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The EU Global Strategy, European Defence, NATO, and the CSDP

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Which responsibilities does Europe want to assume as a security provider outside its borders? Which military level of ambition does that political ambition entail? These are some of the most important questions to be answered by the future EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy that the European Council mandated High Representative Federica Mogherini to draft.

In spite of the existence of an elaborate European security architecture, or perhaps precisely because of its complexity, there is today no single body or forum that makes truly European military strategy. That is, strategy spelling out what those European Allies and partners of NATO who at the same time constitute the EU want to be capable of, alone: which autonomous expeditionary operations do they want to be able to undertake, and which military contribution to their internal and border security do they envisage (below the threshold of Article 5)?

Why?

There used to be no need for such a strategy. During the Cold War, the main “front” was Europe, where all military contingencies would automatically be addressed by NATO: European and North American Allies together. The US actively discouraged its European Allies from involvements further afield, wanting Europeans to focus on Europe. That is still the case today, except that the US now wants Europeans to take care of Europe alone.

Not when it comes to territorial defence: as the US has demonstrated in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, it will continue to deter and defend against any aggression aimed at Europe itself. Indeed, until this day deterrence and territorial defence cannot be assured without the US (which should give Europeans pause to think). But when it comes to crises around Europe that do not directly threaten NATO/EU territory, Washington prefers Europeans to take the initiative themselves and to address such crises before they escalate and require large-scale American intervention. The more Europeans manage this, the more the US can focus its time and efforts on its other strategic concerns, notably in Asia. Many in Europe seem to have forgotten that this has actually been American policy ever since the end of the Cold War, which was marked by the beginning of the civil war in Yugoslavia, and the US’ refusal to engage in what it rightly saw as a European problem.

What has changed is that the US no longer insists that Europeans act through NATO. The Alliance remains the US’ organization of choice, because that is where it has a seat around the table, and through NATO it channels the American contribution to the defence of Europe. But what matters most to Washington is that Europeans act when it is necessary to act, regardless of the flag under which any specific action is undertaken. One thing is sure: in very few scenarios will the national flag of any European Ally or partner suffice. Some interventions can start as national operations, but most will require a coalition of Europeans, put together ad hoc or through NATO or the CSDP, and all will require the EU’s political and economic

engagement if the achieved military effect is to produce durable strategic effects. Developing the capabilities that would allow Europeans to intervene alone is equally beyond the means of individual European Allies or partners, certainly when it comes to the strategic enablers that until now the US has had to provide. Furthermore, Europe's internal security and the stability of its broader neighbourhood are increasingly linked, so that even when the threshold of Article 5 is not reached a military contribution may be necessary to assist the civilian security services inside or at the borders of Europe (just as police and other civilian actors often accompany or follow military deployments abroad).

The conclusion is inescapable. Europeans need a collective military strategy that defines:

- (1) Which responsibilities they want to assume as a security provider outside their borders while contributing to their internal security?
- (2) Which military level of ambition that political ambition entails?

Who?

This is a dimension of strategy that NATO until now did not address. The Alliance's Strategic Concept and defence planning process are geared to defining a level of ambition for NATO as a whole, from which capability objectives for each individual Ally are derived. While at times NATO encouraged collective European capability efforts, most recently under the banner of Smart Defence, collective European strategic initiatives have always been a red line for the US and the UK. Furthermore, in the wake of the Russian intervention in Ukraine the Alliance is refocusing on its core role of collective defence, with a particular emphasis on Europe's eastern border, and seems but little inclined to strategize about expeditionary operations and Europe's southern border, let alone the rest of the world (although there are voices in NATO Headquarters pleading against an all too exclusive focus on Article 5 and Russia).

The EU only ever addressed part of what a European military strategy should cover, and even that has now been overtaken by events. The 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal is a capability target rather than a strategy, though the five illustrative military scenarios that were developed to translate it into detailed capability requirements offer some elements. But the Headline Goal limits the level of ambition to sustaining up to a corps (50 to 60,000 troops) for a least one year, an arbitrary figure which is related neither to what the armed forces of the 28 Member States (still 1.5 million troops!) could actually be capable of nor to the needs that the security environment imposes. And the scenarios cover only a limited spectrum, not including tasks and types of operations in which the EU is already engaging, such as naval interventions and cyber security.

What the EU does attempt to do is grand strategy: setting out the overall role that Europe should play at the global stage, in politics, the economy, and security. This is the level at which the 2003 European Security Strategy operates, which by June 2016 is to be replaced by the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. During the Cold War, the NATO Strategic Concept was the closest Europeans came to developing (or subscribing to) a grand strategy. Though it really was but a military strategy, of course, in view of the bipolar context, the Soviet threat, and the absence

of European political union, it was also a sufficient strategy – then. In today’s world however, military strategy can no longer substitute for grand strategy.

This is where the complexity of the European security architecture and the beauty contest between the different organizations, states’ different views on the roles of the EU and NATO, and the rivalries between certain states that abuse the organizations to fight out their own particular disputes, constitute an obstacle to strategy. In NATO, no debate about the autonomous role of the European pillar has been possible. In the EU, the debate has been limited to what could conceivably be undertaken through the CSDP, which in the eyes of many Member States, unfortunately, is not very much. There has thus emerged a large gap in European strategic thinking: between the level of ambition for NATO as a whole, and the level of ambition strictly for CSDP operations, there is no view on the overall role that Europe could and should play as an autonomous security provider.

What is necessary is a debate that surpasses the organizational divide and that addresses the autonomous European level of ambition *regardless* of through which organization it will subsequently be acted upon. NATO, the CSDP, the UN, ad hoc coalitions: in which framework Europeans will engage in a specific contingency can neither be predicted nor decided beforehand – it will always depend on the characteristics of the crisis at hand. But someone has to decide on the strategy, which will determine when and where Europeans will intervene in the first place. The Global Strategy process is an opportunity to have exactly this debate, to leave all rivalries behind us, and address neither just NATO nor just the CSDP, but “the state of defence in Europe” – as the first President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy put it in his speech at the 2013 EDA annual conference.

What?

The first thing that the Global Strategy would have to address is which responsibilities Europeans need to assume as a matter of priority and therefore, if necessary, alone. Assessing Europe’s shared vital interest, the security environment, and the practice of European engagements, four priorities emerge:

- (1) To take the lead in stabilizing Europe’s broad neighbourhood, including the neighbours of the neighbours, because no other actor will do that for us;
- (2) To contribute to global maritime security, which is of vital interest because 90% of European trade is seaborne;
- (3) To contribute to UN collective security, for the EU needs an effective UN when it deems intervention necessary itself (as today in Libya);
- (4) To support the security services in ensuring the internal and border security of the EU.

Once again, the aim would not be to act upon this through the CSDP in each and every case. Rather this would be the military component of the EU’s grand strategy, which would guide the 28 Member States in all dimensions of the EU including the CSDP, in NATO, in the UN and/or in ad hoc groupings, whenever and wherever Europeans have to take the initiative to safeguard the interests that these four priorities embody. A clear statement of ambition would give a sense of purpose to European efforts and would be very welcome to Europe’s allies and partners, who would know which contribution from Europe they can look forward to.

In terms of capability development, the CSDP does seem the most promising avenue. From the adoption of a new level of ambition would logically follow a tasking to review the Headline Goal accordingly. The Global Strategy could set a deadline for this review. This would require at least doubling the existing Headline Goal: Europeans need to be able to deploy up to 60,000 troops over and above ongoing operations of (collectively) up to the same numbers. Furthermore, at least in their broad neighbourhood they should be able to do so without recourse to US assets – and thus relying on their own strategic enablers. The rhythm of operations dictates this level of ambition: in the past decade, Europeans have continuously sustained at least 60,000 troops, at times even more – which, if that is the maximum level of ambition for expeditionary operations, leaves Europe without any deployable reserve.

In order to make the best use of existing institutions and processes, a new Headline Goal could be incorporated into the NATO Defence Planning Process, so that a capability mix could be designed that allows the European allies and partners both to fulfil their collective defence obligations and, when necessary, to engage in autonomous expeditionary operations and support their security services. For the Europeans, these capability requirements would then form the basis for collective capability development under the aegis of the EDA, notably to develop European strategic enablers. Those states that so desire could at the same time further integrate their defence efforts in smaller clusters. These will create maximal synergies and effects of scale if they change the mind-set and instead of doing national defence planning and then exploring opportunities for cooperation, they move to multinational planning and then decide what each will contribute. A core group of EU Member States could thus still create a de facto Permanent Structured Cooperation even though this mechanism is unlikely to be formally activated any time soon.

Conclusion

The Global Strategy should indeed be global: it is logical that a strategy by and for the High Representative covers her entire remit. But within that remit, defence is a crucial component. European military strategy is and will remain a sensitive topic. But the Global Strategy process present a welcome chance to involve all EU Member States as well as Europe's allies and partners, including NATO as such. The end result will be presented to the European Council. Surely Europe's Heads of States and Government, if anybody, could lay down the grand strategic guidelines for "defence in Europe" and leave the institutional bickering behind them.

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