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And What Will Europe Do? The European Council and Military Strategy

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Important decisions on Europe's military capabilities are expected from the December 2013 European Council. But why? What do Europeans actually want to do with their capabilities? The answer to that question would be the crowning piece of the European Council's decisions.

Pooling & Sharing of military capabilities, procedures and institutions for crisis management, and defence industry are on the agenda of the European Council for December 2013. But as the highest political body of the European Union, the European Council, at the instigation of its President, will likely also want to discuss the political dimension of European defence. The fundamental political question is deceptively simple – and has always been conveniently ignored: *why?* EU Member States collectively have yet to say why Europe needs the military. The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) states that "Europe should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world": grand but vague.

The political question is the strategic question therefore: apart from defending its own territory, which role exactly does Europe with all its capabilities aspire to as a *security provider*?

Europe, not the CSDP. In his speech at the annual conference of the European Defence Agency (EDA) on 21 March 2013, Herman Van Rompuy clearly expressed his main concern to be not the Common Security and Defence Policy as such, but "the state of defence in Europe".[1] Obvious it may be, but never officially stated before: one can only draw the maximum benefit from Pooling & Sharing if the *total* armed forces of all Member States are taken into the balance. The capabilities debate cannot be limited to some theoretically separable part of the armed forces available to the CSDP. Similarly, the strategic debate that should drive capability development cannot be limited to some aspects likely to be acted upon through the CSDP. The challenge is to define overall priorities for the use of the military instrument, in function of the vital interests and the foreign policy of the EU and its Member States, without any prejudice to action under UN, NATO, CSDP or national command – the crisis will determine that choice in each individual case.

INTERESTS DRIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

At its December 2012 meeting, where the agenda for the December 2013 meeting was set, the European Council "note[d] that in today's changing world the European Union is called upon to assume increased responsibilities in the maintenance of international peace and security in order to guarantee the security of its citizens and the promotion of its interests".

As a starting point, the European Council could now emphasize that in spite of the many differences in the focus of national foreign policies and threat perceptions, the Member States as an integrated economy with a distinctive social model do indeed share vital interests:

- Preventing threats against their territory from materializing;
- Keeping open all lines of interaction with the world, notably sea lanes, pipelines, and cyberspace.
- Assuring the supply of energy and natural resources for the economy;
- Managing migration in order to maintain both a viable work force and a viable social system;
- Mitigating the impact of climate change;
- Strengthening international law as a fundament of international stability, notably the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Preserving the autonomy of their decision-making by preventing undue dependence on any foreign power.

Europeans need not be timid about the fact that they too seek to defend their interests – that is the point of policy-making – as long as they continue to do so in a way that does not harm the legitimate interests of others.

The regions and contingencies in which their vital interests are most directly threatened by the potential use of force should form the priority areas of focus for a European military strategy. These constitute the *responsibilities* that Europeans assume as a security provider outside their own territory, and are therefore willing to act upon. In (1) crisis management, Europeans must be able to act across the full spectrum of expeditionary operations, from evacuation, support to humanitarian relief, and assistance and training, to peacekeeping, peace enforcement and indeed war. But a military strategy also encompasses (2) prevention, by way of maintaining a permanent forward presence in priority areas, and (3) deterrence, by maintaining a credible power projection capacity at all times.[2]

Setting priorities does not mean that Europeans will never address any other issues, but that this is what they will prepare and plan for. Nor does it mean that the military is the only instrument with which these priorities will be addressed, but that because of their importance Europeans must be prepared to act forcefully if, and only if, its permanent preventive policies fail. Even then the military will always be one dimension of a comprehensive approach aiming at a clear political end-state.

The context in which priorities must be decided upon is one of austerity budgets. That simply makes prioritisation even more important: when the means are limited, political guidance is crucial to assure that what means we do have are spent in the most relevant way. The shift of the American strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region is another major factor. The "pivot" does not determine what European priorities are – our interests do that – but in limiting the extent to which American capabilities can be counted upon it does determine how many European capabilities will be required.

Analysing Europe's vital interests and the potential violent threats against them, three priority responsibilities emerge:

- Taking the lead in assuring peace and security in Europe's "broader neighbourhood".
- Contributing to global maritime security.
- Contributing to the collective security system of the UN.

Regional Lead

"Even in an era of globalisation, geography is still important", states the ESS. The most obvious priority undoubtedly is to maintain peace and security in Europe's own neighbourhood, where its vital interests are directly at stake.

Geographically, this zone of responsibility extends beyond the area of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Maghreb and the Middle East), encompassing what are now often called "the neighbours of the neighbours" in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf (and to a lesser extent Central Asia). All of these regions as such are important to our vital interests and many of them form "security complexes", i.e. their security is inextricably linked together (as we have witnessed in the Maghreb and the Sahel e.g.). That this broad region, both east and south of Europe, is very volatile and will see a high risk of inter as well as intra-state conflict for years to come needs no further explanation.

To which extent do we feel responsible for this "broader neighbourhood", i.e. in which scenarios must military action be considered?

Inter-state war, including spill-over of a civil war into neighbouring countries, must certainly always be prevented or ended. In such a scenario, the UN Security Council is more likely (though not guaranteed) to seize the matter, and Europe will then probably act as part of a broader coalition, notably with the US, and preferably always with regional actors – but alone if it is the only option. In any scenario a major contribution will be expected.

Intra-state conflict, particularly when the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) arises (i.e. in case of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide or ethnic cleansing), would ideally be addressed by regional actors. The will and certainly the means to do so remain limited however, hence European intervention will often prove necessary. In such cases, Europe is more likely to be the only or certainly the leading external actor, preferably still in coalition with regional actors, as in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). Unless the government of the country in question requests intervention, a UNSC mandate is much less certain. As in Syria today, but also in Georgia (2008), the military feasibility may be constrained by the implication of external powers, the chance that any benefits are outweighed by major negative side effects, or an unacceptably high risk of casualties. Intervention may then be limited to preventing spill-over and possibly supporting the legitimate party in the conflict.

"Europeans must be able to act across the full spectrum of expeditionary operations"

Whether it intervened or not, Europe definitely has a responsibility to stabilize any post-conflict situation, including through peacekeeping, SSR/DDR, and training and assisting local armed forces (as well as the security and justice apparatus). On a more permanent basis, a military presence through cooperation with regional partners can be an important confidence and security-building measure, provided it is firmly anchored in a broader political partnership and does not run counter to EU objectives in the field of democracy and human rights.

In view of its proximity and the extent to which its vital interests are at stake, it is Europe's responsibility *to take the lead* in maintaining peace and security in this broad region. The crises in the aftermath of the Arab Spring have demonstrated that proclaiming an ambitious Neighbourhood Policy but abstaining as soon as any security problem arises is not an option. Policy towards the region must be comprehensive, and thus include peace and security, or will remain but a set of empty promises. That does not necessarily always imply taking the lead militarily, but in any case politically: putting any crisis on the agenda of the regional and international community, and forging a coalition for action. While the US will undoubtedly continue to play a role, Europeans will increasingly define the strategic and operational priorities.

"It is Europe's responsibility to take the lead in maintaining peace and security in this broad region"

GLOBAL CONTRIBUTION: ON SEA

The ESS also states that "in an era of globalisation, distant threats may be as much a concern as those that are near at hand". The most direct as well as most likely threat of force to their vital interests that Europeans face is a disruption of maritime trade (which accounts for 90% of Europe's trade overall).

Maritime security is most commonly associated with piracy in the Gulf of Aden, but obviously the very same trade route can be threatened anywhere between there and the ports of China, and that would be equally problematic. Europeans thus have a vital interest in maritime security in Asia, as well as in other parts of the globe such as West Africa. Furthermore, Somali piracy has demonstrated that maritime problems are rarely solved at sea only. That does not just hold true for the threat of piracy (which is present in Asia and West Africa too). The other main threat to maritime security in Asia is a function of the tensions between China and its neighbours – which clearly calls for more than gunboat diplomacy.

A commitment to maintaining global maritime security thus has far-reaching implications. It is beyond Europe's means to play a leading role in maritime security worldwide, but it can justifiably be expected, and it is in its interest, to take the lead in addressing maritime issues in its broader neighbourhood and adjacent zones. Europeans have proven themselves able to deal with non-state actors, the most likely threat, like in the case of Somalia, though success still requires a broad international and regional coalition. Europe is well-placed to forge such coalitions, and to initiate the broader comprehensive strategy that is required to address the underlying causes of piracy. Less likely but dramatic if it would materialize is a blockage of the main artery of the Suez canal as a consequence of inter or intra-state war.[3] That too would likely be a crisis which the UNSC would seize and upon which an international coalition would act, of which Europeans would have to be a major part.

In Asia, local and regional actors should be counted upon to tackle problems of piracy, but a European contribution would demonstrate how serious the international community takes the issue, thus adding to the credibility and effectiveness of the effort. Moreover, a small but significant permanent naval presence, engaging in exchanges, training, manoeuvres, and patrolling with regional partners and promoting multinational cooperation between them, would constitute an important confidence and security-building measure and contribute to diluting tensions between competing powers. Such a distinctive European naval presence would complement wider European diplomatic efforts at conflict

prevention and region-building, and would be much more effective than adding the odd European ship to the American fleet.

In the Arctic, finally, the main issue is maritime safety rather than security. Here too, Europeans by being present themselves can promote multinational cooperation between the various other actors with a stake in the region.

GLOBAL CONTRIBUTION: ON LAND

Given the volatility of their own near abroad, chances are that Europeans' appetite and means to engage in crisis management elsewhere will be limited. Yet, Europe cannot ignore crisis and suffering in other parts of the globe. At first sight its own vital interests may be less directly at stake in conflicts in Sub-Sahara Africa e.g., but abidance by the fundamentals of international law, i.e. the non-use of force and respect for human rights, is a vital interest as such. Without a general climate of abidance by international law, there can be no international stability and thus no flourishing international trade, nor multilateral cooperation on pressing global challenges. Such a climate can only be upheld when international law is upheld and gross infringements are consistently acted upon.

"The United Nations Security Council has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security", states the ESS, adding immediately that "Strengthening the United Nations, equipping it to fulfil its responsibilities and to act effectively, is a European priority". For indeed, not only are two of the permanent members of the UNSC European, Europeans need an effective UN in case of crisis in their own near abroad. And the UN can only be effective if it is perceived to be effective generally, and not just in contingencies in which the interests of the permanent members are directly at stake.

Europeans have a responsibility therefore to contribute to the UN collective security system. That contribution need not just be counted in European blue helmets – at the request of the UN Europeans can deploy under NATO, CSDP or national command, including in support of regional organisations such as the African Union and ECOWAS – but it cannot be limited to paying into the budget of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Europeans cannot and should not contribute to each and every UN (led or requested) operation. Further prioritization within this priority responsibility is needed. R2P can serve as one guideline: having come into being thanks only to a major European diplomatic effort, surely whenever the mechanism is activated Europeans should now also contribute to its implementation. Concentration and consistency of effort could be another guideline. As the case of the Congo illustrates, small-scale operations of fixed duration, even when successful, rarely create durable effects. A small (relative to the overall size of the force) but permanent contribution of European combat forces to the UN operation in the DRC would surely have had a lot more impact than the two short-term CSDP operations in 2003 and 2006, necessary though they were at the time.

"Maritime problems are rarely solved at sea only"

RESPONSIBILITY REQUIRES CAPABILITIES

Assuming responsibility requires capabilities. If the European Council can agree on strategic priorities, it should translate these into a level of ambition: how many capabilities must Europeans devote to them? This will then serve as political guidance for defence planning

and capability development at the European and national level.

The current European level of ambition for expeditionary operations still is to deploy up to an army corps or 60,000 troops, within two months, and sustain it for at least one year, as per the 1999 Headline Goal (HG). During the last decade Europeans have consistently deployed more than 60,000, counting all national, NATO, CSDP and UN operations in which they participated. But if a grave crisis had arisen elsewhere, only through serious improvisation could they have deployed a corps in addition to all these on-going operations. And never have they undertaken major operations autonomously, i.e. relying on European enablers and in implementation of a European strategy. That is precisely what will be required in the future however, as the US expects Europeans to take charge of security in their own neighbourhood, initiating European policies and acting upon them with European means (and thus allowing the reallocation of US assets).

Europe's preference is for operations with the lightest possible footprint, at an early stage before a problem escalates, in support of local and regional forces (air operations, as in Libya, or training missions, as in Somalia and Mali). Given the customary reticence of local parties to see large numbers of western soldiers on their territories, and the wish of European governments and public opinion to avoid casualties in their own ranks, this is quite justified. It would be a strategic error though to assume that all crises can thus be solved. An air campaign can only achieve effect it there are friendly forces on the ground to support in the first place. The Mali case illustrates that combat operations (ideally short and sharp) may be necessary to create the preconditions for training missions and local ownership to be at all feasible. Even if in Somalia today this approach is gradually yielding results, it should not be forgotten that the country has been in turmoil for two decades now. A light footprint thus also comes with a price, be it of a different kind.

Not all conflicts can be nipped in the bud. Ending full-scale inter-state or civil war, or preventing the latter from spilling over into the region, even when Europeans are part of a broader coalition demands large-scale operations, as will the inevitable post-conflict stabilisation. And for sure, training, assistance, SSR/DDR and peacekeeping, either pre- or post-conflict, have to be sustained over many years to be effective.

Europeans will shortly withdraw from Afghanistan, but already now it is clear that on-going and looming commitments will not allow them to withdraw from the world. Somalia and Mali will demand a presence for a long time to come, which may well need to be extended to other countries in the Sahel. The civil war in Syria when it finally ends will likely demand a military presence on the ground to keep the peace, if it does not require preventive deployment in the neighbouring countries first. Sustaining these inescapable commitments, shouldering in addition a fair share of the burden of global collective security under the aegis of the UN, and the imperative of being able to respond rapidly and with major forces to any crisis in the near abroad: for this the existing HG does not suffice.

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AMBITIONS RENEWED AND ENHANCED

What level of ambition would be both real, relative to the threats to Europe's interests, and realistic, relative to its political, economic and military weight?

- A permanent strategic reserve: the ability to mount a decisive air campaign and to deploy up to an army corps, as a single force if necessary, for combat operations in Europe's broader neighbourhood, *over and above* all on-going or envisaged pre- and post-conflict operations, in the neighbourhood or beyond, of collectively up to another army corps. This de facto "double Headline Goal" may seem fanciful at first sight, but it is but the reflection of the rate of deployment of the last decade.
- Maritime power: the ability to achieve command of the sea in the broader neighbourhood, while maintaining a global naval presence in order to permanently engage with partners, notably in Asia and the Arctic.
- Regional strategic autonomy: acquiring all strategic enablers, including air and maritime transport, air-to-air refuelling, and ISTAR, to allow for major army, air and naval operations in the broader neighbourhood without reliance on American assets.
- Strategic planning: the capacity, within the European External Action Service, to engage in permanent contingency planning incorporating all instruments at the disposal of the EU and the Member States, including sanctions, civilian missions, and military operations, and in case of the latter being decided upon, to liaise with any military headquarters conducting it. Without this permanent civil-military strategic planning, Europeans can never hope to achieve regional strategic autonomy. Effective preventive action or rapid reaction will then depend on coincidence rather than design.

Based on its definition of interests, priority responsibilities, and capability objectives, the European Council could then decide on a number of taskings, to be achieved by December 2014.

An important task would be to translate its decisions into updated and broadened illustrative scenarios by the EU Military Staff, which in turn would generate updated capability requirements. In parallel, the European Council could launch a reflection on the major enabling capabilities that Europeans aim to develop in the long term, by 2030 and beyond, in order to be able to live up to their enhanced ambitions. Such a reflection could be undertaken at ministerial level, led by the High Representative, and fed by input papers by the EU Military Committee, the EDA, the Commission, and perhaps a wise pen group. Starting from a quite concrete question, this reflection can generate more permanent and structured ways of thinking about defence planning between Member States, ultimately leading to harmonization. Finally, the High Representative and the EEAS can be tasked with elaborating a proposal for a strategic planning capacity.

CONCLUSION

Strategy has to drive the acquisition of the means, but also decision-making. The point of setting priorities is that when the next contingency arises, decision-making should be faster, and mandating action by the able and willing Europeans under the political aegis of the EU should be easier. Thus a truly comprehensive approach, integrating operations under whichever command structure the able and willing have recourse to with the entire toolbox of the EU, should become reality.

"A more explicitly shared view of the strategic context would be essential to steer day-to-day choices and help shape decisions with a long-term impact on budgets, on investment, on personnel. It should in any case not be an academic exercise but be geared toward operational conclusions and results": this academic surely subscribes to this final quote from Herman Van Rompuy's speech at the EDA.

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