

Europe's Last Chance Saloon

Written by Anand Menon

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ANAND MENON, JUL 28 2013

European Heads of State and Government, meeting in December 2012, laid out a series of defence policy targets for the year ahead. They promised to review progress and set priorities and timelines at their meeting in December 2013. The meeting will provide one final chance for European states to compensate, via collective action, for the individual weakness that has rendered them increasingly incapable of addressing the security challenges that confront them. All indications are that they will spurn it. Governments, to date, have appeared more interested in maintaining national autonomy, and preserving national jobs and industries than in providing themselves with adequate military capabilities.

The problem is real enough. Recent events in Egypt, Libya and Mali, to name but the obvious examples, point to the continued dangers of instability in Europe's own near abroad. Further afield, rising powers are threatening the international influence of European states. Asia has, for the first time, overtaken Europe in terms of defence spending. Those in Europe who prefer to see Asia as a market, leaving difficult strategic questions to the United States, should think again. Europe is massively dependent on both trade and resource imports. Stability in Asia is as important to Europeans as it is to the United States. For all the excited chatter about a putative Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership to which we have been subjected of late, it is worth remembering that 28% of EU trade is with Asia – as opposed to 25% with the United States. Conflict on the Asian continent would profoundly affect this trade, as would any disruption to eastern sea-lanes. European Council President Herman Van Rompuy was moved to declare in a speech in London in May 2012 that, “as the single largest trade partner of major East-Asian economies we not only have a stake in the region's stability, but also contribute to it. That's why Europe must remain globally engaged.”

Meanwhile, the United States no longer has the ability, the resources or the desire to play the role of global policeman to the extent it has in the past. Scarred by its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, ‘nation building at home’ has become a priority at a time of economic retrenchment. Public opinion mirrors these elite-level trends. *A New York Times*/CBS poll reported in June 2013 that almost 6 out of 10 Americans thought the United States should not play a leading role in trying to resolve international conflicts (as compared to 48% in April 2003).

Yet Europe shows no signs of maintaining, let alone enhancing its capacity for military action. The lessons of recent interventions point clearly to shortcomings in military capabilities. European missions have been systematically undermanned and underequipped. Interventions in Libya and Mali may have appeared successful, though Libya remains awash with militias and the Malian crisis has been postponed rather than solved suggests otherwise. In both cases, however, European armed forces were crucially dependent on their US counterparts. French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described as “incomprehensible” France's lack of surveillance drones. And for all the bravado that accompanied victory over the forces of Colonel Gadhafi, the fact is that, despite fighting ‘one of the weakest militaries in the world’^[1] the Europeans found themselves reliant on US Tomahawk missiles, drones and electronic warfare aircraft, without which the mission may well not have succeeded.^[2]

This lack of adequate military capacities stems from several sources. The austerity policies spawned by the eurozone crisis have made an already bad situation worse. Some smaller member states have initiated reductions of over 20% in defence spending – Lithuania cut its defence budget by 36% in 2010 – while, at the other end of the scale, Germany and the UK approved reductions of around 8% to be implemented over a period of several years.

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Between 2001 and 2010, EU defence spending declined from €251 billion to €194 billion. Crucially, in terms of military capabilities, the period between 2005 and 2010 witnessed a 14% decrease in R&D budgets: the US alone now spends seven times more on defence R&D than all EU member states, whilst spending in emerging states is catching up rapidly.

Europe's disaggregation into national defence systems wields a perhaps still more pernicious influence. Around 80% of all defence equipment in Europe is bought nationally, while some 75% of investment in defence equipment also occurs within national borders. The upshot of fragmentation between separately equipped and commanded militaries is that Europe does not enjoy the economies of scale from which the US benefits. Member states in 2009 were undertaking 89 different weapons programmes – in contrast to 27 in the United States. The EU possesses 16 different types of frigate as opposed to only one in the US. The inefficiencies inherent in this situation hardly require further elaboration.

Out of this sorry tale emerges the notion of the European 'defence deficit,' whereby European cooperation has not managed to compensate for declining capacity at the national level. European integration has failed to rescue individual member states from decline in defence in the way it has in other areas of public policy. Those same member states, whilst all too willing to talk a good game when it comes to defence cooperation, have proven far more reluctant to take practical action in this direction. Defence remains very much a national rather than a cooperative undertaking.

Certainly, some, limited, attempts have been made to address these problems. The European Commission has begun, albeit tentatively, to address some of the dysfunctionality of the European arms market. In 2009 it outlined a common approach to the licensing of defence material transfers – heterogeneous national licensing regimes cost member states some €400 million in 2007/8. The Commission also took several member states to Court in 2012 for not implementing an EU directive allowing for competitive tendering in defence equipment by the specified date of August 2011.

Member states themselves have signed up to the notion of 'pooling and sharing' military capabilities in order to reduce the costs of possessing adequate military capabilities. The European Air Transport Command represents an example, wherein 5 member states share some 150 planes. Yet, such isolated examples notwithstanding, the benefits realized to date have been meager at best – amounting to savings of only around €200-€300 million (or about a hundredth of the amounts cut from defence budgets).[3] Simply put, national governments are reluctant to become reliant on others for their defence, whatever the cost saving and efficiency gains that could thereby be achieved. Sovereign scarcity, in other words, has been chosen over the multilateral multiplier effect.

Given the reluctance with which member states have embraced European attempts to produce more bang for collective European bucks, the notion that the European Council meeting will lead to some kind of step change in the intensity of collaboration appears somewhat fanciful. Rather, European cooperation must start from modest beginnings, in the hope that political momentum will carry it forward. A useful point of departure would be for national defence ministries to coordinate more closely (that is to say, to coordinate at all) over the implications of budget cuts for military capabilities. Sharing information is a necessary first step not only to avoiding the disappearance of niche capabilities, but to building trust as a basis for further cooperation. Further down the line, the consequent identification of common needs might facilitate pooling and sharing, which is achievable only via such convergence of views and not by EU fiat.

A special responsibility falls on France and Britain. The creators of CSDP are often seen as having turned their backs on the project, notably as a result of their 2010 defence treaty. Yet for all the military prowess of Paris and London, purely bilateral cooperation excludes more than half of Europe's military potential. And it is precisely amongst the other member states that there is the most need for the kind of stimulus that collaborative schemes could, conceivably, provide. Because they bear a disproportionate burden when it comes to security, Britain and France have most to gain from a process that generates increased military capabilities and an enhanced desire amongst their partners to deploy them.

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Europe's increasing military shortcomings are no longer a secret. Former US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates warned of Europe facing 'collective military irrelevance' because of steady deterioration of armed forces. The NATO Secretary General has similarly warned that 'if European defence spending cuts continue, Europe's ability to be a stabilizing force even in its neighbourhood will rapidly disappear'. If Europeans aspire to exert real influence over international security affairs, they must do so collectively, or not at all. CSDP has now reached the last chance saloon. After more than a decade of relative ineffectiveness, member states are starting to doubt its ability to provide real value added.

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Anand Menon is Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at Kings College London. He has written widely on subjects ranging from EU politics and policies, to French and British foreign policies, to European security. His latest book is *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union* (co-edited with Erik Jones and Stephen Weatherill, OUP, 2013). The author would like to express his gratitude for funding the research upon which this article was based to the ESRC (Research Grant RES-062-23-2717).

[1] Steven Erlanger, "Libya's Dark Lesson for NATO," *New York Times*, 3 September 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/sunday-review/what-libyas-lessons-mean-for-nato.html?pagewanted=all>

[2] F. Stephen Larrabee Stuart E. Johnson, John Gordon IV, Peter A. Wilson, Caroline Baxter, Deborah Lai, and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth., *NATO and the Challenges of Austerity* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012). 98.

[3] Clara Marina O'Donnell, 'The Trials and Tribulations of European Defence Cooperation,' Centre for European Reform, July 2013.

About the author:

Prof. **Anand Menon** is Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London and Director of the UK in a Changing Europe initiative.