



Seven steps to European Defence, Transatlantic Equilibrium, and Global Europe

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***Panta rhei* – everything flows (Heraclitus). Once again, geopolitics is in transition, and a new crossroads is being approached. While we already knew that global leadership is beyond any single country, now it appears to be beyond even any single continent – beyond an alliance of two continents even. This means that the old strategic truth, that the power that has Europe on its side has the potential to dominate the world, no longer holds. Europe no longer is the kingmaker. And that changes a lot, for the EU, the US, and the world.**

It feels like a return to the 19th century, except that instead of a “concert of nations” we are seeing a “concert of continents”. The concert was the result, in 1815, of intense diplomatic consultations with the aim of limiting tensions between the powers and maintaining peaceful competition. Over time, however, confrontations emerged. Settled at first with “limited” military means, these ultimately led to the cataclysm of World War One. Today again several great powers no longer distinguish between competition and confrontation, and use military means

(often as part of a hybrid approach) to acquire influence and even territory.

At a time when we are facing global challenges, such as the climate crisis, this is very short-sighted. While the latter is not the topic of this paper, it is obvious that a global climate policy and global peace and security policy go hand in hand. Both are of an existential nature.

Since the “concert of continents” shows little harmony, we should in a first step aspire to a peace and security policy at continental level. For Europe that first of all means the EU, which can then enter into partnership with other continent-sized players, notably the US. But America’s security policy no longer focuses primarily on Europe, hence a new transatlantic relationship is required, between two equal and autonomous players within the “concert of continents”.

This paper will propose seven recommendations to build a true European defence and a transatlantic equilibrium that transcends the existing dialogue within NATO, while doing away with the known obstacles on this path.

The fact that seven decades after World War Two we still struggle with this question is a result of two

tenacious delusions, which consciously or unconsciously are being maintained on both sides of the Atlantic. First, the idea that defence is not in the DNA of the EU. Second, that the existence of NATO does not leave space for an EU defence policy. Both prejudices must be absolutely overcome in order to maintain durable transatlantic cooperation and allow the EU to achieve its political ambitions.

TWO DELUSIONS

Delusion 1: Defence Is not Part of the DNA of the EU

After the Second World War, European integration and European defence were the two innovative strategic objectives that marked the vision of the authoritative leaders of (Western) Europe. These were the two pillars of the *The Treaty of Economic, Social and Cultural Collaboration and Collective Self-Defence*, better known as the Brussels Treaty, signed in 1948 by France, the UK, and the Benelux countries. This dual-track approach of broad societal integration and common defence (including an unconditional mutual defence commitment and joint command structures) was seen as a precondition to prevent the European countries from becoming mere objects of the strategies of the superpowers. Indirectly, this paved the way for the creation of NATO in 1949 – which at the time was apparently seen as eminently compatible with European integration. It is often said though that in 1954, when the French parliament voted against the European Defence Community, the “military gene” was irreversibly cut out of the European DNA.¹ But that same year the Modified Brussels Treaty created the Western European Union (WEU), with a more stringent collective defence commitment than NATO.²

After the fall of the Wall in 1989, and the failure of the WEU, the UN, NATO and the EU in the early 1990s to intervene adequately in the Yugoslav civil war, France and the UK together took the initiative (in Saint-Malo in 1998) to de facto transplant the WEU to the EU, so as to allow for “autonomous” European crisis management operations. Sadly, shortly afterwards both countries found

themselves at opposite sides of the dispute over the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a fact which caused more than a decade of collateral damage to the project. Now, after Brexit, we are facing the necessity and the possibility to accelerate the building of an EU defence in cooperation with third countries such as the UK.

Reading the European Treaties, the conclusions of the European Council, and the guidance and competences allocated to the various EU agencies and institutions, one must conclude that for CSDP “the sky is the limit”. Even the peaceful use of space is possible in the framework of European defence. Defence clearly is an area of EU competence, in other words. It is part of the EU’s DNA just as much as transatlantic cooperation. That too has a treaty basis, which brings us seamlessly to NATO.

Delusion 2: An EU Pillar Within NATO

70 years ago, US objectives were to avoid being involved a third time in a war in Europe; to halt the expansion of communism from the Soviet Union; and to end colonial or post-colonial military adventures by its European “partners” (witness Suez). Under American guidance in NATO, after about a decade these European partners should be able to provide for their own territorial defence. If not, the first SACEUR, General Eisenhower felt, NATO would have failed. Meanwhile Western Europe was gently placed under politico-military guardianship.

The East-West divide became global and structural, however, and NATO stayed in place. Within the Alliance, a de facto division of labour emerged. The Europeans provided tactical units, stationed alongside the Iron Curtain. So did the US – but it also proved the strategic capabilities and directed the strategic headquarters. The US thus became NATO’s main shareholder or “lead nation”. Washington, and Washington only – eventually in a dialogue with Moscow – set the strategic course of the Alliance: that was the essence of the NATO consensus. The side effect was that many European countries began to behave as minority shareholders, looking upon NATO as an insurance, and giving in to the temptation to limit

their own contribution to the minimum acceptable – or even just below.

After the fall of the Wall, the then NATO Secretary-General – like all of his predecessors and indeed all of his successors – spoke of an “existential crisis” in the Alliance. As on previous occasions, internal adaptation followed, characterised by the aspiration to assume more responsibilities, under the heading “out of area or out of business”. In the new area (for NATO) of crisis management operations, the same pattern emerged: Washington decided on the strategic objectives of the operation, the Europeans were asked to assist with tactical capabilities. This notably marked the intervention in Afghanistan, in which NATO was but a “supporting agency”.

The previous decade has seen the US “pivot” to Asia, focusing on countries and regions that often are not on the European radar screen – a logical consequence of the fact that the US does not only border on the Atlantic. This also explains why for crisis management, Washington prefers ad hoc coalitions over NATO operations. For interventions in regions where the EU interest is primarily at stake, the message since President Bush Jr already has been: “Dear European friends, you will be on your own”. “Out of area or out of business” has become, at least for the US, “out of sight, out of mind” – just as in 1992, when the civil war in Yugoslavia started. What NATO can still do is play a supporting role in American or European crisis management operations, if there is consensus.

Nevertheless, for the US, NATO remains a unique forum to advance its policies and reach “consensus” – one of the pillars of its global security and defence policy, part and parcel of its National Security Strategy. The defence of the US’ own territory obviously is *vital*. In this perspective, the territorial integrity of its European allies is *crucial*. Hence the provisions for *essential* assistance when and where necessary – for the US, that is the essence of Article 5.

Europeans ought to use NATO in similar fashion, as part and parcel of the EU Global Strategy. A strategy aimed at

the EU’s *vital* interests, for which the territorial integrity of other NATO allies is *crucial*, who can therefore count on *essential* mutual assistance. Both sides of the Atlantic must understand Article 5 in this manner: a duty to act as first responder in defence of one’s own territory, calling on assistance from allies when necessary. But this insurance does not relieve one of the duty to provide sufficient capabilities for one’s own defence.

Meanwhile, warfare keeps evolving, as technology and doctrine develops, new dimensions such as space and cyber are explored, and economic, ecologic and political change affect the strategic environment – including the rise and fall of great powers. A military alliance must keep track of what this means for warfare. At the same time, dealing with China requires a holistic approach, which is notably elaborated in other, more comprehensive forums than NATO: EU-US Summits, the G7, etc. The newly created EU-US Trade and Technology Council, and the announcement of a similar format on security and defence, are examples. There exists a hierarchy, in other words, and a division of labour between international institutions. NATO’s role is to deduce the military implications from geopolitical developments, and to propose its members which actions to take. This implies a warning: if an organisation, in order to stay relevant, develops a bureaucratic tendency to assume ever more tasks, it creates a black hole that absorbs everything but no longer emits anything. Brain death is then not far off – “back to basics” is better.

This ought to demonstrate that an EU pillar in NATO is a delusion. Rather than the EU being a pillar of NATO, the opposite is true: NATO is one of the pillars on which the EU builds, just as it is one of the pillars of US strategy. Forever picturing NATO as the elephant in the room is no more than a convenient excuse not to build a true European defence – or to mask economic objectives. From now on, this is for historians to debate. *Panta rhei*.

SEVEN STEPS

One of the actors that keep NATO relevant is the EU. “Defence matters”, as the EU declared some years ago,

has become a matter of urgency in a Union in which process matters. In recent years, the EU has created more or less all of the institutions and instruments to potentially wage an effective security and defence policy. But the puzzle does not fit. There is a lack of direction, absent a top-down policy that sets clear political objectives. Fitting analysis is still produced and strategies elaborated in a bottom-up manner, but a true political assessment is rarely arrived at. This explains why in a crisis the EU is limited to launching military or civilian missions, or taking economic measures, of a homeopathic nature – with predictably feeble results. Or it reverts to symbolism, such as creating Battlegroups which it then never deploys.

History shows, however, that faced with a matter of urgency the EU usually manages to fit the institutional puzzle together and advance, as when it deals with financial crisis, the pandemic, or climate change. The EU has now reached such a tipping point in security and defence. The following seven steps ought to streamline EU instruments and lift them to a higher level, starting from the top.

Step 1: A European Security Council

Various ideas have been advanced to create a European Security Council.³ In any case, no treaty change is required: it suffices to accord the label of “European Union Security Council” (EUSC) to a European Council meeting. This would operate just as a regular European Council, but respecting seven guidelines.

First, the agenda: the EUSC would focus exclusively on matters of international security and defence. Second, strategic foresight: the EUSC would invite the HR/VP to regularly review the EU Global Strategy, and commit to take follow-up actions to ensure that the strategy is underpinned by the required capabilities put forward by Member States and the relevant EU institutions (more on this below). Third, launching operations: it would be the forum to decide on the launching of any EU operation and, to specify, unambiguously, the desired political outcome. Fourth, partners: the EUSC would decide

which partner countries and international organisations to consult about potential participation. Fifth, the required means: the EUSC must ensure that for each EU operation the required assets and capabilities will be generated by overlooking the “capability-generation conferences” and take additional measures whenever necessary. Sixth, follow-up: the EUSC would commit to take follow-up actions until the desired political end-state is reached. Seven, decision-making: the EUSC would take decisions (such as launching or ending an EU military operation) by consensus (i.e. business as usual), making use of constructive abstention when necessary. In line with the Treaty, the EUSC would entrust the execution of an operation – within the Union framework – to a group of Member States having declared to actively take part by providing assets and capabilities.

That last point deserves to be elaborated. Here too a prejudice must be done away with, one of a legal nature, concerning the interpretation of the Treaty where it says that the opportunities for decision-making in the Council by qualified majority do not apply to “decisions having military or defence implications”. The Treaty also states, however, (in Art. 42.5) that “the Council may entrust the execution of a task, within the Union framework, to a group of Member States in order to protect the Union’s values and serve its interests”. The reality is that Member States that would decide not to participate in an envisaged operation are de facto absolved from any “military or defence implication”. Thus even on military operations, the Council could decide by what can and ought to be understood as a particular kind of qualified majority. The Member States who would not participate in the operation could, of course, still invoke a veto, but that ought only to be acceptable if their national security, in the narrowest sense, is directly threatened by the proposed operation – and it is hard to imagine that the EU would ever propose a military operation that would endanger the vital interests of one of its own Member States.

Admittedly, this is a creative interpretation of the Treaty. It may not make much difference in practice. But nearly all military operations that the EU has undertaken so far

have been instances of “so few doing so much in the name of so many” – that too is a very creative way of behaving. Therefore majority decisions on military action ought to be possible – but this really is *Chefsache*, so a matter for the EUSC (whose de facto decisions the Council can subsequently formalise).

Step 2: EU Global Strategy

The publication of an EUGS by the HR/VP must be an endpoint as well as a new start in a cyclical process. Based on a foresight analysis spanning the next 5 to 30 years, a new EUGS must be elaborated after every European election, involving all relevant EU institutions and in consultation with the Member States. Contrary to the 2016 EUGS, which specified only the political level of ambition, the military level of ambition must be clarified as well. The ongoing process to draft a Strategic Compass seeks to fill this gap at the moment, but in future this must become part and parcel of the EUGS process. The HR/VP must appoint the penholder(s), avoiding “comitology”. The aim is for the EUSC in the end to explicitly accept the EUGS as guidance or to reject it – there is no space for ambiguity here.

Step 3: EU Military Capability Planning

The EU already has the structures in place for capability planning, be it that they are understaffed. The similarities with NATO and even US planning are obvious, except that in the EU the order of work has been turned upside down.

In the US, the National Security Strategy serves as the basis for military planning. In a second step, the US will assess whether commitments entered into in the framework of NATO require additional capabilities, over and above those required for national needs. As stated above, for the US, NATO is a complementary pillar, also in its military planning.

This should not be different for the EU. But the reality is that EU Member States that are also members of NATO

first of all align their national planning with NATO’s overall requirements, and more specifically with their “apportioned” share thereof. Subsequently, they “justify” their planned contribution and investments at “peer pressure meetings” at NATO HQ. After which most of the time they can only conclude that no national budgetary (or political) space is left to contribute capabilities to the EU over and above what has already been allocated to NATO. This is why the “strategic” shortfalls that the EU identified in 1999 already, when it defined the Helsinki Headline Goal, in order to be able to launch in the end relatively modest operations, have still not been filled. It is, obviously, not up to the US or other NATO countries that are not members of the EU to include these needs in their planning.

In order to break through this vicious cycle, EU Member States ought first of all to base their military planning on the EUGS (including the Strategic Compass), and explain their respective military contributions in “EU Member States Chapters”. In a next step, a series of “capability conferences” ought to systematically resolve all remaining shortfalls. Of course, the EU planning process ought to follow the same rhythm as NATO planning. Just like the US, EU Member States will still have to assess whether NATO requires additional capability efforts over and above what they plan for on the basis of the EUGS. The EUSC can and probably will be called upon to act as the catalyst for a successful completion of this planning cycle. For planning without ever taking to action is meaningless.

Step 4: An EU Strategic-Military HQ

The EU’s current strategic-military HQ is understaffed, and at the same time too strongly embedded in and fragmented across other EU structures. In this regard, there are no similarities with NATO – not that that is a necessity. Such a strategic-military HQ has a distinctive character and must not be confused with a political-strategic decision-making body. Politico-military coordination and a comprehensive approach are crucial, but this plays at a higher level – a strategic-military HQ is not the same as the EEAS (although co-locating them

would, of course, be beneficial).

For every operation, the strategic-military HQ must reflect the countries that contribute the troops. It must therefore be flexible, have sufficient in-house expertise in order to act immediately, while having trained “augmentees” from the countries on call. It also requires specific technical assets. Fortunately, the foundation already exists. The investment required to upgrade existing structures to the level of ambition required by the EUGS is negligible compared to the risks (financial, political, and for life and limbs) of deploying without an adequate HQ. In that sense, the upgrade is a matter of urgency. The EU Military Committee is best placed to take the lead on this.

Step 5: EU Tactical Headquarters – A Brussels Plus Agreement

The tactical headquarters for all types of EU operation that are now being envisaged, exist on European soil. Often several Member States have relevant HQs available, notably for land forces. In some scenarios, however, it may be advisable or even necessary to have recourse to specific NATO HQs on European soil, such as an Air Command and Control Centre.

In order to avoid unnecessary duplication (pace Madeleine Albright), the existing Berlin Plus Agreement must be upgraded into a Brussels Plus Agreement. First of all, the EU Member States must be the “main supplier” of these NATO HQs, in terms of investment and operational budgets as well as – most importantly – qualified personnel. In practice, this often is already the case today. One point requires special attention, though. If certain NATO countries, for political reasons, do not want to be associated with a specific EU operation, not even through their participation in a NATO HQ, they must have the right to withdraw their personnel. Up to the EU countries then to immediately replace them with the necessary augmentees.

The quintessence of a Brussels Plus Agreement is that following a formal request from the EU to NATO, allocating the requested tactical HQ is automatic. This is a vital part of both transatlantic and European cohesion and

equilibrium. Times have changed since the 2002 Berlin Plus arrangement – an update is more than timely.

Step 6: Military Capabilities – A Comprehensive Approach

Strategy and military planning when not followed by the acquisition of the required military capabilities, are but a hallucination. And yet precisely in this regard the EU’s reputed comprehensive approach leaves to be desired.

We are facing a capability landscape that, according to the first CARD report by the EDA “is characterised by high levels of fragmentation and low investment in cooperation”. Reference is made to Member States, their industrial policies, and industrial reality. This amounts to an urgent appeal for more comprehensiveness at every level. Including – even in the first instance – at the level of the EU. Yet the latter goes without mention in the EDA’s report.

The time is past in which the Commission regarded defence industry as just another branch of industry that did not require any specific policy. In the areas of space, cyber, and research & technology, the Commission has now elaborated dedicated policies. The moment has arrived for the Commission to put the “military” at the same level as cyber, space, and technology, with a dedicated capability development process, budgetary governance (of similar size), institutional set-up, and supporting agencies. Guidance by the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission is crucial to ensure coherence.

PESCO is a valuable cooperation agreement between the “willing” Member States, who first of all are looking for ways to address common needs as efficiently as possible. Their input must be preserved, including their Ministers of Defence and their representatives in the EDA and the EU Military Committee, as well as the input from the EU Military Staff. It is up to the Commission to provide adequate incentives to stimulate these “willing” Member States to acquire the capabilities required by the defence planning process described above. Current incentives are

insufficient, and procedures too cumbersome.

In order to end the fragmentation of the defence landscape, a Commissioner for the “military” (or for “military capabilities”) is called for to assist the HR/VP. A re-engineered EDA will also have its place in this new constellation, as will a European Defence Fund with sufficient means that can be put to use creatively.

Step 7: CARD Merged with the Strategic Compass into CoRD

In 2016 the Council invited the HR/VP to conduct a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence. In November 2020 the first final CARD report, for which the EDA was the penholder, was presented to Defence Ministers. As stated above, this report focuses on the lack of cooperation between Member States. There is but limited input from the military; not even from the EU military bodies. The report concludes with 55 collaborative opportunities in capability development; six focus areas to develop spearheading systems; and a series of recommendations to Member States to cooperate more closely with the EDA, notably in the framework of PESCO.

But this first CARD report was neither coordinated, nor annual, nor a review of defence. It rightly referred to the Strategic Compass, to which broader process it sought to contribute. So admittedly this was purely an EDA report. This first complete CARD cycle (2019-2020) has not been a wasted opportunity, though, but points the way towards the second cycle. This must be a genuine “Coordinated Review of Defence” (CoRD), still under the guidance of the HR/VP – but not just in his capacity as Head of the EDA but from the fullness of his competences within the Commission, the EEAS and the EDA. The HR/VP ought to appoint the penholder(s).

Starting point of this CoRD should be a SWOT analysis of European defence in the broadest sense (i.e. all capabilities of Member States, in particular but not only the contributions they can and want to make to the EU), and of the functioning of all relevant institutions (EU and

other). Starting from the existing state of affairs, this reality check probably requires a number of command post and even live exercises, in consultation with Member States. Starting from the EUGS, it must be assessed whether all required action has been undertaken to achieve the desired objectives over the next 5 to 30 years. The ultimate end of CoRD is to formulate concrete recommendations for decision-making, the functioning of the institutions, and the solving of military capability gaps. Identifying a number of opportunities for the short term will not suffice.

Just like in the first cycle, the HR/VP must present the report to the Ministers of Defence, then to be put on the agenda of the EUSC. It follows that the Ministers of Defence must be able to meet in a formal Council format in order to prepare the EUSC, just like their colleagues of Foreign Affairs – or Agriculture. In the end, though, this too is *Chefsache*.

Such a CoRD must systematically precede the review of the EUGS; every subsequent cycle must also assess implementation of this Strategy.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A GLOBAL EUROPE

All happy continents are alike, each unhappy continent is unhappy in its own way (with thanks to Leo Tolstoy for the image). Fortunately, the EU is a prosperous continent, a global trade power, able to pursue its own distinctive policies in its international relations; in more than one area, it sets the tone. Europe’s “misfortune” is her military weakness. The consequences the European Machiavelli already specified in the 16th century: without one’s own armed forces, one can never feel strong and safe, and for that one pays a heavy price in times of peace as of war. That applied to the various principalities on the European scene then; it applies to the EU on the global scene today. As geopolitics is arriving at another crossroads, the EU and the Member States must put on their seven-mile boots and go through the seven above-mentioned steps in order to fit together all the pieces of the puzzle into a coherent policy. That is a precondition to forge a close but balanced transatlantic bond, without any side being under

politico-military guardianship. But even that is no longer sufficient. Since global dominance is beyond the power even of an alliance of two, neither “US first” nor “EU first”, nor even “the US and the EU first” will do the trick. Both the EU and the US will have to behave as responsible actors and position themselves amidst allies, partners, competitors and rivals. In this way, the happiness of the EU can indeed be reconciled with that of the other players in the concert of continents, while it can be safeguarded from the misery that some afflict upon themselves. And yes, to that end, defence matters.

The chaotic US exit from Afghanistan was not a unique

wake-up call. Rather the EU having gone into “snooze mode”, the alarm rang for the fifth time in as many decades. And AUKUS just confirmed the ongoing geopolitical transition. The EU is to stand up now or forever remain a serf. .

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ENDNOTES

¹ At the time, the currency and the armed forces were seen as *the* emanation of national sovereignty. Meanwhile France stood at the cradle of the Euro and is the proponent of strategic autonomy at the EU-level.

² West Germany and Italy joined the WEU as full members and would shortly join NATO as well.

³ Jo Coelmont, [Will a European Security Council Bring Strategic Relevance?](#). Egmont Security Policy Brief No. 124, March 2020.