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Common Ground for European Defense: National Defense and Security Strategies Offer Building Blocks for a European Defense Strategy

by Claudia Major and Christian Mölling

In Brief: Support for a European defense strategy is growing. This paper offers a key ingredient: the common ground and prohibitive differences among EU governments on issues like threat perception, the role of the military, capability requirements, cooperation, EU and NATO, and the defense industry. There is a lot of common ground, and the differences often point to discrepancies in priorities rather than approaches. However, two features that EU countries share pose the most daunting obstacle to defense progess on a European level: The EU as a framework for defense cooperation has lost importance; and all countries insist upon their defense sovereignty, especially when it comes to defense industry. A European defense strategy that moves EU defense forward will need to forge a debate on the implication of the Lisbon treaty for defence, link existing means to strategic aims, and introduce common European language into national strategies and practice.

Introduction

Momentum is growing behind a European defense strategy. While some countries, especially France, have traditionally called for the defense dimension to be addressed at the EU level in conceptual terms, most EU governments did not see the need to do so. Thus, initial plans for a European Global Strategy led by EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini did not foresee a significant military dimension. However, the violent conflict to Europe's east and south, as well as terrorist attacks at home, have underlined that the role of military power in international affairs, specifically in Europe's neighborhood is growing again. Europeans cannot hide from these harsh realities, which has led to more support for an EU document dedicated to defense.

Various perspectives need to be aligned to make such a document on defense credible and meaningful. For example, if the EU wants to redefine itself as an actor of consequence in global affairs, the document needs to reflect both the role defense can play in foreign

policy and the interplay between defense and other policies as well. A second perspective would arrive through a European Defense Review. Such a landscaping of European defense postures would show the capabilities they have available today and within the next decade, and identify upcoming challenges, needed changes and areas for cooperation.

This paper offers a third potential ingredient: through a comparison of national strategies of seven different EU countries it examines the common ground and prohibitive differences on threat perception, role of the military and operations, capability requirements, concepts for cooperation, the EU and NATO, and the defense industry. The countries selected represent "most different" cases in terms of size and geography as well as general political ambitions (France, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the U.K.), with a focus on documents that have been published after 2014 and thus could have taken into account the significant changes in European security until then. The analysis revealed a great deal of common ground as well as several differences. More importantly, it did not reveal any fundamental contradictions between states.

Threat Perception

In general, the threat assessments have become more nuanced in recent years. EU states perceive a diverse environment in terms of actors and threats, and increasingly acknowledge the nexus between internal and external security. They identify a growing conventional military threat from state actors. At the same time, the threat of unconventional or hybrid warfare is growing, coming from both state and non-state actors. Assessments pay particular attention to threats linked to functional aspects of the state and vulnerabilities of societies such as cyber threats, organized crime, energy dependency, and risks with broader sources such as economic instability. France, Romania, and the U.K. clearly establish a link between the economy and security, including the budgetary constraints on their armed forces. The erosion of the traditional international order is also identified as a problem undermining security cooperation and international institutions.

EU states perceive a diverse environment in terms of actors and threats.

There is a notable gap between 1) those who recognize the relevance of a global security scene but consciously prioritize regional threats (Sweden, Romania, Poland) and 2) those who understand threats primarily from a global or functional point of view (U.K., France). Therefore, EU states do not differ much in regards to the kind of threats they fear. Yet, their analysis varies considerably with regard to the actor who is most expected to threaten a given country. A country's geo-strategic location partly influences their threat analysis: Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the U.K. focus on Russia, while Spain and France center more on the Middle East/North Africa and issues like migration, conflict among ethnic and religious groups, or maritime security.

Role of Military and Operations

The EU states accept the existence of a continuum of threats from external to internal, recognizing that the distinction between internal and external security is increasingly blurred. However, they diverge on the appropriate role of the military in addressing the resulting security tasks. For the external dimensions, there are three concentric circles of tasks: the core circle is deterrence/defense, on which all agree. The second wider circle is crisis management, but this is not a priority for all EU states. The third, outer circle is only valued by some states, supporting capacity building of partners and institutions. France and the U.K. have the additional circle of nuclear weapons capability. They are the only Europeans with such forces as part of a deterrence posture.

There is no basic European consensus on the use of armed forces beyond external security. France, Spain, and the U.K. define a strong role for the military alongside other security forces in areas like cyber threats, intelligence, resilience, counter terrorism, or civilian protection. Others like Sweden limit the function of armed forces to classic military tasks, allowing for ad-hoc assistance to civilian agencies but not for systematic and pre-planned support in non-military emergencies.

Capabilities

All governments want to remain capable and close capability gaps. The analysis reveals a focus on modernization and increasing readiness (a high percentage of capabilities that are ready to use). There is very little examination of those capability areas where a (mutual) dependency with partners already exists, and could serve as an incentive for cooperation. Moreover, governments rarely deliver detailed assessments of their existing arsenals and how planned changes would affect national and European security and postures.

There are only a few areas where the states identified similar national capability needs. Many mention the value in having the capability to launch and participate in several and various types of missions simultaneously, including rapid reaction and sustained engagement. Capability areas range from the classical military domain (war fighting capabilities) to soft power, cyber capabilities, and intelligence as all being necessary means for the armed forces. However some nations focus on classical capabilities, while others seek additional means for power projection as a key asset. Moreover, some countries define the development of new technologies and related industries as a crucial part of their capabilities. While smaller countries have fewer specific projects, bigger countries have long lists of indented improvements.

A new area of capability often mentioned are those that can counter asymmetric or hybrid threats and increase resilience. What exactly these capabilities are is not specified, although offensive cyber capabilities are receiving growing attention, as are reserve forces.

The Role of NATO and EU

While almost all states agree on the central role of NATO, they define its precise role differently. France and the U.K. explicitly see the Alliance as one lever among many to pursue their security interests; others tend to either support NATO generally or largely depend on it. Another difference is in the exclusivity of NATO's role. The U.K. sees NATO as the only European defense actor, while others (Netherlands, France, Spain) can envisage the EU playing a role in this area as well.

All agree on the central role of the EU as the key actor to manage socio-economic issues, to take care of the neighborhood, and, particularly, to employ both civilian *and* military means of defense. The different levels of importance that states attach to military means and collective defense as core elements of security seem to explain why they expect different things from the EU and confer different tasks to the Union.

All states also agree that it is necessary to strengthen NATO-EU relations. Moreover, many states advocate implicitly or explicitly for a clear division of labor according to which NATO is responsible for collective defense and the EU for socio-economic issues and crisis management. However, there is less clarity about the respective roles in the large area between this division.

Defense Industry

All states except Sweden[1] underline the importance of their national defense industry to maintain autonomy and sovereignty, to sustain critical weapon systems,

1 Sweden has a long tradition of giving strong support to its national defense industry. However, this is an informal policy, as is well understood in the national defense establishment and supported by the procurements projects mentioned in the latest Swedish document. As this paper does not deliver an interpretation of national strategies but rather sticks to the text, this support cannot be mentioned in this analysis.

and to serve the needs of national armed forces. Even when this industrial base is mainly privately owned and dependent on international exports, it is seen as a national asset. This also legitimizes the protection of the industry. States such as France and the U.K. specifically highlight its contribution to the wider economy, innovation, and labor markets. National procurement and exports are meant to support this basis. Contributions of foreign industries to national security are only marginally mentioned.

The differences point to different priorities rather than contradictory approaches.

Europe as a region is seen as a back-up to deliver what cannot be delivered nationally. Yet, the potential scope of this added value is vague. Only a few states refer to EU industrial concepts like the internal defense market or an "European Defense Technological and Industrial Base." France and Poland are most explicit on their objectives at the European level and the instruments with which they want to achieve them. Only France mentions the European Commission as a relevant player. Romania wants to "develop cooperation in the field of security industry with states of the Euro-Atlantic space, by capitalizing on multinational cooperation opportunities, amid NATO and EU initiatives." The Netherlands explicitly seek to strengthen the European defense market and industry.

Findings and Recommendations

It is worth underlining that there is common ground on many issues, including the most important ones, such as a broader understanding of both threats and security and the necessity of cooperation.

In most of the cases, the differences point to different priorities rather than contradictory approaches. Some countries focus their threat analyses on the neighborhood, others on the global scene. Some see Russia as the greater threat, some the Middle East and North Africa. These statements can be complementary rather than being contradictory or mutually exclusive.

Most of the differences are traditionally contentious issues: countries tend to have different opinions on the appropriate role of the military and the use of forces as such, whether the main task of the military is collective defense or crisis management, and on what the priorities and roles of the EU and NATO should be. All countries insist upon their sovereignty, for example when it comes to defense industry, which complicates a common European approach.

The Interplay between EU and National Levels

While EU documents clearly reflect common denominators in security and defense, national documents rarely contain language regarding the EU. Thus, states tend to push their defense priorities to the EU level but do not incorporate EU-level agreements and positions into their national documents.

EU documents and concepts reflect many of those elements that are common among national documents. The 2003 EU Security Strategy and its 2008 update both mention cyber threats as a security problem. The "Petersberg tasks" outline the type of missions all EU countries can agree on. As these two core EU documents all predate the events of 2014 (Russia/Ukraine) and 2015 (Paris attacks, refugee crisis), they cannot take into account the difference in the threat perceptions that EU countries have since developed. Given these events, many countries seem to pay less attention to those structural risks such as climate change mentioned in the ESS 2003 and the 2008 update.

On the contrary, in recent national documents, the EU is very rarely mentioned as a reference object of security or a framework for cooperation. National

documents do not systematically reflect what states have committed to the EU level. Very few examples of language from EU documents, let alone the Lisbon Treaty, have made it into national documents. Instead, there is a strong national spin in the documents, which all focus on autonomy. Since at the same time the documents highlight the need for cooperation, their message is at least ambivalent. States seem to recognize the need for cooperation generally that results from growing interdependence. However, they still picture themselves as being fully sovereign, having the full range of choices that does not affect their freedom of action and thus their level of sovereignty.

States have to choose whether they want to proactively restate the current *acquis*, or only react to some countries' wishes to lower the current standards.

Keeping, Extending, and Reducing the Acquis

The analysis of national documents and their interplay with the EU level allows the identification of areas in which there is room for maneuver to maintain, extend, or reduce the EU acquis and formalize it in a new EU defense document. There are three cross cutting considerations:

- Proactive or reactive: Given the current tendency to disregard the EU frame, states have to choose whether they want to proactively restate the current acquis, especially the Lisbon Treaty commitments, or only react to some countries' wishes to lower the current standards.

- Complementary or contested: There are several issues where various positions do not contradict each other in general (sources of threat, capabilities). However, if an allocation of resources were to be reduced and priorities reset accordingly, these issues could turn into contested areas where good arguments are needed to define common interest. This is very likely in the case of the difference between those who want to concentrate on the neighborhood or a certain area of it and those with global ambitions. This problem may also surface if there is a dichotomy between crisis management and collective defense, and between those who are reluctant to the use of military force and those who are more willing to use it. Nonetheless, all these areas offer space for negotiation between the two extremes.

- EU or national documents: An EU defense strategy document should explicitly integrate elements of national documents and build on their commonalities. Governments should in turn introduce this language as well as EU-related commitments into national documents. Moreover, a new EU defense document should take advantage of the risk/threat methodology used by many national documents.

The evolving threat perception pays more attention to immediate risks and threats. This may result in a push for a narrower focus for the EU document as well as more urgency in the language. At the same time, the EU document may deliver an argument for balancing this evolving drive toward the more immediate risks. Threats do change. In 2003, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was seen as potentially the greatest threat to EU security, and the 2008 update underlined this analysis. It may be worth differentiating between urgent and important problems.

With the border between internal and external security increasingly blurred, the continuum of military tasks seems to have widened beyond external operations. This, together with the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks, including the invocation of Art 42.7, may

re-energize the debate on the use of Common Security and Defence Policy missions on EU territory.

While governments have given detailed information on common capability gaps at the EU level, they do not link these gaps back to the national level. Moreover, while they want to increase regional cooperation, and the EU and NATO would certainly benefit from that, a lack of coordination between regional clusters and a disregard of both the approved goals and mechanisms at the EU and NATO levels and the instruments created to coordinate cooperation (the European Defence Agency and NATO defence planning process) risks limiting potential contributions and further damaging both institutions. Individual governments could link EU and national documents by showing where and how national and multinational procurements will support common security, collective defense, and crisis management — all essentially multinational endeavors anchored in the EU and NATO.

Progress in defense industry aspects is seriously needed but has to be very well planned. This policy field is not only highly nationalized compared to all other areas, it also often involves several other ministries beyond the ministries of defense. Preparation for a potential defense industry element of a new EU strategic document has to start early, involve all stakeholders and look into the relationship between political ambitions and industrial realities on the national and EU levels.

The growing state-based threat and the resurfacing of classical defense has already re-energized NATO. This may reinforce calls for a clear-cut division of labor between NATO and the EU. The increasing importance of non-military threats, which is where the states see the EU as the better-placed actor, also supports these calls. Both may affect NATO-EU relations in either approaching a clearly formulated division of labor or, quite the opposite, a renewed competition between the institutions. While such a division of labor may sound appealing for a conceptual document initially, its implications in terms of operational and political implementation would need to be considered carefully.

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