

Strategic priorities for EU defence policy

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>> The EU cannot cope with all the potential security threats and challenges facing the world, nor should it aspire to. As Frederick the Great told his generals: “to defend everything is to defend nothing”. If the EU is to have an effective foreign policy in the future, it will need a clear sense of its strategic priorities, and what it is prepared to do through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It is much easier to predict what the EU will not do. For example, the EU will not fight wars in East Asia.

Defence forms only one part of a much broader EU foreign and security policy which mobilises a wide range of players, from diplomats and development workers to judges and police, and, when necessary, soldiers. Since its first peacekeeping operation in 2003, the EU has initiated almost 30 CSDP missions (civilian operations for the most part). However, the EU has not yet carried out a military operation comparable, in scale or intensity, to the NATO operation in Afghanistan or the UN missions in Congo or Lebanon.

It may be that the EU does not need to carry out military operations similar in size and nature to the UN or NATO. Perhaps it will mainly remain concentrated for many years to come on smaller humanitarian and state-building operations, for which there is already considerable demand. Looking to the future, however, this assumption seems risky for at least two reasons. First, the world in and around Europe may well be a more dangerous place in the future. Second, the EU will increasingly have to assume roles previously played in and around Europe by the United States. The challenge for EU governments is to more clearly define how they intend to use their military resources in future; resources which are

HIGHLIGHTS

- If the EU is to have an effective foreign policy, it will need a clear sense of its priorities and what it is prepared to do through its defence policy.
- Europe’s evolving strategic landscape includes a more turbulent neighbourhood, the US re-balance towards Asia and a shift in global military power.
- The EU should be able to carry out a wider range of military tasks to protect its interests and project its values.

»»»»» much more costly to deploy, both politically and financially, than civilian assets.

**THREATS, GEOGRAPHY, INTERESTS
AND VALUES**

There are many ways to define strategic priorities, including assessing threats, geography, interests and values. Perhaps the most obvious official document to consult when trying to develop CSDP priorities is the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 (and the 2008 review of its implementation). The ESS identified five threats to European security: the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), terrorism, regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime. The 2008 review added three further challenges: cyber security, energy security and climate change.

The ESS does not, however, clarify the precise role of CSDP in dealing with all these threats and challenges. It is difficult to prescribe what precise role military force in particular could have in countering some of these threats – cybercrime, energy, climate change, and organised crime, for example. Moreover, in the cases of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, regional conflicts and state failure, for which a military role would be more plausible, the EU would not necessarily organise such tasks. Iran developing a nuclear weapon is one example.

Geographically speaking, the ESS is not short-sighted. It points out that security challenges in South and East Asia, such as North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme, matter for Europe. But it adds that “even in an era of globalisation, geography is still important”. The ESS further prioritises efforts to build security in Europe’s neighbourhood, which is listed as one of three strategic objectives in the 2003 document, along with addressing the security threats listed above and supporting an international order based on “effective multilateralism” – perhaps the phrase the ESS is best known for. This is not simply a question of values and of upholding international law; it is also in the EU’s interest to support the development of global governance and

regional organisations. However the guidance contained in the 2003 ESS is weakest on how the EU should navigate a more multipolar world today, and on the geostrategic consequences of the rise of non-Western military powers for Europe.

THE RISE OF ASIA

Everyone knows that economic power has been shifting from West to East over the last decade. Less frequently discussed is the simultaneous shift in military power from West to East – or more correctly from the European part of the West to the East. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Asian defence spending already exceeded European expenditure in 2012. The IISS says that Asian countries increased their defence spending in 2011 by just over 3% (in real terms) on average, and China increased its defence budget by a whopping 6.8% in 2011.

Another think tank, SIPRI, says that Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia and Japan (along with China) are climbing up the defence spenders league, while Britain (4th), France (5th) and Germany (9th) are falling down the top ten list. Italy, 10th in 2010, fell off the list of top ten military spenders in 2011. Furthermore, SIPRI adds that Russian defence spending exceeded both that of France and Britain in 2011, pushing Moscow into third place. Despite plans to cut some \$489 billion from its defence budget over the next decade, the United States will remain the world’s top military spender for some time to come; but according to some projections, China’s defence budget will surpass the collective spending of the European members of NATO by 2020.

If Europeans think they may need to use robust force autonomously in the future, they should develop a clearer sense of their common external interests

Military spending alone does not paint the whole picture of geostrategic change in international security. In the East Asia region, for instance, a large number of potential conflicts exist, as evidenced in the summer of 2012 by growing tensions over territorial claims in the East and South China seas. The number of disputes in these seas has risen dramatically, from four in the 1980s to 28 between 2010 and 2012 alone. Apart from maritime disputes there are other major challenges, such as the status of Taiwan and North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

This evolving strategic and military context explains the US military "pivot" to the Pacific. Europeans have nothing comparable to the already large (and growing) military presence and commitments of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. But the EU does have an interest in East Asian security. Some 28% of EU external trade in 2010 was with East Asia, an impressive 5% more than the EU traded across the Atlantic the same year. Indeed, EU maritime trade with Asia accounts for more than a quarter of transcontinental container shipping traffic – the most important trade route on Earth. As an old proverb says, "He who is Lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice".

A MORE DANGEROUS NEIGHBOURHOOD

Furthermore, rising military powers are increasingly active in Europe's neighbourhood. China's growing interest in African, Arctic and Middle Eastern security, for example, has been well documented. Economic growth in China and India will depend to a large degree on secure access to energy sources in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. This could trigger more intense competition between Beijing and Delhi (along with others) for energy supplies in Europe's neighbourhood. The EU already works closely with China and Russia (which are permanent members of the UN Security Council) on Iran's nuclear programme, and has operated with Chinese, Indian and Russian ships (in addition to American, Japanese and South Korean vessels, amongst others) in the Western Indian Ocean to counter pirates.

Brussels should try to build on those experiences to encourage co-operation with rising military powers on issues of joint concern in Europe's broad neighbourhood.

In the Southern neighbourhood, the 2011 conflict in Libya fuelled a separate outbreak of violence in Northern Mali, spreading instability across the Sahel from Algeria to Nigeria. The Horn of Africa is home to three of the most fragile states in the world – Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan – resulting in continued instability. In the Middle East, the current conflict in Syria could have dire consequences in the region if it spills over into neighbouring Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, not to mention Israel and Turkey. Similarly, any conflict stimulated by an Iranian nuclear weapons capability would greatly impact the Middle East, especially Gulf countries (and potentially blocking the Straits of Hormuz, through which passes about a third of global petroleum supplies transported by sea).

Looking eastwards, the Caucasus – the Nagorno-Karabakh region, for example – is the scene of ongoing conflicts that have and could become wars. While Afghanistan remains a security concern for the stability of Central Asia, there are other strains too. Tensions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan over water resources have the potential to turn into interstate conflict; while ethnic tensions in the Fergana Valley that is shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan might also heighten into conflict in future. Added together, the myriad of current and potential security challenges in Europe's broad neighbourhood makes a heady mix.

A CHANGING US MILITARY POSTURE

The 2003 ESS rightly praises the special role of the United States in European security: "The United States has played a critical role in European integration and European security, in particular through NATO. The end of the Cold War has left the United States in a dominant position as a military actor". The Pentagon's announcement in January 2012 that the US intends to re-balance some of its vast military resources away from Europe towards the Asia-Pacif-



»»»»» ic caused much debate and discussion in Europe. But that debate has been almost entirely Europe-centric: would the US pivot to Asia-Pacific mean American disengagement from European security? Would Europeans have to take on much more responsibility for security in their neighbourhood?

The US will almost certainly continue to cut its numbers in Europe and increase its presence in Asia in the coming decade. However, the reorganisation of American military resources will take many years, and its evolution will depend on future events. True, the Pentagon will not be interested in responding to every crisis in and around Europe; for example, it did not hide its initial reluctance to intervene in Libya in 2011. But the Obama administration is not leaving Europe, and re-balancing should not be confused with abandoning. In contrast to the global footprint of US defence policy, however, European defence planning is almost exclusively focused on Europe's neighbourhood. For example, all but two of 27 CSDP missions to date have been deployed in Europe's broad neighbourhood (the exceptions are Afghanistan and Aceh in Indonesia). Put simply, the US is an Asian military power, but Europe is not.

A key question, consequently, is how will Europeans cope with problems in their neighbourhood – with or without the US? One key factor may be the readiness of rising military powers such as China and India, along with Turkey and Russia, to play a greater role there. Sometimes the US may wish to take the lead, with or without Europeans (in Bahrain, for example, where the US fifth fleet is stationed). Sometimes, the US may be involved with Europeans (e.g. Libya or Iran). But sometimes, Europeans may have to act without the US: the UN force sent to the Israeli-Lebanese border in 2006 was primarily made up of Europeans. Similarly, although they didn't use military force, it was the EU-27 that led the international response to the Georgia crisis in 2008. The EU's current and planned operations in Niger and Mali to tackle the grave security crisis in the Sahel also reflect this emerging strategic trend.

This in turn raises the altogether thornier question of whether Europe would use robust military force when operating alone. At first glance this seems unlikely, based on past evidence and its lack of capabilities. But that said, in early 2011 the idea of France and Britain leading a military operation in Libya also seemed fanciful to many European observers, as did a French military intervention in Mali in the first days of 2013. While the US is not abandoning Europe, given the Pentagon's recent reluctance over Libya and Georgia, Washington would surely be happy to leave most future Balkan, Caucasian and North African crises to the Europeans. The US, after all, has enough to worry about in the broader Middle East and Asia.

WHAT STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR EU DEFENCE POLICY?

The lists of threats and challenges outlined in the 2003 ESS and the 2008 update remain valid. Regional conflicts and state failure have not disappeared (e.g. Mali or Syria), the spread of WMDs is still relevant (e.g. Iran) and the global challenges of climate change, energy security and cyber-security continue to evolve. CSDP will continue to have a role in addressing aspects of these threats and challenges, especially regional conflicts and state failure (in particular peacekeeping and state-building tasks). In addition, although beyond the scope of this paper, the potential links between CSDP and EU internal security policies, such as responding to natural and man-made disasters or maritime border guard activities, may become increasingly prominent in the future.

The geographic focus of the ESS on Europe's neighbourhood also remains important, not least given the current turbulence in the region. The EU will play a low-profile and mainly non-military role in East Asian security. Yet from the Eastern Atlantic to the Western Indian Ocean, it needs to consider how to better share the security burden with the United States, and increasingly work with rising military powers such as China, India and Russia in that Atlantic-Indian Ocean axis.

Furthermore, if Europeans think they may need to use force autonomously in the future (especially in a robust manner), they should develop a clearer sense of their common external interests. One way to assess interests would be to draw up a list of priorities for EU foreign policy. These could include supporting the international rule of law, free trade, energy security, a more democratic and stable neighbourhood, and a constructive working relationship with Turkey, Russia and the US – the key non-EU players in European security.

Concerning CSDP, defining shared foreign policy interests sets the context for identifying scenarios which may require Europeans to use force in the future (including in combination with civilian resources and other regional or international organisations). These scenarios could be geographic (i.e. the neighbourhood or beyond), functional (keeping sea lanes open or protecting energy supplies) or existential (opposing major breaches of international law or old-fashioned self-defence – Iran’s nuclear programme could potentially apply in both ways here). Linked to this is the prickly question of the level of operational ambition for CSDP: should the EU be able to potentially carry out a robust Libya-style military operation in the future? The broad list of potential military tasks that EU governments have agreed to – sometimes referred to in EU jargon as the “Petersberg tasks” – implies that they should be able to deploy robust armed forces if it were really necessary.

None of this is to pretend that the EU is or will soon become a full-spectrum geostrategic military actor; nor does it assume that Europeans will always act through the EU. The 27 CSDP operations initiated so far have been mostly civilian and small relative to UN or NATO missions, and some have been little more than flag-planting exercises. As a result, the Union sometimes gives the impression that it is more interested in being perceived as a politically-correct power than a geopolitical one. In a rapidly changing world, geopolitics should not be ignored. Assessing how global military power is

changing, and how that may impact upon European security and foreign policy interests deserves much more attention from EU governments.

CONCLUSION

CSDP should not be reduced to a form of armed social work; nor will it become a vehicle for military competition between great powers. But there are a number of potentially important tasks in between, and not only those carried out in response to major crises, such as NATO’s interventions in Kosovo or Libya. For example, 90% of European external trade is carried by sea, so maritime security and the protection of trade routes is essential for the EU. Naval operations, like the current EU mission to tackle piracy on the waters off Somalia – which was deployed in part because of the disruption to EU-Asia shipping – may become increasingly prominent missions for CSDP. In future, alongside a geographic focus on Europe’s broad neighbourhood and helping to tackle some key threats to European security, CSDP should contribute to protecting vital European interests as well as projecting European values.

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