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A Security and Defence Union

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Published online: 14 June 2016

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Abstract Security and defence have become the new front lines of the European project. The time has come to build a Security and Defence Union capable of delivering security to Europe’s citizens and the wider continent in a challenging international environment. It should be based on five qualitative leaps: a security strategy for Europe, an institutional revamp, renewed military ambition, integration of defence capabilities and a new partnership with NATO. With the forthcoming *Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy*, the follow-up ‘white book’-process and the Commission’s defence action plan, 2016 offers the strategic sequence necessary for the Union to move forward.

Keywords *Global Strategy* | Common Security and Defence Policy | White book | Collective security | Strategic autonomy | Permanent headquarters | Hybrid threats | EU–NATO | Brussels+

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the European Commission.

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Introduction

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has an indisputable way with words. When, in 2015, he compared the EU's foreign and security policy to a 'bunch of chickens' and called for the establishment of a 'European army', he certainly caught the attention of his audience. The response in Berlin, where the notion of a European army is well established in popular opinion and coalition agreements, was cautiously supportive. In London reactions were unsurprisingly dismissive and derisive (despite recent positive polls).¹ Stockholm's Carl Bildt (2015) tweeted '... what about starting with a European air force?', presumably half in earnest, half in jest; whereas from Paris, Prime Minister Valls allegedly quipped, with distinctive French pride and lament, 'l'armée européenne existe, c'est la France' (Flora et al. 2015).

These reactions capture the current state of European defence. It is no use invoking what is actually called for by the treaties, namely the 'progressive framing of a common Union defence policy' (art. 42(2) Treaty on European Union). Political will and the solidarity to act together cannot be written into treaties. To the honest European observer, there should be no doubt that the Commission's vision for the future is not about returning to Clausewitz-era standing armies but rather about building a European security architecture capable of facing today's and tomorrow's crises (European Political Strategy Centre 2015a, 2015b, 2016).² As matters stand, the ability of the EU to collectively ensure its security and defence is in serious doubt. Situational awareness, preparedness and decision-making capacity, as well as civilian and military instruments to act decisively across a broad spectrum of internal and external crises, are all lacking today.

In 2015, Juncker's stealth attack proved to be in vain. The European Council of June 2015, initially expected to focus on defence matters, became another non-event in the consolidation of European security. Faced with competing priorities, leaders easily let the opportunity slip. May they be forgiven—2015 was still an age of relative innocence. Russian aggression in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in Syria and the spread of Islamic State still seemed to most to be distant realities. This time around, just a year on, there is time for neither wordplay nor divisions. War, strife and threats that seemed far away have moved into our cities and our homes.

This June's European Council offers a second chance. Just as European leaders in the spring of 2012 awakened from their torpor to propose a Banking Union to overcome the eurozone and sovereign debt crisis, the moment has come to build a Security and Defence Union. It should be based on five qualitative leaps: a collective security strategy for Europe, an institutional revamp, a military ambition fit for today's security

¹ According to a YouGov poll, the British public is surprisingly positive about the idea of an EU army: 36 % support the idea, 29 % are opposed and 36 % were undecided (Wells 2015).

² Just as von Clausewitz (1989) recognised, in his time, that conflict and war do not only play out on the military field through acts of force, but also as socio-political phenomena through the economy, technology, politics, social forces and psychology.

challenges, the integration of military capabilities, and a new partnership and sharing of roles with NATO.

A collective security strategy for Europe—at last?

As terrorist bombs and Kalashnikovs seem to strike at will at the heart of Europe, we should need no further convincing that the world around us is changing for the worse—and that we need to react to it.

The tide of refugees, beyond the humanitarian crisis, is only the most visible expression of the return of a strategic reality in which cold external winds chill our hearts, putting the safety and cohesiveness of our societies, and of the European project itself, under severe stress. For the first time in two decades the West must regroup and reassess, and find the resources for a combined step change in Europe's two principal security organisations. In parallel with NATO's strategic adaptation expected at the Warsaw Summit this summer, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini's forthcoming *Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy* must answer above all the question of what to do to deliver more security to Europe.³

Security and defence have become the new front lines of the European project. The *Global Strategy* offers the opportunity to consolidate the Union as a security community on three conditions: it must propose a new narrative on what the Union is about; it must create a consensus on threats and interests, cementing commitments to solidarity between Europe's nations; and it must give impetus to a reorganisation of the Union's collective means to act in the new security environment.

The first condition is to forget yesterday's mantra of the EU as a 'global player', which has been spun out of the EU's successive idealistic visions of building peace, then enlargement and finally having an international role for the good of all. This last, universalist 'promise does not work for today's challenges. The Union's much-fabled 'transformative power' (Leonard 2005), our capacity to export our values and stability, is, in reality, limited. Equally weakened is the belief in 'effective multilateralism', which became a cornerstone of former High Representative Javier Solana's 2003 security strategy (European Council 2003), as a sufficient answer. Let us face it: if we are to avoid importing the world's crises and instability, our own security and defence must now become our fundamental priorities.⁴ What is needed from leaders in June is a com-

³ See High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2015).

⁴ Mark Leonard went as far as suggesting that *self-preservation* is now the most pressing demand when discussing the renewal of Europe's security strategy and his own 2005 'transformative power' concept at the EU Institute of Security Studies Annual Conference 'Towards an EU Global Strategy' on 22 April 2016 in Paris.

mon strategic narrative that puts collective security at the heart of preoccupations: may they therefore choose ‘*In defence of Europe*’ as the new ‘bumper sticker’ for the Union’s external action!

The second prerequisite is recognition of the changing realities of collective security. Threats come in hybrid forms; through a multiplicity of actors, state and non-state; and unfold on a new continuum from global commons, through our extended and immediate neighbourhood, to the heart of our homeland. Ultimately, diplomacy and crisis management abroad is also homeland security. A new strategy must recognise the simultaneous need to *protect* at home, *secure* in our vicinity and *enable and support* partners to become security providers beyond (Domecq 2016). Delivering security to citizens requires the forging of a consensus on shared vital interests and new means to act on them, be this in terms of common efforts to track down terrorist networks; securing our borders; managing crises in our neighbourhood; or addressing security concerns along trade routes, or in cyber- and outer space.

The third condition is acknowledging the new demands on EU capacity and capabilities across the full civilian–military spectrum. A tougher environment raises important questions, in particular for the EU’s military ambition and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Years of under-spending is crippling European defence, just as the lack of political will and neglect has every so often left the CSDP powerless and immobilised (Major and Mölling 2016). The *Global Strategy* must not only prepare the Union for the use of force when necessary, it must also make sure that it has the capacity to do so. In a world of complex interdependencies, deciding how to ensure Europe’s freedom of action and strategic autonomy through own capabilities and a domestic industrial and technological base becomes ever more vital. The answer lies in new collective commitments to defence investment and cooperation. To get there, the EU will need to follow up on the *Global Strategy* with a security and defence ‘white book’—process for the first time in the history of European defence, as recently proposed by Michel Barnier and Dutch and French defence ministers. It should carry out a root and branch review of the Union’s crisis management framework, military level of ambition and defence capabilities priorities.⁵

Institutions (and permanent headquarters), yet again

At the risk of provocation, institutional issues *are* at the heart of the matter. As strong centripetal forces make their mark in Europe, the Union can only renew its capacity to act in common in foreign policy and defence if leaders assume strong ownership. This is true of the forthcoming *Global Strategy*, but also goes further: today’s changing security landscape highlights the need for iterative processes capable of forming a consensus

⁵ The idea of an EU defence white book has been an ever recurring issue since the 2001 Belgian presidency, but was recently championed again by the Dutch and French defence ministers and Michel Barnier, Special Adviser to the President of the European Commission, at the informal meeting of defence ministers in Luxembourg in September 2015.

on priorities and strategy. In 2013, Europe's woes and responses centred on the euro-zone, in 2014 on Russia and Ukraine, in 2015 on borders and refugees, in 2016 so far on terrorism—who knows what is next? Collective security deliberations must become a systematic fixture of the European Council, underpinned by the regularity and stability that only institutions can bring.

In principle this is no more than what the treaties provide for: 'The European Council shall regularly assess the threats facing the Union in order to enable the Union and its member states to take effective action' (art. 222(4) Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). In practice, this should go far beyond today's rather casual and fickle exercises. Increasingly complex and horizontal crises cannot be adequately met without further institutional consolidation of some sort. Should the Union one day face a complex crisis, such as wide-scale cyber-attacks or the collapse of critical infrastructure, the many uncoordinated crisis platforms across the institutions and 28 member states might simply not be up to the task. In an ambitious Security and Defence Union, EU institutions would add value in everything from information sharing, intelligence and joint contingency planning to decision-making, coordination and the mobilisation of a range of operational instruments.

On the civilian side, a novel approach and a new crisis architecture is slowly coming to life in response to the refugee crisis through the Integrated Political Crisis Response arrangements⁶ and reinforced operational means, such as the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism and the Emergency Assistance instrument for faster crisis response within the EU.⁷ In reaction to the increasing complexity and permanence of terrorist threats, the European Counter Terrorism Centre, set up just last January within Europol, is being scaled up to take on a broad spectrum of front-line tasks from information sharing and threat assessment to coordination, the fighting of online terrorist content, emergency response and investigation. To take the measure of new hybrid threats, the Commission and the High Representative have just proposed the consolidation of European (inter-institutional) intelligence in an EU Fusion Cell, as well as the establishment of crisis protocols between institutions and with member states (European Commission and High Representative 2016).

Change is on its way, yet what are missing are often the more decisive institutional steps, as illustrated by the protracted debate on a permanent operational headquarters (OHQ). The threat of vetoes has long loomed large over this aspect of European integration—so large that established doctrine has almost come to be that the EU *should not have* full-blown crisis arrangements of its own. Now the writing is on the wall. Without situational awareness, contingency planning and reaction capacity at the Union level, whether in terms of strategic communication or other means, the preparedness against hybrid threats will remain insufficient. The lack of a permanent OHQ and integrated crisis management platforms leads to basic inefficiencies such as competition

⁶ See European Council (2014).

⁷ See European Commission (2016).

between different missions and operations, and prevents effective civilian–military strategy and planning, intelligence gathering, exercises, and command and control at the Union level. Going half-way will always result in half-measures: the EU must now act decisively by establishing an OHQ structure that can address both internal and external contingencies.

Looking further ahead, the treaties’ strong commitments to solidarity are at the heart of what the EU as a security organisation should be about. The two key articles, the *mutual assistance* and *solidarity* clauses, need not remain bilateral and essentially unprepared instruments. Taken together and operationalised, they would allow the Union to be better prepared and united across a continuum of crises, from natural disasters, civilian emergencies such as the refugee overflow, and security threats and terrorism, to hybrid challenges and defence (European Political Strategy Center 2015a; Biscop forthcoming). In institutional terms, what the Union should be looking at is not only mapping the role of each institution and actor but ultimately also the creation of a ‘European Security Council’ of its own, bringing together senior-level officials from military, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement and other bodies to advise at a strategic level.

Levelling up military ambitions

The ‘white book’ follow-up process to the *Global Strategy*—if leaders can agree on a mandate in June—offers the Union the first significant opportunity since 1999 to set a new military level of ambition. Tough questions must be answered: against what threats, and with what objectives should we shape our future security and defence instruments? How can we address the CSDP’s current operational weaknesses, be it in terms of the availability and deployability of military force, solidarity and burden sharing in operations or civilian–military complementarity? What degree of autonomy is the CSDP aiming for, and what effort in terms of capabilities does that entail?

Lofty targets will not in themselves deliver security. Rather than setting new headline goals, the priority should be a review of the CSDP objectives, the so-called Petersberg tasks, to reflect a new reality of merging external and internal threats. In a capable Union most military missions short of NATO’s collective defence should be within reach. This requires a scaling-up of the Union’s means to act across a broad spectrum of operations, from territorial and border security at home to capacity building and expeditionary missions abroad.

The Petersberg tasks already provide for ‘peace-making’ or higher-intensity missions. To a jittery European public and inexperienced institutions *Serval*-type operations, tracking down Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb fighters with bullets and bayonets in far-off Malian mountain ranges, seem unrealistic. Still, in an increasingly fragile environment, it is in our common European interest (and not just France’s) to shore up fragile states, prevent Islamist ‘overruns’ and fight terrorism, even in distant Africa. The demands on EU crisis management and peace support will only increase, and to remain

with the French taxonomy, the CSDP must now gear up to deliver *Barkhane*- (anti-insurgent) and *Sangaris*- (securitisation and stabilisation) type missions of its own.⁸

For this, EU crisis management tools also need to be resized. The ‘never-used’ Battlegroups should be transformed into a truly modular rapid response concept. Supplemented with air and sea components, and special forces as necessary, they should be available and capable of performing tasks from crisis management and peace support operations to temporary border missions, disaster relief and the protection of critical infrastructure. The EU’s military leadership must be given responsibility, together with framework nations, for the pre-identification of multinational forces that meet the standards required for different operations over rotations longer than the current six months.

National contributions would be compensated for by new guarantees on burden-sharing. A strengthened institutional set-up and new financing tools are necessary to facilitate force generation and decision-making for all types of EU missions. The bet must be that a common security strategy and the availability of military threat assessments, planning, and command and control arrangements will in time go a long way towards facilitating the political decision-making that today is wanting. In addition, a dedicated fund or partial EU budgetisation should cover the deployment cost of missions and, in the case of the Battlegroups, also certain standby costs.

These are not the only lessons to be learned from a changing situation. Europe’s sea and land borders highlight how civilian and military options must be better integrated. The Mediterranean is currently the testing ground for cooperation between different maritime functions, from national maritime operators and EU agencies, such as Frontex, to CSDP and NATO missions. Making progress towards a large-scale integrated maritime information system is becoming a matter of urgency, while the proposal for EU border and coastguard capacities should in time lead to more ambitious EU maritime capabilities.

The CSDP make-over must also prepare the EU to deal effectively with hybrid threats, drawing on national means and best practice as well as new institutional capabilities. A comprehensive tool-box could range from civilian and military advisory missions and exercises to operational support in specific circumstances, such as emergency border control; evacuation; or chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear protection. Cyberspace is another priority domain where the Union must go beyond regulatory approaches towards capacities in common to face the new reality of digital weaponry and commercially and strategically motivated thefts and destruction.⁹

⁸ ‘Coalition of the willing’-type operations as provided for under Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union could be an interesting option for the future.

⁹ An increasing number of articles, such as the *Financial Times*’s recent in-depth article on Iran’s cyber-capabilities, provide eye-opening accounts of an ongoing revolution in defensive and offensive cyber-capabilities (Jones 2016).

Last but not least, a revised CSDP must recognise the need to rely on effective partnerships for security and development, whether they are with the UN, regional and local actors on Africa's continent, or with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and NATO in our eastern neighbourhood. Efforts must be directed as a matter of priority towards sustaining state functions such as the police, judiciary and military in partner countries through so-called *capacity building for security and development*. Today the military dimension of this effort is wide of the mark. Existing tools in the context of both CSDP budgets and development policies must be put to their best use, but a dedicated financing instrument linked to or similar to the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace¹⁰ will be needed if the Union is serious about stepping up collective action for stability.

Jump-starting the capabilities integration cycle

Executing full-spectrum military interventions requires robust war-fighting capabilities: armoured vehicles, attack helicopters, frigates, strategic lift, tanker aircraft, satellite communication, intelligence and so on. By and large Europe has had (or has had access to) these capabilities so far, which has provided a sense of enduring security. Yet existing technologies and systems are now old, duplication is rife, and investment and collaborative efforts have ground to a halt. Not only do we have 23 different light armoured vehicles in Europe today, but, as a renewal of naval capabilities is announced, 7 European nations are launching 7 parallel frigate programmes. This ongoing 'renationalisation' of defence (Keohane 2016) is a race to the bottom that defies all logic.

The days when national sovereignty and security could be assured through national means alone are coming to an end. Budgetary constraints, defence inflation, technological changes and cost escalation (Wolf 2015) will force a paradigm shift: member states, big and small, and Europe as a whole, must either acquire capabilities through cooperation or risk losing them altogether. Still, today the European Defence Agency's (EDA) Capability Development Plan is ailing due to a lack of common priorities and serious member state engagement, just as past initiatives, whether the EU's Pooling and Sharing or NATO's Smart Defence, have delivered only meagre results.

More bite is needed to sustain a new cycle of integration in defence capabilities. The upcoming defence 'white book' must establish quantitative and qualitative investment commitments,¹¹ identify key collaborative capability projects for the coming years and connect bottom-up capability efforts with the necessary top-down political steering. A European Semester-type process, whereby national and bilateral defence planning and procurement priorities are regularly reported to the EDA and discussed by ministers,

¹⁰ See European Commission (2015).

¹¹ These could be based on the NATO Wales pledge of increasing defence spending up to 2 % of GDP, but the qualitative elements as already enshrined in existing but non-binding EDA benchmarks seem just as important. For more information on these see EDA (n.d.).

should be instituted to achieve more synchronisation. In this, focus should be placed on capabilities with the highest operational impact, and on prospects for European cooperation and supply chain integration.

In parallel, Europeans must prepare for formidable shifts in military technology. A decade ago military research and technology would have been ahead of civilian research and applications by several years. This is no longer the case today, with key strategic technologies in aerospace, cyber-technology, robotics and man-to-machine interfacing becoming globally available. The US has announced a new defence innovation initiative—the ‘3rd Offset Strategy’—to counter the growing military–technological might of China, Russia, Iran and others. For Europeans, whose own investment in military research and development is down by 35 % in just 10 years, this raises serious questions and risks a widening technology gap within NATO (Fiott 2016).

If Europeans are to retain the ambition to decide their own security and be a reliable partner in NATO then they have no choice but to join this innovation race. There can be no enduring military effort or long-term strategic culture without own capabilities and a defence industrial–technological base to sustain them. Supporting collaborative efforts in capability development and enhanced investment in defence research and technology hence stand out as fundamental priorities for the European Defence Action Plan announced by the Commission.

One area of action should be to support greater investment in critical technologies through a future defence research programme. The investment of €3.5 billion over seven years, as suggested by the European Commission Group of Personalities (Group of Personalities 2016), will add an indispensable ‘fifth player’ to the European research and technology effort, and will also serve as a catalyst for member state buy-in in a new capability-planning process. Together with the EDA, the Commission can also use its wide range of industrial policy tools, from small to medium-sized enterprises and raw material policies to certification and standardisation, to support European capability priorities and cooperation.

Last but not least, the EU should act much more decisively on incentives and financing for collaborative defence projects. A major step forward would be to recognise common European projects, as opposed to national ‘go-it-alone’ approaches, as structural budgetary efforts in the context of the application of the Stability and Growth Pact. Specific fiscal incentives, beyond the EDA’s current VAT exemption, should also be considered. In terms of financing tools, a fresh look must be taken at the European Investment Bank instruments, including the potential for a next-generation European Fund for Strategic Investment. The EDA also needs a dedicated bridging capacity or start-up fund to overcome the lack of synchronisation in national defence budgets that holds back common projects today.

EU–NATO: from Berlin Plus to Brussels Plus!

General de Gaulle reputedly said of NATO that it is ‘the defence of Europe by Americans’. The question of *what Europeans should be able to do together without Uncle Sam* is as relevant today as then. In his recent ‘Doctrine’ interview in *The Atlantic* (Goldberg 2016), US President Obama made it starkly clear that the US expects less free-riding from Europeans in a tougher, multipolar world. Changing realities should also prompt a strategic rethink: the spirit of Berlin Plus and the old division of labour in which NATO carries out territorial and collective defence while the EU acts as a low-intensity crisis manager abroad, in particular on the African continent, no longer holds true. The EU’s recent exploration of hybrid threats, strongly pushed by the UK, the US and NATO, is just one acknowledgement that in the face of diversifying threats, our collective security in a broader sense cannot be NATO’s sole appanage.

The final area in which Europeans must collectively step up their efforts is therefore that of EU–NATO relations. Years of mutual suspicion are in the process of being traded in for a new partnership, no longer based on the wrong question of ‘what the EU is *not* going to do’ but on the right one, namely ‘what the EU *should* do and how to *do it together with NATO*’. NATO and the EU are complementary security organisations on a continent that needs more, not fewer efforts. Collective territorial defence, pre-positioning, air policing and reassurance measures are not in themselves enough. The broader concept of collective security must be addressed by articulating the two organisations’ comparative advantages, avoiding duplication as well as limiting preconceptions of role-sharing.¹²

This summer’s back-to-back European Council and NATO summits must be seized upon to establish a roadmap to fully develop EU–NATO synergies. In the area of hybrid threats common protocols and even joint hybrid teams should be envisaged, while fully respecting each organisation’s decision-making autonomy. Defence capacity building, maritime situational awareness, exercises and cyber-defence are further areas to be considered for reinforced cooperation (Stoltenberg 2016).

More significantly and looking ahead to a potential deal on the unification of Cyprus, the EU and NATO should not only deepen information exchange but could also break new ground in the sharing of operational means, such as rapid reaction instruments. In an ideal partnership between the two organisations, the separate EU Battlegroups and NATO Response Force concepts would give way to the creation of a European brigade-sized stand-by force for expeditionary operations, acting as the necessary complement to NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force’s role in territorial defence. To sustain this, the EU and NATO should also closely coordinate their respective capability development processes, for instance through a Framework Nation Concept common to the two organisations. Such a ‘Brussels Plus’¹³ partnership makes eminent sense:

¹² Norway’s then Minister of European affairs, Vidar Helgesen was amongst the first to highlight the EU’s new, critical and complementary role to NATO’s in collective security (Helgesen 2015).

¹³ The concept of a new ‘Brussels Plus’ partnership was coined by General Patrick de Rousiers (2016) at a Dutch EU presidency conference.

whether made available for territorial defence, CSDP or NATO, European capabilities ultimately serve the same fundamental purpose, our collective security.

Conclusion

2016 is a year rife with existential threats for the Union, but also one of significant opportunity—not least for European security and defence. The forthcoming *Global Strategy* and NATO's Warsaw Summit, together with the potential EU Security and Defence 'white book' and Commission Defence Action Plan, offer an unparalleled strategic sequence.

It is no longer time for incremental steps in CSDP or national defence capabilities, but for thinking anew about the essential decisions that bind Europeans together. If European leaders can find the courage to step out of the 'fog of peace', technocratic bickering and the grip of history, they can deliver a step change in the collective capacity to ensure security for the citizens of Europe and the wider continent through the establishment of a Security and Defence Union.

Will all 28 member states join or will the numbers be smaller? It is useless to pretend that this question does not exist. The possibility of moving forward in smaller groups of permanent structured cooperation—both outside and within the treaties—is there. Who will be *in* and who will be *out*? Ultimately that is up to the leaders and peoples of Europe to decide. But in security and defence, let us still believe that strength lies in numbers!

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