

Rebalancing Priorities: America, Europe, and Defence Austerity

Written by Carl Cavanagh Hodge

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CARL CAVANAGH HODGE, MAR 5 2012

At the 2012 meeting of the annual Munich Security Conference US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta jointly assured European allies that the Obama administration's efforts to "rebalance" its security policy to emphasize Asia would not diminish NATO or Atlantic Relations.[1] The assurance was given against the backdrop of the recent release of the administration's 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance vision. Noting the weakened condition of the international economy and a darkened fiscal outlook, that document observed that "thoughtful choices will need to be made about the location and frequency" of U.S. participation in multilateral stabilization missions far from American shores.[2] It seemed to legitimate after the fact the limited and supporting role US capabilities played in enabling NATO's intervention in support of Libyan rebel forces seeking to oust Muammar Gaddafi's regime, an intervention urged by France and Britain. The legacy of the grueling experience of the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq was also apparent in the promise that "US forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations." [3] For many of the governments assembled at Munich, reference to a diminished American military profile in Europe in "resource-constrained era" reinforced the impression that the strategic rebalancing of the United States is to take place at the expense of traditional allies.

The China Syndrome

The January 2012 vision, moreover, takes on greater significance when considered together with the more comprehensive *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* of February 2010. Of particular interest to American allies in the *QDR* was the attention given to rebalancing forces, strengthening relationships, and reforming defence acquisition. Across these categories the competition between contemporary commitments and anticipated challenges is self-evident in the spirit and language of the report.

The passages dealing with counterinsurgency (COIN), stability, and Counterterrorist (CT) operations are informed overwhelmingly by the experiences of American and NATO forces in Iraq and, above all, Afghanistan. They de-emphasize the importance of large, expensive weapons systems and stress the continuation of manpower-intensive small-war capabilities. Yet the document's discussion of "anti-access environments" notes, among other things, the challenges posed to US power-projection in the Western Pacific by China's development of ballistic and cruise missiles, attack submarines, and long-range air defence capabilities[4] — in other words, the large, expensive weapons systems developed for traditional interstate warfare.

These competing priorities, along with the inter-service rivalry they promise to engender, are to be met in the face of the administration's plans to cut \$487B from defence costs over the next decade as part of the efforts to reduce the US budget deficit. While the outgoing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted in the *QDR's* Executive Summary that the United States faced a complex environment and wide range of contingencies,[5] fiscal constraints simultaneously promised to limit the range of contingencies the United States would be able to meet. At the Munich conference Secretary Panetta observed that the short-term consequence to Europe of reduced defence spending would be a relatively trivial withdrawal of four combat brigades after which the United States would still have some 70,000 troops in Europe.[6] However, Panetta inherited from Gates a relationship with key European allies whose commitment to collective defence and security has, from Washington's perspective, long been delinquent.[7] In the

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midst of NATO's Libyan intervention Gates had warned that America's European allies risked consigning NATO to "collective military irrelevance." [8]

So NATO is at a crossroads. The fact that statements to this effect have been made repeatedly since the founding of the alliance in 1949, does not make this one any less valid. More important is the specific nature of the juncture reached in 2012 and the stresses to which NATO is currently subject. They are:

- Material wear and tear due to the length of the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with the financial and political price paid domestically for the maintenance of both commitments.
- The onset of a new politics of defence austerity brought on by the financial crisis of 2008 and the necessary reordering of priorities.
- The new stress given simultaneously by the United States to the security of the Western Pacific, which, in a time of diminishing resources must necessarily reduce the attention given to Europe.

Increased attention to the Asia-Pacific is not simply the whim of an administration eager to break with its predecessor's commitments in the Middle East and Central Asia. In a report to Congress on the US global posture issued in September 2004 – that is, in the face of growing missions in Afghanistan and Iraq – the Bush administration noted the need to improve military capabilities in the Asia Pacific region, in particular "the ability to project military forces rapidly and at long ranges, both to the region and within it." [9] Pentagon parlance now routinely refers to the development of "air-sea battle" capabilities with reference to China's growing military strength. [10] While the Bush document discussed the Asia-Pacific region with primary attention to the security of the Korean peninsula, President Obama's visit to Australia in November 2011 involved a pledge of 2500 marines as part of a training hub for US forces throughout the region and was a response, diplomatic as much as military, to the lengthening shadow of China throughout the whole region. The Pentagon's 2011 report to Congress, with its reference to the China's efforts to assert a presence in the "near and far seas," articulates American security concerns about Western Pacific in considerable detail. [11]

This deep reorientation of the US strategic perspective – begun by one administration and confirmed by the next – inevitably challenges America's European allies to shoulder a greater share of the burden of security on Europe's periphery and beyond. Yet fiscal limitations similar to those forcing choices upon President Obama will make it difficult for Europe to accept this added burden.

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In the United Kingdom the Cameron government's dedication to fiscal rigor moved it to announce in its 2010 *Strategic Defence and Security Review* an 8% reduction in overall defence expenditures over four years. Acknowledging in the Foreword that fiscal circumstance "necessitated tough decisions to get our economy back on track," the government warned that reductions in defence expenditure would necessarily be "a vital part of how we tackle the deficit." [12] Putting the reductions in context, it conceded further that the UK was confronted with a legacy of overstretch due to its simultaneous troop deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly between 2006 and 2009. Yet while "recovering capabilities damaged or reduced as a result of this overstretch" would be a priority of the next decade, the government pledged to transform British capabilities for a broader strategic environment of uncertainty. [13] This will be a tall order, as the impact of the cuts on the capabilities of an ally with proportionally much smaller forces than the United States will be more immediate and more profound. The *SDSR* proposed to cut 7,000 personnel from the army, 5,000 each from the navy and air force, and 25,000 civilian staff from the Ministry of Defence.

Meanwhile, the first comprehensive defence review France has undertaken in fourteen years has promised to invest heavily in the modernization of military equipment, reduce overall manpower, and renew France's relationship with NATO – a process that began in the 1990s with France's return to the Alliance's integrated command and continued under President Sarkozy with a vigor that has domestic critics accusing him of being too pro-American. The 2008

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White Paper predicts that France will continue to be in demand as a contributor to stabilization operations beyond national and European territory.[14] What's more, the white paper defines an arc of strategic interest stretching from the Atlantic through the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, the Horn of Africa, and South Asia. The paper is therefore notable for its sweep and its ambition to sharpen France's capabilities, but it was published in June 2008 based in large part on fiscal assumptions that preceded the onset of the international economic crisis. Furthermore, the commitment to its goals may be dependent on the continued residency of Nicholas Sarkozy in the Elysée Palace, as it does not enjoy solid political support across the partisan spectrum. Between a suddenly altered national budget picture and the flux of French elections in April and May of this year, it is far from certain that France will contribute either to NATO and EU defence capabilities- on anything like the scale envisioned by the white paper.[15]

Of all the major West European states, Germany has been slowest to reform and adapt its military to the post-Cold War international environment. The most recent defence white book, that of 2006, gave no clear indication that Berlin had arrived at a new and coherent vision of Germany's place in the world, much less a plan for recalibrating its military capabilities in accordance with it. It concluded that "the future role of the armed forces will be shaped by the fact that, in light of a changed international environment, an effective defence of the country and its people can be provided only through a comprehensive provision of security through an integrated security policy." [16] This was an extraordinarily convoluted way of committing a government to everything in principle, yet nothing in particular.

Germany is only now beginning to turn the page on armed forces based on conscription long after most other European countries have abandoned them. The concept of citizens in uniform became fundamental to Germany's reconstitution after 1945, an antidote to the corporate identities of the armies of the Second and Third Reich. The fact that draftees cannot be deployed abroad means that the contemporary *Bundeswehr* remains configured for territorial defence and is ill-suited to the expeditionary operations NATO has undertaken since the 1990s. Only 6,700 of its 250, 000 troops are deployed abroad. According to a report published by the business magazine *Wirtschaftswoche*, the *Bundeswehr* is the most expensive but worst-equipped military in NATO. Its tooth-to-tail ratio requires 35 uniformed and 15 civil personnel to support each soldier in combat duty, while France gets by with a ration of 1:8:2 and Britain with 1:9:4.[17]

This means that military interventions around the European periphery and along the arc of strategic interest will be dependent less on collective European political will than on a community of interest between London and Paris. It will be facilitated in large part by American command-and-control capacity — when and where political will in Washington permits. In the case of Libya in 2011 American and Anglo-French strategic interests converged quickly to bring about a remarkably cost-effective application of limited force. As Syria demonstrates, however, Libya is more likely to be the exception than the rule.

Conclusion

The combination of defence austerity and US strategic reorientation therefore suggests that the interests of European security will be best served in the near-term by more intense cooperation between Britain and France in developing a joint expeditionary capacity. Events may yet force the United States to rethink the diminished importance it affords Europe among its global strategic priorities. Failing that, it would be prudent of the British and French governments to pool the resources and expertise to act in Europe's name. A good deal of American impatience with NATO allies, after all, has been generated not only by modest European defence budgets in good times as well as bad, but also by the pretense, now twenty years old, that the EU is developing a collective security capable of supplementing American strength. The evidence that London and Paris are prepared as an alternative to take practical steps in pursuit of order in the European neighborhood is wholly welcome.[18] The evolution of Washington's 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance might yet compel them to attempt much more than they currently plan.

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[1] Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at the 48th Munich Security Conference," Munich, Germany, February 4, 2012.

[2] Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century*, January 3, 2012, p.6.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2010, p.20, p.31.

[5] Ibid., pp.iii-xviii.

[6] U.S. Department of Defense, "Defense Department Media Background Briefing on U.S. Force Posture in Europe Going Forward," Washington, D.C., February 16, 2012. The United States currently has roughly 80,000 troops assigned to U.S. European Command (EUCOM) although many are currently deployed to other theatres such as Afghanistan.

[7] Today the U.S. accounts for roughly 75% of NATO's military spending, up from 50% during the Cold War. "Talking Truth to NATO," *New York Times*, June 10, 2011.

[8] Defense Secretary Robert Gates, "The Security and Defense Agenda (NATO's Future)," Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011.

[9] Department of Defense, *Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture: Report to Congress*, September, 2004, p.12.

[10] Jim Garamone, "Pentagon Office to Coordinate New Air-Sea Strategy," *American Forces Press Service*, November 10, 2011.

[11] Office of the Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2011.

[12] HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, October 2010, p.3

[13] Ibid., pp.15-16.

[14] *The French White Paper on Defence and National Security*, (New York: Odile Jacob, 2008), pp.121-122.

[15] *Defense Industry Daily*, November 3, 2008.

[16] Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, *Weißbuch 2006 zur Sicherheitspolitik Deutschlands und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr*, p.142.

[17] Christian Ramthun, "Bundeswehr ist teuer, aber wehrlos," *Wirtschaftswoche*, July 5, 2011.

[18] Ben Jones, "Franco-British Military Cooperation: A New Engine for European Defence?" *ISS Occasional Paper*, No.88, February 2011; Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix, "Franco-British Relations at Sea and Overseas: A Tale of Two Navies," *Naval War College Review*, Vol.64, No.1, 2011, pp.79-94.

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