



Fail to plan, plan to fail: European security and defence

by Ian Bond

If you are building a house, there is no point in collecting a pile of bricks, buying state-of-the-art household equipment and then waiting for a structure to emerge. First you plan, then you build. When the European Council discusses defence at its meeting in December, however, the focus will be on why Europe is not buying enough dishwashers. Designing the house will not be on the agenda. This is a mistake.

The closest thing the EU has to a blueprint for security and defence policy is the 'European Security Strategy' of 2003, lightly revised in 2008. Since then, the member-states have made limited progress towards their goal of being "able to act before countries around us deteriorate, when signs of proliferation are detected, and before humanitarian emergencies arise". They can point to some successes when reacting to acute problems – for example, the EU naval operation set up when piracy off Somalia became too serious to ignore. But taking into account all the resources the EU and its members have, they have done too little to shape their security environment in a time of change.

A number of European countries, including Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden, want a new security strategy. With their encouragement, several European think-tanks jointly published a report in May 2013 entitled 'Towards a European Global Strategy', which contains many good ideas and has been the basis of a continuing programme

of policy analysis and recommendations. But the official paper by the EU High Representative and the Head of the European Defence Agency, drafted in preparation for the December European Council, contains only a short section on "the strategic context". This section will not be discussed or endorsed at the meeting.

The UK, France and Germany have all been unenthusiastic about revising the 2003 strategy. France fears that a new strategy would no longer justify Europe's ambitious Headline Goals (targets for the military capabilities that are needed for EU missions) and Capability Development Plan (though in an age of austerity these seem out of reach anyway). Germany, after a period in the 1990s when it was willing to defend European values robustly, for example in Kosovo, seems at present to want to pretend that military force has almost no place in international relations.

The UK, on the other hand, wants the EU to concentrate on increasing military capability, not

discussing strategy. But it will be hard for Britain to persuade its European partners to invest more in defence unless it can articulate what the purpose is. Without a strategy, defence procurement becomes little more than an expensive job-creation programme – easy for finance ministries to cut in favour of something more cost-effective.

The British government seems to have two fears about any attempt to agree a new European strategy. The first is that a lot of effort will result in a lowest common denominator strategy. There is a real risk of that – as with NATO's strategic concept. But even a minimalist agreed document would be better than nothing. Those who wanted to go further could, while those inclined to free-ride would face at least moral pressure to live up to the strategy.

The second is fear of 'competence creep', with the European Commission gaining influence in the defence field and undermining NATO and national decision-making. The British defence secretary, Philip Hammond, has already attacked the Commission for its directives on the defence trade – even though, as Clara Marina O'Donnell wrote in a recent CER policy brief, these common rules should help secure savings by removing inefficiencies in the European defence market.¹

In current circumstances, however, this second fear looks misplaced. Leaving aside the (remote) possibility of Argentina attacking the Falkland Islands, very few threats to the UK would not affect the rest of Europe, or vice versa, so national freedom of action is anyway something of a mirage. And the UK would have plenty of support for keeping the Commission out of defence policy (as opposed to the defence market).

As to undermining NATO, Europeans can no longer assume that the US will always rescue Europe, if Europe does nothing to rescue itself. NATO's 'Steadfast Jazz' exercise, which took place in Poland and the Baltic region in November 2013, was the largest exercise conducted by NATO since 2006. Of its 6,000 participants, only 250 were Americans. If European nations were more capable of defending themselves, they would be both less dependent on the US, and less likely to provoke the US to give up on them in exasperation.

The fact that some EU member-states are not members of NATO is no longer as important as it was in the Cold War. Indeed, neutral Finland and Sweden took part in 'Steadfast Jazz'. NATO may remain the formal vehicle for territorial defence, but the withdrawal this year of the last US tank from Europe tells Europeans that, in whatever institutional framework, they need

to be ready to look after themselves. The main difference between NATO's strategic concept and an EU strategy should be the latter's reliance on a 'comprehensive approach' to crises and conflicts, bringing together defence, diplomacy, development and other instruments.

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Though 28 countries with varying security concerns would undoubtedly find it difficult to forge a consensus, the European strategy should not be a compendium of national 'top priorities'. Instead it should identify those issues where a European contribution is most needed and most likely to be decisive. One obvious candidate is an end-to-end approach to conflict-driven illegal migration, for example from the Horn of Africa via unstable Libya to Europe.

A strategy without resource consequences would be useless. The decisions on spending priorities that flow from a European strategy need to reflect the comprehensive approach, so that every element is resourced by someone but not everyone tries to do everything. European countries remain wary of relying on each other to provide military capabilities when needed. But existing initiatives like the European Air Transport Command (a pool of almost 150 aircraft from Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) show that there are ways around the problem of trust. European nations should better co-ordinate their efforts in 'soft' security as well; development assistance can be just as important to Europe's security as the application of military force.

At present, not all member-states are pulling their weight, in hard or soft power terms. The UK spends close to 3 per cent of GDP on defence and development combined, France about 2.7 per cent and Sweden around 2.5 per cent. Germany spends little more than 1.5 per cent, Italy around 1.3 per cent and Spain no more than 0.8 per cent. The major contributors should press the back-markers to do more for European security, for example through well-targeted development assistance in fragile or conflict-affected countries in Europe's neighbourhood. A costed strategy that all 28 have agreed to may make it harder for the miserly to wriggle out of their responsibilities.

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¹ Clara Marina O'Donnell 'The trials and tribulations of European defence co-operation', CER policy brief, July 2013.