

WILL EUROPEANS EVER AGREE ON THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE?

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SUMMARY

Europeans are not per se unwilling to use force to achieve political goals. They only seem to be unwilling to do so in the framework of the EU. The perceived absence of a shared threat, the differences in strategic culture, the institutional weaknesses, the lack of resources, the lack of ambition and trust, and the fact that, with NATO, a better alternative is at hand for the management of Europe's hard power concerns, make it unlikely that the EU will become a relevant military operator any time soon. The structural, political impediments to more cohesive defense cooperation go so deep that economic pressure alone will not be enough of an incentive to unite their military activities within CSDP.

But if Member States want EU foreign policy to become more relevant, they can't forever dismiss hard power as a tool for the EU. A serious conversation is needed at the highest level about shared threats, interests, goals and means.

This Policy Paper is part of a series entitled "[How can Europeans be taken seriously with lower hard security capacities?](#)" which also includes contributions by Jean-Pierre Darnis (IAI, Rome), Ronja Kempin (SWP, Berlin), Daniel Keohane (Fride, Brussels) and Nick Witney (ECFR, London).

It is a contribution to the project "[Think Global – Act European \(TGAE\). Thinking strategically about the EU's external action](#)" directed by *Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute* and involving 16 European think tanks:

Carnegie Europe, CCEIA, CER, CEPS, demosEUROPA, ECFR, EGMONT, EPC, Real Instituto Elcano, Eliamep, Europeum, FRIDE, IAI, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, SIEPS, SWP.

Four other series of Policy Papers deal with key challenges on EU neighbourhood, strategic resources, migrations and economic policy. The final report presenting the key recommendations of the think tanks will be published in March 2013, under the direction of Elvire Fabry (*Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, Paris*).

Introduction

The fact that the lack of unity has become the most recognisable trait of the European Union is one of the tragic ironies of the current debate about the integration process. Traditionally, foreign policy has been one of the areas most disputed among the 27 Member States. But even within this contested field, the Common Security and Defence Policy stands out as a particularly cumbersome bone of contention among Europe's nations. The issues here are manifold: shrinking defence budgets, lacklustre military assets, underdeveloped cooperation in the armaments sector and the notoriously dysfunctional EU-NATO relationship. More fundamental even than these, however, is the question of whether Europeans share a common political understanding about the very purpose of their militaries: will Europeans ever agree on the use of military force?

1. Not from Venus, but need Martians to lead

In the more than two decades since the end of the Cold War, Europeans have gone to war rather frequently. They have intervened, alongside their American allies, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, in the Horn of Africa, and in Libya, to name just the most well-known examples. This is why Robert Kagan's stipulation that Europeans are pacifists from Venus, as opposed to belligerent Americans from Mars, is missing the point. Europeans have proven again and again that they are not particularly pacifist. The real question is why they don't seem to be able to organise their security amongst themselves, in coordination with the US, but with a much higher degree of independence and self-reliance.

Europeans seem to require American leadership to discover their belligerent streak. Very rarely have they been active in robust ways within an exclusively European framework, i.e. without U.S. support, and outside the NATO framework. And never have they planned and conducted such a mission collectively as the European Union. At a time when Europe's traditional protector and chief global security agent, the United States, is losing both military strength and political will to let Europeans free-ride on U.S. security services, the obvious absence of unity in Europe on security affairs has become a major political and strategic problem.

2. No Threat, No Use

One of the reasons for this disunity lies in the fact that, by and large, Europeans do not feel that their security is much at risk. In a poll for the EU barometer in 2011, terrorism, named by a mere seven per cent of those asked in the EU 27, was the only external risk factor named in a list of the most important issues facing the EU.¹ Economic and financial concerns, immigration and unemployment topped the list. In the same year, 33% of Americans stated that they were frequently or occasionally worried that they could become a victim of terrorism.² This is just one example of many. Similar polls have repeatedly found that the threat perception of Europeans is generally low. Unsurprisingly, low threat perception leads to a general rejection of military force as a useful tool to resolve problems. The German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Trends revealed in 2012 that only 35% of Europeans from 12 selected EU countries³ believed that war was sometimes necessary to obtain justice. In the United States the number was 74%.⁴ In sum, a low threat perception and a rejection of the use of force as a useful tool for problem solving seem to indicate that Europeans, while not pacifists per se, strongly believe that they

1. Eurobarometer 76, 2011.

2. AP/GfK poll, May 2011.

3. The countries are: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

4. Transatlantic Trends 2012.

generally don't need and don't want to use military force. These are not good pre-conditions for developing a meaningful security and defence component within the European integration process.⁵

3. The EU is not the Place

Europeans, when they decide to go to war, seem to avoid the EU as the framework in which such operations should be conducted. The military operation to protect the anti-Gaddafi uprising in Libya is a case in point. When a military operation became a serious option in the spring of 2011, the EU was sidelined from the beginning as the organisation of choice, even though the United States had signalled early on that it did not want to be in a leadership position in the Libya case. Instead, the nations considering an intervention sought to multi-lateralise the operation by feeding it into the NATO framework. This was primarily for three reasons: First, NATO had all the operational procedures, including a functioning multinational command and control structure readily in place. The EU had no relevant capacity of that kind. Second, the NATO framework allowed for considerable American military support during the operation. As became obvious very quickly, this turned out to be a key component of the mission. Third, and possibly most importantly, NATO provided a flexible political framework. It allowed for alliance unity in action despite considerable differences among the alliance's members concerning the usefulness of a military operation, and the readiness to participate in it. In the North Atlantic Council, where unanimity is required to authorise action, "constructive abstentions" by those allies who preferred to stay out enabled the alliance to move ahead nevertheless. Fifteen NATO members participated in the mission, 13 stayed out. Admittedly, the EU has similar provisions for flexibility in place, and has also used them in the Chad operation and in the deployment of the EULEX mission to Kosovo. But these were small, low-risk, limited-footprint missions. It is safe to assume that such flexibility would not have been possible within the EU framework in case of a massive and robust deployment of combat forces for a protracted period of time. NATO was able to create unity where there was none because it could address diversity in a constructive way. In addition, NATO managed to weave into the operation contributions from four non-NATO allies. Few observers or decision-makers today believe that the EU could pull off a similar achievement.

“IN LIBYA, THE EU WAS SIDELINED FROM THE BEGINNING AS THE ORGANISATION OF CHOICE”

It is not surprising then that in the aftermath of Libya, consternation about the European Union's irrelevance in the matter was graspable. Numerous observers and European diplomats stated that after Libya, CSDP was "dead".⁶ High government officials from various Member States could be overheard saying that their countries' defence ambitions did not lie within CSDP, and that scarce resources should much rather be invested in NATO and its existing structures.

In the future, decreasing defence budgets will make European nations even more dependent on the existing assets NATO has on offer. Military deployment outside the NATO framework will become less and less of an option, even for nations with comparatively strong military capabilities. None of this makes military integration within the EU framework very likely in the foreseeable future.

4. It's the Capabilities, Stupid! (Not the Framework)

In this also lies the answer to the much-asked question of what the Europeans should do if one day the US is unwilling to play the enabling role in a scenario similar to Libya. If the Europeans wish to conduct such operations independently, they must look primarily at their own capabilities, not at the framework in which to use them.

5. In seeming contradiction to this, 65% of Europeans stated in 2011 that they thought defence and foreign affairs should be organised supra-nationally instead of nationally. However, this result did not indicate whether it was the EU or NATO, or any other collective body, that people deemed appropriate for that task. Also, results varied markedly among European nations, with solid majorities in Sweden, Finland and the UK believing that foreign and defence policies should be organised nationally. See *Eurobarometer 76*, 2011.

6. For a good overview of EU reactions to the Libya experience, see Anand Menon, "European Defence Policy from Lisbon to Libya", *Survival*, vol. 53, no. 3, June-July 2011, pp. 75-90.

It was not the absence of a credible EU framework that caused the difficulty in the Libya case. It was the absence of European military hardware, including ammunitions, air-to-air refuelling, reconnaissance, and command and control assets. The key to European defence lies in understanding that spending more wisely (and maybe, at some point, spending more) on defence will be good for both NATO and the Europeans alone.

5. Diverging Rationales

A key reason for the lack of more concerted military activities at the EU level is that players within the Union harbour fundamentally different strategic cultures. France and Britain cultivate the more traditional geopolitical attitudes of former great powers with extended erstwhile colonial possessions. The option of military interventions is not alien to their societies' foreign policy debates.⁷

Germany operates in the 21st century with a strategic culture stemming from the 1950s, when the newly-founded West German state tried to come to grips with historic cataclysms and the objective restraints of the day. Neither unification nor increased military activities have changed this deeply engrained culture. It can be characterised by restraint, the absence of geopolitical thinking and a widespread rejection of all things military.⁸ A strong desire to stay morally clear of military entanglements, combined with no notable threat perception, tops most considerations of alliance solidarity.

In contrast to this are Eastern Europeans, whose primary security concern is Russia, a sentiment shared by few other EU Member States. For Southern Europeans, security thinking is primarily focused on illegal migrants passing through the Mediterranean and from the Balkans, neither of which can be successfully dealt with by military means.

With such strongly diverting rationales, hurdles are extremely high for a systematic, far-reaching, communalised approach to military deployments among EU members.

6. No Appetite for Cooperation

The economic crisis in the European Union constitutes a formidable incentive for closer cooperation among EU members, not least in the field of security and defence. However, most political leaders seem to demonstrate a profound disinterest in developing this policy field.⁹ Immense fiscal pressures have not even lead to closer coordination of military reform efforts (i.e. the shrinking of military capabilities) among Member States. British, French, German, and Dutch posture reviews and force reduction plans, among others, have been purely national endeavours. Consultations even within the established NATO planning structures were only conducted when the results of the planning process had already been determined at the national level. Even though many of these reforms happened during roughly the same time frame, no efforts to synchronise the planning and implementation were made.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the EU's Pooling and Sharing programme, designed to integrate individual national capabilities to save money and increase interoperability, has been largely ineffective.

Furthermore, EU Member States have for years been unwilling to open their closed-off armaments market for either real competition or meaningful cooperation.¹⁰ The failed merger of the two European armaments giants

7. For a more detailed analysis of the diverging foreign policy cultures among the EU's three biggest Member States – the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, see: Stefan Lehne, "The Big Three in EU Foreign Policy", *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2012.

8. Jan Techau, "No Strategy Please, We're German", NATO Defence College, *NDC Forum Paper*, no. 18, May 2011, pp. 69-93.

9. Estonia's Defence Minister's Maart Laar has complained about the wasted opportunities in both NATO and the EU. See Maart Laar, "How austerity is deepening Europe's Defence Crisis", *Europe's World*, No. 21, Summer 2012.

10. Alessandro Giovannini, Giovanni Faleg, "Advice from a caterpillar: the conundrum of EU military spending in times of austerity", E-Sharp, April 2012.

EADS and BAE Systems was further proof that EU Member States (in this case Britain, Germany and France), have little trust in each other's reliability in the security and defence sector, nor can they easily overcome national caveats and jealousies in a strategically important policy field. That this was not even possible under the worst economic (budget restraints) and geo-strategic (the U.S. pivot to Asia) conditions, is testament to the very slim prospects for defence cooperation in Europe. Worse, it is an indicator for the profound lack of ambition or strategic scope in the entire foreign policy field.¹¹

It is these demonstrations, alongside the many troubles of the EU's post-Lisbon Treaty foreign policy record, that have lead observers on both sides of the Atlantic to doubt whether there were any foreign policy aspirations left in Europe more generally. There is a wide-spread feeling now that crisis-ridden, post-modern, inward-looking Europe indeed wants very little of the world, and has given up any ambition to shape and improve it.¹²

“CRISIS-RIDDEN, POST-MODERN, INWARD-LOOKING EUROPE HAS GIVEN UP ANY AMBITION TO SHAPE”

The institutional setup that was designed in the Lisbon Treaty to bring more cohesion to EU foreign policy, has so far been unable to dispel such nagging doubt. EU foreign policy, including the security and defence field, was always intended to be an intergovernmental policy track. Its decision-making requires unanimity, giving veto powers to every single EU Member State, no matter how strong or weak. In other words, the nations of Europe never intended this policy field to be integrated. Instead, it is approached in a strictly instrumental manner, allowing CSDP to be relevant only on a case-by-case basis. The institutions designed to steer the EU foreign policy process, suffer from many structural defects and have generally been too weak to exercise leadership in the realm of foreign policy.¹³ This is doubly true for CSDP.

7. The Prospects

In light of the aforementioned factors, it seems highly unlikely that the European Union will be able to develop a more integrated approach to the use of military power. At best, Europe can expect to continue its military activities on a strictly case-by-case basis, with individual missions only being possible under the most ideal circumstances.

Europe's most successful military operation, the anti-piracy mission of "European Union Naval Force Somalia" (Operation Atalanta), launched in December 2008, indicates what these circumstances are: (1) a complete overlap of Member States' interest, (2) an at least seemingly clear moral case, (3) a narrow, non-complex military task, (4) a limited deployment of military personnel and equipment, (5) a low-risk scenario, (6) relatively limited costs, (7) low domestic visibility, (8) broad international acceptance, (9) clear founding in international law. This is hardly the stuff that geopolitical relevance is made of. That Atalanta, despite its noted success¹⁴, has not lead to a significant gain in prestige for the EU as a hard security player lies in the fact that is essentially a fair-weather operation.

The fundamental factors that create disunity in Europe on the use of force, namely the perceived absence of a threat, the differences in strategic culture, the institutional weaknesses, the lack of resources, the lack of ambition and trust, and the fact that, with NATO, a better alternative is at hand for the management of Europe's hard power concerns, make it unlikely that the EU will become a relevant military operator. The structural, political impediments to more cohesive defence cooperation go so deep that economic pressure alone will not be enough of an incentive for Member States to unite their military activities anytime soon. Instead, Europeans will continue to use NATO as the primary forum for debating, planning, and conducting military activities in the foreseeable future.

11. Ulrike Guérot, "For EU, Peace Comes Without Strategy", *World Politics Review*, 15 October 2012.

12. Jan Techau, "A Farewell to Foreign Policy Relevance", *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 18 September 2012.

13. Stefan Lehne, "More Action, Better Service. How to Strengthen the European External Action Service", *Carnegie Policy Outlook*, December 2011.

14. The House of Lords, EU Committee for External Affairs, *Turning the Tide on Piracy, Building Somalia's Future*, 21 August 2012.

For the EU, this is an ambiguous development. On the one hand, removing, with few exceptions, military cooperation from the agenda, means one contentious and unthankful policy field less in the already tedious daily grind of EU foreign policy. On the other hand, writing off military cooperation altogether amounts to admitting that EU foreign policy will never be more than an add-on to the Union's core integration projects. For no foreign policy can be entirely effective and complete without the hard power muscle to back up diplomatic efforts. In short: under both the best and worst of circumstances, the question of EU military cohesiveness will remain a source of disappointment about and criticism of the European Union.

8. Recommendations

There are two things the Member States of the EU should do to deal with this dilemma.

1. In order to address the issues of lack of trust and lack of ambition, the heads of state and government need to instigate a real conversation about the strategic military and security needs of Europe and the EU in the 21st century. The simple fact that we, as import- and export-dependent countries, have global security interests that we are unable to protect ourselves should be the starting point of the debate. To what extent must we enable ourselves to protect them? To what extent must we help those who protect them for us? No such conversation exists at the pan-European level. Government action across Europe is testament to this. Ideally, such a conversation will create a shared strategic assessment and common political will on security matters, at least in select fields. This would be the pre-requisite for then also doing more together. Which leads to the second recommendation.
2. Europeans must finally get serious about pooling and sharing, despite the obvious difficulties attached to it. Just because this case has been made with tiresome repetitiveness, this does not make it any less true. Overall, Europeans still spend enormous amounts of money on defence. It gives them very little military clout, and very few options to do relevant things with their forces when needed. This borders on the scandalous. Much better capabilities are within reach even without spending more.

Contributions to the TGAE series: "How can Europeans be taken seriously with lower hard security capacities?"

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