



European Strategic Autonomy: Which Military Level of Ambition?

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The EU Global Strategy is crystal clear on the EU's political level of ambition yet remarkably silent on the corresponding military level of ambition. But strategy without capabilities is just a hallucination. Recent developments in the EU make it possible, however, for the Member States to agree on an appropriate and affordable military level of ambition. The aim: to conduct autonomous crisis management operations and to contribute substantially to territorial defence within the NATO framework. We should not forget that the European countries have the primary responsibility for the territorial defence of their own continent.

The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) defines a political level of ambition, in order to defend the EU's vital interests: our security, prosperity and democracy. It also introduces strategic autonomy as an objective. Clearly, the aim is for the EU to be a global actor in security as well as defence.

But the EUGS refers only in passing to European defence in the full meaning of the term. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is mostly portrayed as one of the

elements of the Union's integrated approach. Nothing wrong with that: the military is indeed but the catalyst that in some circumstances is necessary to achieve the desired political objectives. If the references to defence remain too vague, however, and are not afterwards translated into required military capabilities, the EU will not achieve real actorness in defence. Strategic autonomy requires soft as well as hard power.

The reluctance to do what is necessary to achieve a meaningful military level of ambition is the weakest link in the implementation of the EUGS, and stops the EU from putting into practice a fully integrated approach, and from achieving real strategic autonomy. How to overcome this reluctance?

MORE THAN PEACE KEEPING OPERATIONS

At the time of the presentation of the EUGS in June 2016, many initially saw the question for a detailed military level of ambition as inconvenient. Since then, however, the EU has in rapid tempo created a whole series of instruments to facilitate military capability development, from Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) to the European Defence Fund (EDF). There is today more union in defence than ever before. As we know now *how* we can generate the required

capabilities, we can focus on the question of *which* capabilities we need, in order to do *what*. For today's world and for the future – Chinese strategy, for example, has a time horizon of 2049.

The origins of the CSDP can be found in the 1992 *Petersberg Declaration* by the Western European Union (WEU). Although the so-called Petersberg Tasks, which were later incorporated into the Treaty on European Union, did theoretically include peace-making (which we would now call peace enforcement), the original emphasis clearly was on peacekeeping. If that was understandable when seen in the context of the 1990s, when the WEU and then the EU first began to develop an autonomous defence policy, there is no reason why so many still interpret the CSDP in a reductive manner. The EU is engaging in crisis management operations, in capacity-building, in border security, in defending against hybrid threats. Furthermore, the Lisbon Treaty introduced a Solidarity Clause and a Mutual Assistance Clause. The EU is protecting citizens at home and abroad. The idea that one can ring-fence the CSDP and limit it to peacekeeping has obviously been completely overtaken by events.

Real strategic autonomy requires us to leave the status quo behind and to take a fresh look at both pillars of defence: crisis management and territorial defence.

THE SCOPE OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Even the US expects the EU to achieve autonomy in crisis management. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama sent us the same message: “Sometimes, dear friends, you will be on your own”. The same goes for Donald Trump – he just words it even more succinctly. One of the main reasons is that for the US China is now the main challenger, and Asia the main theatre.

The EU thus needs to engage responsibly in all conflicts in which European interests are more at stake than those of the US. This in turn means that Europe needs the capabilities required to conduct crisis management operations across the spectrum, whenever a crisis emerges, and for as long as it takes to achieve the desired political end-state. If necessary, the EU must be able to address multiple crises at the same time. The EUGS introduces a geographic priority: the EU should assume responsibility first and foremost in its broad neighbourhood (“in the east stretching into Central Asia, and to the south down to Central Africa”). The EUGS also mentions the vital importance of free access to the global commons, however. This is a worldwide challenge, hence the CSDP should also be able to operate worldwide. Not to become the world's policeman, but to be able to defend our vital interests whenever and wherever they are threatened.

In certain cases, Europeans may still contribute to crisis management operations initiated and led by the US, and vice versa. Indeed, NATO can also conduct crisis management operations, in addition to ensuring collective defence. But the US sees NATO more as a “supporting agency” to generate coalitions of the willing for the operations that Washington wants to undertake. The general rule clearly has become that overall autonomy in crisis management is a prerequisite on both sides of the Atlantic. The US has realised that a quarter century ago – it's about time that we do too.

CAPABILITIES FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

History has shown that one should never model one's capabilities on those needed for the last war – but one can draw lessons from previous conflicts.

When the civil war in former Yugoslavia erupted, the ambition to act was there, but

initially the means were lacking. Afterwards the EU translated the required capabilities for such a scenario into the Helsinki Headline Goal: a quickly deployable army corps, supported by a tactical air force equipped with precision-guided munitions. In terms of command and control, that implied a civilian-military headquarters at the strategic level, a force headquarters to conduct the operation in theatre, and a combined air operations centre. Geographically, the theatre of operations in former Yugoslavia was relatively limited, and the various adversaries each possessed but limited military capacity, hence there was no need for large reserves, though of course the long duration of the deployment meant that troops needed to be rotated.

In Libya in 2011, European states once again wanted to take the lead, but two decades after the start of the war in former Yugoslavia the EU still proved unable to act autonomously. Remarkably, no comprehensive approach was adopted to address the crisis. Action was limited to the first phase of a military intervention: neutralising the adversary military through air attack. No civilian-military headquarters was activated at the strategic level. The air campaign required a combined air operations centre, significant stocks of precision-guided munitions, air-to-air refuelling, and intelligence on the theatre of operations. Without appealing to NATO and the US, the after all rather limited military objectives could not have been achieved.

In the campaign in Iraq and Syria, the European countries continue to contribute in full solidarity, through the US-led coalition. While it is too early to draw definite conclusions from this conflict, one lesson already stands out: given the presence of sophisticated Russian air defence systems, Europe urgently needs the capacity to deploy the next generation fighter aircraft.

As conflicts tend to endure over many years and even decades, in various regions, while new threats (such as hybrid challenges and cyber-attacks) have emerged, it has become ever more likely that in the future Europe will have to address several large-scale conflicts simultaneously, and might even be forced to deploy reserve units to reinforce ongoing operations. The EU will not be able to cope if too many actors continue to interpret the Headline Goal in a fragmented way, as a composite of brigades and battalions, which they can only imagine to be deployed piecemeal, on small-scale and low-risk operations, against militarily inferior opponents not too far from Europe. Such deployments will seldom achieve the desired strategic effect.

Today, strategic autonomy in crisis management requires several immediately deployable army corps, and equivalent air and naval forces, that can be projected without geographic limits and until the desired political end-state has been achieved. These forces must possess sufficient intelligence, be protected against cyber-attacks, and be able to call upon pre-identified reserves. A strategic-level military headquarters must be available for immediate activation, without any preconditions or limitations, hence it must be permanent. Success depends on preventive action and quick deployment into theatre, which requires that the operational plans are elaborated beforehand and that troops are kept in a sufficient state of readiness. On top of it all, a civilian-military strategic headquarters must ensure an integrated approach.

COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Article 5 is NATO's *raison d'être*. The collective defence guarantee obviously is vital for Europe – but is it still for the US? The answer is yes. The strategic focus of the US is indeed on China, the only actor that could equal or even overtake the US in terms of power. Russia has a lot of nuisance power, but can no longer

threaten US predominance. But in this strategic competition, an old strategic truth remains valid: the power that has Europe on its side, has the potential to dominate world affairs. China and Russia also know this, hence their attempts to gain influence and/or to divide and subvert the EU and NATO. For the US this means that preventing its links with Europe from being cut or, worse, Europe changing sides, is a matter of national security. NATO remains vital to both Europe and the US.

However, the European interest obviously is more directly at stake, because European territory is more directly threatened than the American homeland. To keep NATO relevant and resilient, a new transatlantic equilibrium is necessary, including in the area of collective defence. This surpasses the debate on burden-sharing. It's not just about which % of GDP allies need to spend on defence, but about which degree of autonomy allies on either side of the Atlantic need, which military capabilities that requires and, as importantly, which military planning can deliver them.

A new equilibrium entails first of all that the European countries need a sufficient degree of autonomy to allow them to take charge of crisis management each time their interests are more at stake than those of the US. But in addition it entails that the European members of NATO, who with the US and Canada are "co-responsible" for collective defence, must assume "first responsibility" for their own territorial defence, and provide the major share of the military capabilities that this requires. In budgetary terms this does not just mean that the Europeans must contribute more than 50% of the defence expenditure dedicated to the defence of Europe – that they are doing already. The challenge is to achieve the same level of cost-effectiveness as the US in its defence spending.

MILITARY PLANNING

The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) constantly recalibrates the military requirements in view of the changing threat. The requirements for NATO as a whole are translated into targets for every individual Ally. However, no provision is made for a subgroup, such as the European Allies and partners, to collectively acquire all capabilities required to allow them to act autonomously in certain scenarios. If it is not planned for, it will not happen by accident. To the contrary, the legacy of the Cold War, during which the US contributed the strategic enablers and the Europeans Allies focused almost exclusively on tactical assets, can be felt to this day.

It is up to the EU Member States to align their national defence planning in order to achieve the capability mix that will generate the desired European strategic autonomy within the overall NATO level of ambition. In CARD, the EU now has exactly the right instrument to provide top-down guidance at the highest level – Heads of State and Government – to both the EU institutions and the Member States. If CARD works, national defence plans will gradually, and in all sovereignty, end up being more and more aligned. Unnecessary duplications will disappear and strategic assets that individual countries cannot afford will be acquired collectively. This is the core of PESCO. Divergences will occur between the various national defence plans, in particular with regard to participation in individual capability projects. But within the binding framework of PESCO, flexibility is possible: not everybody needs to participate in every project at the same time, as long as nobody breaks overall solidarity by refusing to contribute. In short: the EU has the full toolbox to decide on an adequate military level of ambition and to generate the required capabilities, in an affordable manner.

CONCLUSION: FOR NATO, FIRST EUROPE

Everybody remembers the “3 Ds”, Madeline Albright’s first reaction to European defence: no decoupling, no discrimination, no duplication. Today, we should keep in mind “3 Cs”: there is no competition, no contradiction and certainly no conspiracy. What we do have between the EU and NATO is a “4th C”: an agreement on complementarity. The failed experiment of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) in the early 1990s proved that establishing a European entity within NATO doesn’t work. Trying “simply” to merge two asymmetrical

entities like the CSDP and NATO will not work either, but rather risks destabilising both. It is through the EU and alongside NATO that the Europeans can achieve strategic autonomy.

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