

The European Council and Defence: The State of our Ambition

Sven Biscop

Does Europe still have an ambition in defence beyond that of its academics, i.e. to write papers about it? When the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, put an assessment of “the state of defence in Europe” on the agenda of the Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU),¹ he definitely generated a new and very hectic round of producing papers. But he also successfully galvanized the debate and, potentially, turned it into a new direction.

Does Europe Exist?

The fact is that we never examine “the state of defence in Europe”. In political terms we do continually refer to “Europe”. We expect “Europe” to do something about Libya, Mali, Syria etc. Because of the shift of its strategic focus to Asia and the Pacific (the “pivot”), even the US has sent a clear message that “Europe” should assume responsibility for the security of its own periphery. For the Americans, “Europe” can mean the European allies of NATO, the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), or an ad hoc coalition of European states. Washington really no longer cares under which flag we act, as long as we act and the problem is dealt with without extensive American assets being drawn in.

In terms of defence planning however, “Europe” does not really exist. We assess the state of the CSDP, of NATO’s military posture, and of course of each of our national armed forces. But we never assess Europe’s military effort in its entirety. In fact, we are unable to, simply because there is no forum where we set targets for “defence in Europe”.

On the one hand, we pretend that it is only a specific separable (and, in the minds of many capitals, small) part of our armed forces that can be dedicated to the CSDP and the achievement of its Headline Goal, defined by the European Council in Helsinki in 1999: the capacity to deploy up to a corps of 60,000.² That is a theoretical fiction. In reality any commitment to either the CSDP or NATO or both has an impact on one’s entire national armed forces. A decision to invest in an air-to-air refuelling project through the EU’s European Defence Agency (EDA) for example implies that that sum cannot be spent in another capability area of importance for the CSDP or NATO or, usually, both, whereas once delivered the resulting air-to-air refuelling capability will be available for operations in either framework. Schemes to encourage states to join capability efforts, like the EU’s Pooling & Sharing and NATO’s Smart Defence, obviously can only make the most of opportunities to generate synergies and effects of scale if all arsenals are taken into the balance in their entirety.

On the other hand, the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) supposedly does encompass (nearly) the whole of our forces, but it sets capability targets for individual nations in function of the targets of the Alliance as a whole, and does not separately define the level of ambition of NATO’s European pillar. Yet we know that significant additional capabilities will probably be generated by European allies collectively rather

1 In his speech at the annual conference of the European Defence Agency on 22 March 2013; see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/136394.pdf

2 For many Member States it is, apparently, such a small part of their forces that they seem to equate the CSDP with the Battlegroups and have all but forgotten the Headline Goal. They also tend to forget that a Battlegroup is pretty much the numbers that the Brussels police will deploy during the actual European Council – hardly a level of ambition worthy of a continent.

than by European countries individually. As to operations, it becomes increasingly likely that in many scenarios European allies will have to act alone, without the United States.

Defining Europe

A call to look at “the state of defence in Europe” thus implicitly is a call to first of all define a level of ambition for “Europe”, against which the existing capabilities can then be assessed, shortfalls identified, and priority objectives defined. Put succinctly, the question is: *why?* Why does “Europe” want to have capabilities in the first place?

As the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, stated at the outset of her *Final Report Preparing the December 2013 European Council on Security and Defence*: clearly this question ‘warrant[s] a strategic debate among Heads of State and Government. Such a debate at the top level must set priorities’.³ The key *political* question that the European Council needs to address, before it can address any *military-technical* question, is for which types of contingencies in which parts of the world “Europe”, as a matter of priority, commits to assume responsibility, and which capabilities it commits to that end. On the basis of the answer to that question all other dimensions of the European Council’s broad defence agenda can be tackled – absent that answer, Europe’s defence effort will still be left hanging in the air. It is often said for example that “Europe” needs its own strategic enablers, such as air-to-air refuelling and ISTAR. But to be able to do what? Air-policing in the Baltic? Air-to-ground campaigns in the Mediterranean? Or even further afield? And at which scale? Without an answer to such questions, it is impossible to rationally design a sensible capability mix and decide on priority capability projects.

Yet, who is “Europe”? Who can define the level of ambition that serves as political guidance for operations undertaken and capabilities developed by Europeans through both NATO and the CSDP? There is today no institutionalised venue where Europeans can take decisions about their posture in NATO and the CSDP simultaneously – it is always either/or. Under these circumstances, the European Council is the best option. It is of course an EU body, but they are our Heads of State and Government, meeting in an intergovernmental setting, adopting not binding law but political declarations, and that by unanimity. Surely they, if anybody, have the legitimacy to declare that they will consider the political guidance which they agree upon to guide their governments’ positions in both NATO and the CSDP.

In political terms, “Europe” either means any European state, or an ad hoc coalition of some of these states, or, when they make foreign and security policy together (which alas they do not do systematically enough), the EU. What “Europe” does *not* mean in political terms, is the CSDP or NATO: these are instruments, at the service of the makers of foreign and security policy. Instruments, moreover, both of which “Europe” is more likely to use in the near future than the US, in view of the “pivot”. Trying to define the exclusive remit of NATO or of the CSDP is absolutely useless therefore, for in either framework it will be the very same group of European countries that will be at the core of any initiative to undertake military action. If Washington no longer takes the lead in setting strategy towards Europe’s neighbourhood, the only alternative actor is Europeans collectively, i.e. the EU (for individually, no European state can defend all of its interests all of the time). The European Council thus really is the best placed to address “the state of defence in Europe” and define the level of ambition for the CSDP/the European pillar of NATO.

This does not in any way prejudice how, in a real-life contingency, “Europe” will undertake military action: using NATO, the CSDP, the UN, *ad hoc* coalitions or a combination thereof. Indeed, if action entails larger-scale combat operations, “Europe” will need the NATO command & control structure, which is its main asset and thus at the heart of its continued relevance. However, the best way to make sure that all instruments, military as well as civilian, are put to use in an integrated way, from the planning of any type of action to the post-action and long-term involvement, is to *politically* put any intervention under the aegis of the EU, even when acting under national or NATO command in the case of military involvement. The fact is that in almost every scenario, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) will either from the start or eventually have to take charge of the political, economic and social dimension, regardless of how we address the military dimension – better to integrate all from the beginning therefore under the political aegis of the Union. Furthermore, that flag still is much less controversial whereas there always are countries and regions in which it is advised not to operate under specific national flags or the NATO-label.

In this context, creative use of Art. 44 of the Treaty on European Union, which is mentioned in passing in the High Representative’s report, can provide a flexible way of circumventing the political difficulties that continue to be an obstacle to effective coordination between NATO and the EU (or between ad hoc coalitions and the EU). Art. 44 allows the Council to entrust the implementation of an operation to a group of Member States. When a Member State or a coalition initiates an operation using a national or the NATO command structure,

³ IOF 15 October 2013; see http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131015_o2_en.pdf



the Council could retroactively recognise it as a task “to protect the Union’s values and serve its interests” (Art. 42.5), thus placing it within the *political* aegis of the EU, but without detracting from the command & control exercised by the Member States involved, except that they commit to “keep the Council regularly informed of [the operation’s] progress” (Art 44.2). The advantages would be manifold. The military dimension of an intervention can be fully integrated from the start with the political, economic and social dimension of which the EU is best placed to take charge (as opposed to the Libyan case, when the EU put itself out of the game and only came back in at a much later stage, thus losing a lot of time). The EU guise will do a lot to alleviate any suspicions of hidden national or NATO/American agendas. And the Berlin Plus mechanism, designed to give the EU access to the NATO command structure but which in practice has proved far too rigid to use effectively or rapidly, can be avoided.

Defining Europe’s Priorities

That finally brings us to the question: what are the priorities for Europe as a security provider? Ashton’s report puts the emphasis on the broader neighbourhood, including not just the countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy but stretching out into the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. This is where according to Ashton “strategic autonomy must materialise first”. An unexpectedly bold statement, as is the assertion that the Union should be able “to act decisively as a security provider”, “autonomously where necessary”, and “to protect its interests”, including by “projecting power” – certainly that last notion had not been read in an EU document before.

The European Council should definitely build on this part of Ashton’s report, using the same strong wording (to which Member States do not seem to have objected) and crafting it into a short and sharp paragraph for its conclusions. Otherwise, once the December meeting is behind us, Ashton’s report will have been just another preparatory document without any clear status. If on the other hand the Heads of State and Government would issue similarly worded conclusions, they would offer strong political guidance for both NATO and the CSDP, ceating a level of ambition for the European pillar of NATO and updating the level of ambition as compared to the EU’s Headline Goal.

“Strategic autonomy” in the broader neighbourhood (of which the Gulf really also is a part) should be read to mean that in this region Europe commits to *take the lead* in maintaining peace and security, i.e. to initiate the necessary response to security problems, including prevention, as well as intervention, with partners if possible but alone if necessary. Further on Ashton’s report refers to the Maritime Security Strategy to be

adopted in 2014, which should of course be integrated in the priorities. And should contributing to the collective security system of the UN not be a priority too, in line with the EU’s commitment to “effective multilateralism”? All three priorities go hand in hand.

Defining the Military Level of Ambition

The next step ought to be one that is curiously absent from the debate: if the European Council were to agree on priorities, these then have to be translated into a quantifiable military level of ambition. Which capabilities are we willing to commit? How many troops do we want to be able to deploy and which permanent strategic reserve do we want to maintain? Which strategic enablers does this require?

First, Europe needs a permanent strategic reserve: the ability to mount a decisive air campaign and to deploy up to an army corps (the 60,000 of the Headline Goal), as a single force if necessary, for all types of operations in Europe’s broader neighbourhood, over and above all on-going operations. This de facto “double Headline Goal” may seem fanciful, but it is but the reflection of the rate of deployment of the last decade. Second, it needs maritime power: the ability to achieve command of the sea in the broader neighbourhood, while maintaining a global naval presence in order to permanently engage with partners, notably in Asia and the Arctic. Finally, in the “post-pivot” era “strategic autonomy” in the neighbourhood means acquiring all strategic enablers, including air and maritime transport, air-to-air refuelling, and ISTAR, to allow for major army, air and naval operations in the broader neighbourhood without reliance on American assets.

This is the nature of the decisions that need to be taken before a truly comprehensive “strategic level Defence Roadmap [...] setting out specific targets and timelines”, as called for in Ashton’s report, can be developed. That can be a tasking to the EU Military Committee / EU Military Staff and to the EDA.

With regard to short term objectives in such a roadmap, European governments now have to urgently make happen the 11 projects that the Foreign Affairs Council already prioritized, in December 2011. If we would implement them, they would substantially address some of the key shortfalls qua strategic enablers. But none of them will materialize unless more countries contribute and contribute more – not just by sending staff officers to meetings but by co-financing. For the credibility of Europe in the eyes of our own public opinion as well as the US, it is crucial that in at least one major area a real project, i.e. with money attached, can be announced on the occasion of the European Council. Necessary though it may be, we don’t want to announce that a year’s preparation led only to the creation of “a process”.

As regards any roadmap's longer term objectives, the updated level of ambition should be interpreted as a new starting point for the scenarios elaborated by the EUMS, on which Europe's requirements catalogue is based, and thus also for the update of the EDA's Capability Development Plan (CDP, expected by the autumn of 2014), of which the requirements catalogue constitutes the main strand. Starting from new assumptions, long-term priority capability objectives can be identified – the capabilities that we want to have in 20 to 30 years, which we have to start thinking about now. The targets that Europe collectively sets as a result of this process can be taken into account in the NDPP, thus constituting the middle level between national and NATO-wide defence planning, or the European pillar, that is lacking today.

The stark reality is though that until now most of the time most states make but paper commitments to NATO and the CSDP and that neither the NDPP nor the Headline Goal or the CDP have had much impact on national defence. This is why Ashton is right to also call for a “robust follow-up process”, including perhaps a “European semester on defence”. Without guarantees that notably budgets allocated to collective capability projects will not be affected by future national budget cuts, the level of trust necessary to launch such projects in the first place cannot be achieved. Furthermore, we would do well not to discard the Commission's ideas on funding dual use capabilities⁴ too eas-

ily – money should trump turf wars. The first element of follow-up should definitely be to report back to the European Council, perhaps in mid-2015, in order to maintain the current impetus.

Conclusion

The December 2013 European Council will surely not satisfy all expectations, which are very great – but then the challenge is great too. One should not over-do “expectations management” therefore, as some officials are prone to – if we are not allowed to expect anything, the European Council should not be meeting in the first place. In reality, putting defence on its agenda has already generated a new dynamic in the debate, including on ideas and notions which hitherto were not part of the official discussion. The conclusions on defence adopted by the Council on 25 November, leading up to the European Council meeting on 19-20 December, are very long and cover many areas, but contain almost no actual decisions. But the European Council can still adopt important political guidance on the level of ambition, and concrete taskings and deadlines to translate these into planning and scenarios, as well as decisions on the industrial base of European defence. And it will hopefully see the announcement of one or other real project. Taken together, this would already constitute a “roadmap light”, charting the way to a comprehensive roadmap on defence.

4 In its July 2013 *Communication A New Deal for European Defence. Towards a More Competitive and Efficient Defence and Security Sector*. COM(2013)542/2; see http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/defence/files/communication_defence_en.pdf

4 In its July 2013 *Communication A New Deal for European Defence. Towards a More Competitive and Efficient Defence and Security Sector*. COM(2013)542/2; see http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/defence/files/communication_defence_en.pdf

5 One follow-up that these vague and often strangely formulated conclusions certainly invite is copy-editing.

4



Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
P.O. Box 8159 Dep, N-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.

About the Author

Prof. Dr. **Sven Biscop** is director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and teaches at Ghent University and at the College of Europe in Bruges.