



CSDP and NATO Post-Libya: Towards the Rubicon?

Jolyon Howorth

In the wake of Libya and the American pivot to Asia, CSDP-NATO relations must be recalibrated. The buzz word for CSDP should be: integrated through the EU and empowered through NATO.

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is currently approaching its Rubicon. For twenty years, the member states dallied with cooperation in security and defence policy. But when the Libyan crisis broke in spring 2011, their willingness and their ability to handle a regional operation of medium intensity were shown to be severely wanting. It is difficult to over-state the extent to which Libya was precisely the type of mission for which the EU, ever since its collective defection in the Balkans in the early 1990s, had been preparing. Yet, when push came to shove, political divisions and military inadequacy rode roughshod over strategic necessity. In the most serious crisis on the EU's borders since the birth of CSDP, the Union proved quite incapable of action. This raises an existential question: are the EU member states serious about being in the security and defence business at all? How much are they prepared to pay for it? Will they decide to actually cross the

Rubicon or will they take fright at their own temerity and abandon the CSDP experiment?

Free-riding is a deeply engrained European habit. For forty years, West Europeans became accustomed to dependence on the United States, via NATO, for their very survival. Debates over burden-sharing were constant. Even during the Cold War, all too few long-term NATO member states came close to spending the agreed NATO target of 3% of GDP on "defence". By 2010, only three of them, the UK, France and Greece, spent above the new post-Cold War benchmark of 2%, while the remaining 21 European member states of NATO spent an average of 1.3%. With the end of the Cold War, there was a scramble in Central and Eastern Europe for NATO membership. By 2004, ten former members of the Warsaw Pact had been admitted and these were joined in 2009 by Albania and Croatia. To secure membership, all these states temporarily boosted their defence spending. But by 2010, none of them was spending 2% and half of them were closer to 1%. In 1990, the US covered 60% of NATO's overall expenditure. By 2011, the figure was 75%. There is little wonder that, in his valedictory speech in June 2011, Defence

Secretary Robert Gates warned that if this pattern continued, the new generation of US politicians, who had not come of age during the Cold War, would cease to feel that the US investment in NATO was worthwhile.

Some say that Europe, in 2012, faces no real threats. Why therefore should it devote large sums to “defence”? Europe may be internally at peace with itself. But can it count on continuing to live in peace? A mere glance at the map is sufficient to answer in the negative. From the Arctic Circle (the latest “new frontier”) to the Baltic Sea and down to the Black Sea, from the Bosphorus to the Straits of Gibraltar, destabilisation hovers around the EU’s entire periphery. The Middle East, Europe’s “next abroad”, is in effervescence and the Caucasus the site of multiple frozen (and not so frozen) conflicts. The sea-lanes which facilitate Europe’s trade with the rest of the world, from the Suez Canal to Shanghai, are rife with piracy and emerging-power naval rivalries. To imagine that the EU can rely on its own internal Kantian pact to avoid engagement with a turbulent external world is not simply naïve. It is irresponsible.

CSDP HAS ISSUES

CSDP faces three main sets of problems. First, in addition to disagreements with the US over burden-sharing, there is the growing reality of American military disengagement from Europe. In relative terms, this has been inevitable since the fall of the Berlin Wall. There is no doubt that the US and the EU remain each other’s most important partners in an emerging multi-polar world. In terms of economics, trade and investment, the transatlantic relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. But from a strategic perspective, the US no longer sees Europe as the centre of gravity of its military effort. The January 2012 US *Strategic Guidance* paper makes it clear that henceforth America’s focus will be on the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East. There is an unequivocal assumption (always implicit but

occasionally explicit) that Washington expects Europe increasingly to assume responsibility for crisis management in its own neighbourhood. The pressure on the Europeans to stand up and be counted is mounting. The Libyan mission *Operation Unified Protector* introduced the concept of the United States “leading from behind”. This was technically a misnomer. Without massive US military inputs, the Libyan mission could not have been brought to a (relatively) successful conclusion. But the Obama administration’s insistence that Europeans should at least be *perceived* to be “taking the lead” in Libya represented a paradigm shift in both political and symbolic ways. The US signalled quite clearly that, henceforth, it wished to transfer responsibility, in the European theatre, to the Europeans. We may still be a long way from the full operationalization of such a shift, but there is no doubt which way the balance must swing. Europeans have been served notice that Uncle Sam believes it is time they came of strategic age. In order for this to happen, leadership in the European area is going to have to change hands. As long as the US either insists upon or (de facto) assumes leadership in Europe, the Europeans will continue to free-ride and will continue to fail to deliver.

The second main problem has to do with military (and civilian) capacity for the mounting of overseas missions under CSDP. So much has now been written about the need for “pooling and sharing” that it is difficult to say anything new or different. Many pooling and sharing projects have already been initiated. The Belgian and Dutch navies formed a single integrated command in the 1990s. In 2010, the European Air Transport Command (EATC) was established at Eindhoven Airbase in the Netherlands. It offers a joint set of assets to the air transport fleets of France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. The European defence ministers, meeting in Ghent on 9 December 2010, agreed to examine ways of categorising

defence assets under three heads: those that, for reasons of strategic imperative, would remain under national control but could be made more interoperable at EU level; those that could offer potential for pooling; and those that could be re-examined on the basis of role- and task-sharing. In November 2011, the European Defence Agency (EDA) identified eleven priority areas for cooperative development, including helicopter pilot training, maritime surveillance, medical field hospitals, air-to-air refuelling, future military

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satellite communications, ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), and smart munitions. In March 2012, the EDA Steering Board adopted a Franco-German-Dutch project for the joint procurement of air-to-air refuelling aircraft. Much is already happening. The problem is that it is essentially a small handful of the same EU member states which are actively engaged in European initiatives, while the majority take refuge in discursive support. For pooling and sharing to be seriously effective in terms of deployable European capacity, significant transfers of sovereignty will have to be agreed. This may be painful for some member states, but it will be less painful than the total *loss of sovereignty* implied in a given nation-state being unable to guarantee its own security.

This introduces the third problem – which is also the most serious. It is the sheer poverty of political will and the widespread risk-aversion which afflicts so many EU member states. It is the total absence within the EU of any strategic vision. It is the lack, at EU level, of any sign of leadership. Without a clear sense of strategic objectives – or at a very minimum some clear notion of what it is the EU is attempting to

achieve in the world – issues of capacity and responsibility become almost meaningless. There is an urgent need for a trans-European debate about the real ambitions and objectives of CSDP. In an age when inter-state conflict seems to be on the wane and when Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated the limited *political* usefulness of military force, what sort of role do the Europeans wish to play in the world – particularly in their own back-yard? What role should military capacity play in their projects? How do they understand power – their own and that of others? Assuming they can reach agreement on any of these issues, they then need to start planning. For that, they need a strategic planning agency. They need more meetings of the Council of Defence Ministers *à la Ghent*. They need the synthesis of those *national* strategic plans that already exist. They need a *European Defence Review*. They need a *European strategic plan*.

For twenty years, CSDP has muddled through in an ad-hoc way. That is no longer an option. Libya demonstrated unequivocally that, even after twenty years of preparation, the EU’s capacity to mount a significant military mission in its own backyard is grossly inadequate. It can be argued that it is difficult and requires time to coordinate the efforts of twenty-seven sovereign member states. Perhaps, but time is not likely to wait for those states to catch up. History is on the march. Risks and threats are on the rise, not simply on the EU’s direct periphery, but across the globe. To fail to produce a policy and a strategy for coping with them is indeed to risk irrelevance. To date, those responsible for delivering CSDP have insisted on the importance of “autonomy” as a motivating dynamic and an organisational principle. In order not to be stifled at birth by their powerful transatlantic cousins, or micro-managed by NATO, the Europeans-as-international-actors, it was asserted, needed to find their own way in the world, to carve their own path towards actorness. In the initial

stages of CSDP, this approach made perfect sense. Alas, the quest for autonomy has not delivered either the necessary political will or the appropriate material capacity. There is little reason for confidence that another twenty years of the same processes will produce substantially different results. As one that, for the past twenty years, fully supported – and attempted to theorise – the need for autonomy, I now believe this is the wrong approach going forward. It is time to re-think the relationship between CSDP and NATO, which, in practice, has led to sub-optimal performance on the part of both, to dysfunctional practices at both institutional and operational levels, to many crossed political wires, and to much waste of resources and effort. As long as this continues, neither NATO nor CSDP is likely to achieve its true objectives.

NATO HAS ISSUES

In the early stages of the 2011 Libyan crisis, there were some, particularly in France, who thought it possible that the EU might mount a CSDP military mission under a UN mandate to implement the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Others imagined a Franco-British lead. In the event, the mission became – almost by default – a “NATO mission”. I use the inverted commas because questions must be asked about the very nature of an alliance half of whose members were objectively opposed to the mission. Furthermore, NATO’s own internal review of *Operation Unified Protector* reveals that the mission was very far from being an unqualified military success. This raises some important questions about NATO itself. There are three key issues here: the nature of the alliance; the type and scale of cooperation; and leadership.

The constraints of the Cold War and bipolarity dictated tight solidarity between all alliance members in all parts of the globe. NATO was truly an *alliance* as traditionally understood. Yet post-1989, in the absence of any existential nuclear or other type of threat, and in a multi-polar world, regional crises have

an impact on NATO’s member state interests in very different ways. There is little likelihood of unanimity on anything, particularly at great distances from Europe. The “alliance” has become a mechanism for generating coalitions of the willing. Donald Rumsfeld was (for once) correct: “the mission determines the coalition”. NATO’s most recent attempt at self-definition, the 2010 *New Strategic Concept*, is in reality neither new, nor strategic. Nor is it even a concept. It is a document which contains something fairly vague for everybody, but nothing very precise for anybody. Although NATO’s Prague summit in 2002 declared that distinctions between “in area” and “out of area” were no longer valid and that the alliance could operate throughout the world, and although this precept has been implemented in Afghanistan, there is henceforth very little prospect of European forces signing up to support US grand strategy around the globe. The US drive for a “Global Alliance” or for a “League of Democracies” never found favour with Europeans and has probably been administered the *coup de grâce* by the experience of Afghanistan, which, however strong the official spin may be, is almost certain to be judged by history as a military and political failure. Washington is, in any case, more comfortable with multiple bilateralisms than with ever more complicated formal alliances, as the recent agreement with Australia and the constant quest for new partnerships indicate. NATO’s Chicago summit in May 2012 formally kept all options on the table, but on-going questions about the real nature and purpose of NATO are unlikely to be resolved any time soon. NATO itself needs a radical re-think.

CSDP AND NATO: STARTING AFRESH

As for CSDP, assuming, in the wake of Libya, that it continues to move towards the Rubicon, its cooperation with NATO remains more crucial than ever. It is, I would argue, only through the NATO framework that CSDP can actually achieve operational effectiveness and,

eventually, autonomy. That suggests three things.

- First, it means that the Alliance should come back to Europe – including its entire periphery. It should be explicitly re-designated as a mechanism for guaranteeing regional stability in the European area and its neighbourhood. That stability, unlike during the Cold War, will not be secured through a balance of nuclear forces or through existential deterrence, but through the development of a serious capacity for regional crisis management. Collective security will complement collective defence.
- Second, it means that NATO and CSDP must stop seeing one another as rivals in a beauty contest or as contenders for a functional or spatial division of labour. The sterile quarrels over duplication in general and HQs in particular must be transcended. In a world of shrinking resources, it must be recognised that *European* forces and capacity, whether deployed via NATO or CSDP are all drawn from the same pool. At the level of procurement, the dynamics of pooling and sharing should be concentrated in the EU. It makes no sense to have two separate processes, one operating within NATO (smart defence) and another within the EU. There is very little chance that mere coordination of national means would suffice to meet European requirements. Shared sovereignty is only meaningful if accompanied by policy convergence and shared security and strategic objectives – in other words, a process of political integration. Pooling and sharing have political, economic, industrial and operational implications. The EU is a global political project, whereas NATO deals “merely” with security. The EU is also the framework within which Europe generates common interests. Logically, therefore, it is the place where these interests can best be harmonised at the level of the defence

industrial base. There is no question that this European procurement process should be conducted in tight liaison with NATO, but the EU framework is indispensable. The role of the EDA should be central and *Allied Command Transformation* (ACT) should be transformed into an agency which ensures liaison with the US defence industrial base.

- Third, there must gradually and progressively be an institutional and political merger between CSDP and NATO. This sounds outrageously radical, but in reality the structures of CSDP were modelled on those of NATO and the permanent representatives to the two military committees are, for the most part, the same individuals. Enhanced cooperation will, over time, lead to integration. This paper is not the place to go into the details. The key issue is the direction in which the two entities should be moving. The US position over Libya indicates a way forward.

Operational leadership must increasingly be assumed by the Europeans. This will require serious restraint on the part of Washington and extreme seriousness of purpose on the part of the Europeans. CSDP must acquire operational autonomy *through and within* NATO and the Americans must learn to take a genuine back-seat. Progressively the balance within the Alliance must shift to one in which the Europeans are doing the vast majority of the heavy-lifting in their own back-yard, and the Americans are acting largely as force enablers. There should be a return to the original structures of the 1949 Treaty. There is no reason why SACEUR could not be a European flag officer. The European caucus within NATO, far from being taboo, must become the corner-stone of the Alliance. Europeans must stop believing that NATO cannot work without US leadership. However, this proposal also depends critically on US

willingness to accept regional leadership by the Europeans. If that willingness is absent, then the entire experiment with European security and defence, whether CSDP or an enhanced NATO, will fail.

CONCLUSION

To those with reasonable memories, this recalibration of the CSDP-NATO relationship may look strangely familiar. It recalls the experiment with the *European Security and Defence Identity* (ESDI) of the mid-1990s. This was the initial attempt to square the circles of European military incapacity, American political disengagement, and actual regional turbulence which constituted the transatlantic response to the Balkan crises. But there is one huge difference. ESDI was predicated on continuing US primacy and American leadership of an alliance in which Europeans would simply play a more functional and operational, but subordinate, role. It was informed by Washington-imposed conditionality (Albright's "3 Ds"). The US would retain a "right of first refusal". The present proposal, by contrast, is for an arrangement whereby the Europeans will be encouraged to take over leadership in order to allow the Americans to disengage properly. It is, therefore, in this sense, the direct opposite of ESDI. In the 1990s the ESDI buzz word was "separable but not separate". The new 21st century buzz word for CSDP should be "integrated through the EU and empowered through NATO".

I recognise there are huge practical problems in going forward. These should not be projected as obstacles to a progressive merger which nevertheless makes sense. This is not an exercise in institutional tinkering. It is the most effective way in which Europe as a consequential security actor can actually emerge. The alternative, for Europeans, is to give up and simply submit to whatever a rapidly changing world delivers. That is no alternative.

Prof. Dr. Jolyon HOWORTH is Jean Monnet Professor of European Politics at the University of Bath (UK). He has been a Visiting Professor of Political Science at Yale since 2002.

The Security Policy Brief is a publication of Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations

EGMONT
Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be

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