint-Malo on 4 December 1998 to lend military credibility and autonomy of action to Europe by **establishing a European security and defence policy (ESDP)**, which was to become one of the European Union's legitimate areas of authority.

Nicole Gnesotto's analysis goes on to identify two distinct development phases in this new policy. An initial period of positive (if limited) development in the 2000s has been followed by a second period of paralysis which started at the beginning of the 2010s, as fresh crises broke out to the east and south of the European Union's area of influence.

"Along with the euro and enlargement, [European defence policy] is probably the greatest European invention of the 2000s". The author reminds us that all of the institutions and tools required for conducting a security and defence policy were created and set up in Brussels in the course of that decade. **The ESDP was actually quite a success**. "It proved its usefulness in crisis management on three continents – Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East – it embraced a major industrial element and it proved its added value over the traditional framework of foreign operations, namely national forces and NATO". In addition to emergency crisis management, the policy's defence industry side was strengthened in 2004 by, in particular, the creation of the European Defence Agency (EDA). Currently providing indirect employment to some 900,000 people, the defence industry is indisputably a crucial factor as much for

economic growth in the member states as for the future of the CSDP.

Thus “the CSDP went from strength to strength and was the object of ongoing development throughout the 2000s: after the political and institutional innovations of 1999, it moved into the operational phase involving real crises in 2003 and embraced the industrial element in 2004” (p. 36). In the author’s view, where the ESDP was successful was in its immediate introduction of “the practical concept of crisis and of political emergency into an ethical framework based on peace and on the longer time frame typical of the economic cycle”.

**The trouble is, the Union’s strategic aspiration seems to have vanished since the autumn of 2008:** “European defence went into recession, as though that expression served as a common denominator for every one of the Union’s areas of economic and political activity”. With the European crisis, efforts in the defence industry were overshadowed by international competition, by shrinking budgets and by an exponential rise in the cost of research and development for new civilian and military technologies (p. 36).

The absence of European defence has been sorely felt in a number of different areas such as conflicts with Russia, the Arab spring, Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the future of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The author calls this decade the decade of “**strategic disappointment**”. The crises on Europe’s doorstep and the EU’s diplomatic and political incompetence have revealed internal rifts and the absence of a common political will in the sphere of foreign policy. Some crises have been handled positively, but on the whole the CSDP has not produced the results one might have expected. At the European Council meeting in December 2013, which was supposed to give a fresh start to Europe strategy in light of all the new crises, the government leaders singularly failed to impart a new impetus to European defence.

## 2. A policy marked by ambiguity and division

Nicole Gnesotto highlights the obvious difficulties in forging a more integrated European defence system. “After a long history of disagreement and misunderstanding, **there is still only minimal agreement among the member states as to what exactly we should understand by ‘European defence’:**

the debate on the aims, the modalities, the pace and even the means of achieving this policy is still ongoing” (p. 55).

**The EU’s relationship with NATO continues to be a major source of disagreement.** Fully twenty years after the Treaty of Maastricht, NATO remains the political obstacle to European defence. The Europeans continue to be obsessed by the need to build European defence in the shadow of Atlantic agreements. “In fact, some Europeans wish to restrict the Union’s and the CSDP’s role to civilian missions because they wish to maintain NATO’s crisis management role in the military sphere. On the other hand, certain countries such as France favour a balance between civilian and military tasks for the Union” (p. 70).

Nicole Gnesotto stresses the specific nature of defence policy which, unlike other Community policies, is essentially intergovernmental in nature. But political disagreement continues to hold sway with regard to the “primacy of national sovereignty over the goal of European integration”. The European Commission plays a growing role in connection with the CSDP’s civilian aspect, and the Treaty of Lisbon helps to impart greater consistency to the Union’s external policy by strengthening dialogue between the Commission and the Council. But the Council’s role has gone from strength to strength, and the member states are still reluctant to transfer any sovereignty in the sphere of defence. Security is the area in which the communitarisation of policies is, of course, the most difficult, as the right to decide on citizens’ life and death is the last bulwark of European nationalism.

**There are numerous and very complex differences within the EU over the CSDP’s future.** The larger member states, whose military expenditure reflects their size, are at odds with the smaller member states, which refuse to be gobbled up in a process of communitarisation. The new member states, hailing as they do from the former Eastern bloc, are historically marked by Soviet domination, while the older member states have a more internationalist vision of the risks in such spheres as the struggle against terrorism or the stabilisation of the Mediterranean’s southern shore. And the countries most familiar with overseas operations, such as France and the United Kingdom, are pitted against the others.

The author also refers to the different national visions – “while they may have ended up reaching agreement over a minimal definition of the CSDP’s field of action [as enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon], that fact has not put paid to their very different approaches due to their unique historical legacies, to their very disparate military power, to their world visions, to the nature of their relationship with the United States, to their public opinion, to their industrial performance in the defence industry and so forth” (p. 80).

The United Kingdom always has been, and still is, strongly opposed to the idea of a political Europe with its own foreign policy, which might undermine Britain’s role or the role played by NATO. It has systematically opposed virtually every major attempt to push the CSDP forward. France “has been pleading for a European defence system ever since the EEC was first set up, upholding the goal of a powerful Europe, and it is seeking to build up the Union as a political player wielding strong influence and enjoying recognition on the international stage”. Other member countries’ resistance to the development of these projects has always firmed up precisely over France’s wish to shake off the influence of NATO, but “France now adopts a very pragmatic attitude towards NATO, an attitude devoid of all ideological prejudice”. Germany’s approach, for its part, has evolved since World War II. To get its partners to accept it in the context of the new European integration process, it agreed to all of the proposals put forward by France, but following unification in 1990, it has become the norm also to take Berlin’s interests into account. Germany has developed a kind of strategic absenteeism “which can be ascribed to the pacifist inclinations of a large part of the country’s public opinion”.

### 3. Imparting a fresh boost to strategic Europe: now or never

In the final section of her essay, Nicole Gnesotto considers the stages to be covered and the obstacles to be overcome in order to impart a fresh boost to European defence. **The strategic context is extremely difficult both internally and at Europe’s doorstep.** “A number of factors have come together in the negative: Europe itself is going through a historic crisis of prosperity, growth, confidence and solidarity among its member states”. This certainly does not offer the most favourable

of contexts for the political deepening of European defence. “But by the same token, it is equally unacceptable to give up the idea of a strategic Europe for good, at the very moment when the United States is calling on the Europeans with increasing determination to start seriously shouldering responsibility for their area of influence”.

Yet a number of conditions need to be met if we are **to impart a successful boost to the CSDP.** The Union must find a balance for its relationship with the United Kingdom, which is a great military power and which continues to be an essential player in the development of the CSDP. However, its permanent lack of engagement in European affairs is holding back any chance of integrating the CSDP. It will also be necessary to thrash out a “new deal” between the Commission and the Council in order to give the Commission the power to make financial investments, which are crucial for the CSDP’s military-industrial aspect.

Lastly, the author explains that the debate on European defence has become bogged down over the modalities of integration and the degree of mutualisation, whereas the first thing to be debated should be its aims. **What does Europe want from the CSDP?** “As long as the Union fails to clarify its overall strategic objectives, as long as the Union fails to adopt any priority, choosing instead to haphazardly react to one or the other form of external pressure or event, the CSDP stands a very good chance of continuing to be nothing more than a motley assemblage of military and civilian operations without any real impact on the way crises evolve”.

Nicole Gnesotto stresses the need to invent **a clear narrative on Europe’s goals as an international player.** “Should Europe continue to be a kind of civilian agency that intervenes in countries’ reconstruction and stabilisation after a conflict, or does the Union wish to take control of its destiny and to give itself the effective means, including the military means, to intervene in its external environment as a whole rather than simply being on the receiving end of that environment?”

In conclusion, while Europe has proved capable of “developing as an increasingly large haven of peace and prosperity, a haven of unparalleled political experimentation on the international stage”, the instability of its neighbourhood to the east and the

south, and the United States' insistence that the EU adopt greater responsibility in its area of influence, raise fresh challenges. It is necessary to shake off the image of a Europe overtaken by events, of a Europe with cold feet, of a Europe both powerless and inactive. "This, because what the CSDP lacks most is the very same thing that the Union lacks most: **a mobilising narrative, the narrative of a collective project highlighting Europe's usefulness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**".



Nicole Gnesotto, *Faut-il enterrer la défense européenne ?*,  
Collection Réflexe Europe - Débats, La Documentation française, mai 2014.

1. Nicole Gnesotto, *Faut-il enterrer la défense européenne ?*, Collection Réflexe Europe - Débats, La Documentation française, mai 2014.

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