

Towards a More Secure Europe: A New Focus on Defence

Written by Hristiana Grozdanova and Anna Maria Barcikowska

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HRISTIANA GROZDANOVA AND ANNA MARIA BARCIKOWSKA, APR 2 2012

Since the autumn of 2008, the financial crisis and its implications have dictated EU policies. The pressures on EU governments to control expenditure continue to be enormous. Defence has not remained immune raising important questions how Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU can function in this new environment and even if it can survive austerity. Some commentators see it only as a question of choices – how much does defence matter and where does it stand in national priorities, missing a critical point: without a strong security and defence policy in the EU, underpinned by credible military capabilities, Europe risks becoming a marginalized, second-tier player.

Now that America has reoriented itself towards the Asia-Pacific region, Europeans have to do more not less. To do so in the midst of the worst economic crisis in decades is a real challenge for CSDP and will require a serious effort and continuous political momentum to get it back on track.

On March 29, in his speech on Polish Foreign Policy for 2012, Radek Sikorski, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, painted a bleak scenario:

“A divided Europe loses its chance to remain a key player in international trade and politics. Tired with defence spending stinginess and a general European inefficiency, the USA opt out of NATO. Russia fills the void left by the West in the East; China fills the void in Asia. The Arab world is engulfed by transformation crises. Europe is no longer a role model for anyone.”

This is evidently a worst-case scenario, but if the EU wants to contribute to promoting and preserving peace and stability and use actively and effectively instruments at its disposal for crisis management and conflict prevention, European leaders will have to rethink their commitment to CSDP.

Radek Sikorski observed, based on the experience of the Polish Presidency of the EU (July – December 2011), that CSDP is unfortunately impossible to implement in a group of 27 member states and stressed that the EU must initiate tighter cooperation between willing countries. This is perhaps the solution. Europe’s role in the world can only be sustained through enhanced defence cooperation and a group of like-minded Member States ready to drive CSDP forward can be much more effective. It can act as an example that others will hopefully follow.

In December 2010, Poland together with France and Germany launched the “Weimar Initiative” making it clear that there is need to give a fresh impetus to CSDP and take bold decisions to make it more cost-effective and cost-efficient at the same time. One such decision considered was the proposal to establish permanent civil-military planning and command structures for EU operations. Unlike NATO, the EU has no permanent military headquarters and structures and responsibilities are split between the Union and its Member States. In practical terms, this means that when a military operation is to take place, the EU has to activate different entities ad hoc and bring them together. Therefore, having EU headquarters would help to overcome the vital shortcoming of the system where to launch an operation and activate an Operational Headquarters (OHQ) a Council Decision is required each time. It would also significantly improve the operational efficiency of EU crisis management and facilitate more effective use

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of resources. What is more, the EU can use the HQs of five of its Member States, or NATO structures or activate Operations Centre in Brussels.

This proposal, advocated vigorously for during Polish Presidency of the EU, failed to muster sufficient support – in particular due to strong opposition from the UK. However, it was not an entirely wasted effort. It led to a compromise agreement to activate the EU's dormant *Operations Centre*, which for the first time since it was created in 2007, has been put in practice to help conduct the EU's operations in the Horn of Africa.

The difficulties to take forward the Weimar Initiative exposed the inherent problems of the CSDP and the fragile balance between the need to collectively improve military capabilities and the concerns over national sovereignty and power. The Weimar initiative is not a new idea for the European Union. Similar initiatives have failed in the past due to lukewarm political support. If the EU wants to remain engaged in crisis management and conduct complex civil-military tasks, European leaders must pull their weight on security and defence.

Common Security and Defence Policy can only be as effective and ambitious as Member States want it to be. Rethinking CSDP in times of austerity and strategic shifts will require revisiting approaches and ideas that might previously have seemed politically unacceptable but now are a necessity.

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