

The December 2013 European Council on Defence: Avoiding Irrelevance

Written by Jolyon Howorth

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JOLYON HOWORTH, OCT 15 2013

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union (EU) is currently a project at risk. Like the Eurozone project, it was launched for primarily political reasons in the knowledge that the physical, political and strategic elements required for success were not in place. The approach consisted in crossing each bridge as it came into view – in short, it made a virtue of “muddling through”. But with the EU’s Southern and Eastern neighborhoods in a state of relative turmoil, with the US tilt to Asia, with draconian defense cuts being applied in every member-state – without any attempt at cross-border coordination – with NATO still trying to find a role, the policy is in limbo. That is why President Van Rompuy called for a special European Council scheduled for December 2013 to address the status and future of CSDP. Many analysts have argued that CSDP is facing a “make or break” situation.

Prognoses for the success of the December Council range from pessimistic to dire[1]. A quasi-consensus among heads of state and government has formed around three prescriptions for the Council. The first concerns method: do not generate grandiose schemes, but focus on pragmatic baby steps, preferably one at a time. The second has to do with vision: do not attempt to define a strategic objective because the EU could never agree on one. The third, as a consequence of the first two, addresses expectations management: do not anticipate any major steps forward in order to avoid disappointment.

This is a recipe for disaster. The December Council is too necessary and too important to risk emerging as a non-event. It should not be about fine-tuning. If CSDP is to develop into a policy area with a future, it is time to ask some probing, fundamental questions.

I have just finished writing the second edition of my 2007 book[2]. It is a very different book from the original. After 350 pages, I am left wondering exactly what CSDP *is*. The cognoscenti know what it *does*. It does overseas crisis management missions – 33 missions to date. Expert analysis of those missions is at best ambivalent, at worst worrying. Scores of academics and think-tankers have scrutinized and analyzed the CSDP missions and only a handful is prepared to give them the clear benefit of the doubt.

The EU’s security and defense project today finds itself caught in mid-stream, seemingly unable either to go back or to go forward. In its brief fifteen-year history, it has achieved a great deal. But most progress has been incremental, reactive, ad-hoc, piecemeal, experimental and inchoate. It is high time to stop muddling through and to establish, at the very least, what exactly CSDP is attempting to achieve. In order to make genuine progress at the December Council, the meeting needs to focus on four key problem areas: strategic vision; autonomy; intervention; and leadership.

Strategic Vision

This seems to be a concept that makes European policy-makers break out in a cold sweat. Time and again, EU officials have reminded scholars and analysts that the Union does not dabble in “grand strategy”[3]. Yet to posit the need for a more strategic approach is really saying little more than that there needs to be agreement on basic

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objectives, and on the means required to achieve them. To this extent, the 2003 *European Security Strategy* was not a strategy since it made no attempt to think through the relationship between means and ends[4]. By the same token, the 2008 “Review” was not a review since it contented itself with a minor updating of the 2003 text[5]. And unfortunately, the document which emerged from the trans-European process launched in 2012 under the title of the *European Global Strategy*, reads like motherhood and apple pie[6]. The world is undergoing a process of power transition. What is the EU aiming to accomplish in a world undergoing power transition? In order to answer that question, it needs to understand the potential scenarios for that power transition.

There is a lively debate in the US about these potential scenarios, beginning with diametrically contradictory views about the appropriate role for the US post-Afghanistan[7]. John Ikenberry offers us a scenario based on the ability of the liberal international order to co-opt into its institutions and values all of the emerging powers[8]. Robert Hutchings insists, on the contrary, that “the West” will have to make major concessions to “the Rest” and forge a “global grand bargain” ushering in a new global order which will be equally acceptable to all the major actors[9]. Charles Kupchan, on the other hand, imagines a world in which there will be many different pathways to modernity and in which no one power will enjoy dominance, still less hegemony[10]. These are totally different scenarios and outcomes. There seems to be no echo of this debate in the EU. Instead, the Lisbon Treaty speaks of promoting and defending European values. What does that mean? Are those values exportable – or under attack? How far is the EU prepared to go to promote and to defend its values? In the context of power transition, I would suggest that the EU’s new strategic narrative should be: “to facilitate and help engineer a peaceful transition towards a more consensual global order”.

Autonomy

We should recall why the word “autonomous” in the December 1998 St-Malo Declaration was so important. It was predicated on the belief that EU member states would take security and defense more seriously (and would be prepared to pay for it appropriately) through an EU agency rather than through NATO – where the habit of free-riding was (and remains) so deeply engrained. It was also about the EU being able to decide for itself what to do, where, when and with which instruments. Those were important foundational principles. I believe it was crucial in the early years to allow CSDP to grow in its own way, without being micro-managed from Washington DC. But has the EU actually delivered on the promise of autonomy? In 2013, it remains hugely dependent on NATO and on the US for more or less everything other than the very simplest of missions. So was autonomy essentially about allowing the Union to send a (largely ineffectual) police mission to Kinshasa[11]? Given the scale of ambition revealed to date, did autonomy really matter?

Another reflection on autonomy has to do with the ongoing relations between CSDP and NATO – which have always been dysfunctional and are increasingly deleterious for both agencies. It is now widely agreed, particularly since the Libya fiasco, that CSDP has to enter into much deeper and intensive cooperation with NATO? But what does that mean in practice? Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has engaged in three important missions: in Kosovo, in Afghanistan and in Libya. Will any one of those operations be recorded by history as a clear-cut success? Both NATO and CSDP are currently in a state of existential self-interrogation. What does it mean under those circumstances to insist that CSDP should remain autonomous of NATO? To what end? As one who initially argued in favor of autonomy in order for CSDP to breathe life into itself, I now believe the EU should progressively *merge* with NATO, in order to turn the merged entity into an effective and appropriate *regional* actor for the stabilization of the greater European area[12]. This would have the associated benefit of allowing the Americans to concentrate on their own strategic priorities.

Intervention

We need a deep, heart-searching re-appraisal of intervention as an activity and as a principle. The recent debate on Syria’s chemical weapons and a putative Western “response” is instructive in this respect. How can we be sure that, through our intervention, we will be making matters better rather than worse – or no different? That is the only question of any significance. There is much talk about CSDP being a “security provider”. But does the EU really know what that means or how to achieve it with any degree of durability? The EU has now engaged in no fewer than

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seven missions in the DRC. In what sense have they provided lasting security[13]? Since July 2005, the EU has been running a “Rule of Law” mission in Iraq, training many hundreds of Iraqi officials. However, in summer 2013, Iraq moved up to occupy the number three position among states imposing the death-penalty. It occupied the number 11 slot out of the top 20 “critically failed states” as listed by *Foreign Policy*. Iraq was ranked 169th out of 174 states as the most corrupt in the world by *Transparency International*. *Amnesty International* records, for Iraq, excessive levels of arbitrary arrests, non-judicial imprisonment, systematic torture, executions (judicial) and killings (extra-judicial). It is not clear how much security the EU mission has actually provided in Iraq.

Leadership

Anand Menon has argued that “leaderlessness” is an appropriate condition for CSDP[14]. Maybe, in the early years, this was a necessary concomitant of getting all member states involved in the designation and launch of the project. It is now high time to move on. There is a growing body of opinion behind the notion that leadership is desperately required in all policy areas. Who should be part of a putative “core CSDP”? Until it is clear what CSDP is attempting to achieve, we cannot know. A July 2013 French Senate report on CSDP suggested abandoning the vague concept of “l’Europe de la Défense” in favour of focused concentration on creating “la défense de l’Europe”. The leadership group proposed for that project would be essentially France and the UK. But how many member states would accept such a project as the EU’s new narrative? The Saint-Malo Declaration which spoke of the EU “playing its full role on the international stage”, or the *European Security Strategy* which refers to the EU as a “global player” – both of which documents are very ambitious – clearly requires a leadership group comprising all the EU’s major powers. But if CSDP were to limit itself to carrying out minor civil-military stabilization operations, then leadership might well be limited to Germany, Sweden and Belgium. Until we know what the project is, we cannot identify appropriate leaders.

Very few people around the world even know of the existence of CSDP. If the EU is in fact to be a security & defence actor even at regional level, it needs to address these questions head on. There is little purpose in simply re-arranging the deck-chairs. If that were to be the outcome of the December Council, the EU runs the risk of becoming irrelevant in this world of power transition.

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Jolyon Howorth has been Visiting Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at Yale University since 2002. He is also Jean Monnet Professor ad personam of European Politics and Emeritus Professor of European Studies at the University of Bath. Recent books include: *The Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, Palgrave, 2007 (2nd edition 2014); *Defending Europe: the EU, NATO and the Quest for European Autonomy*, Palgrave, 2003 (co-ed) and *European Integration and Defence: the ultimate challenge?* (Paris, EU-ISS, 2000).

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About the author:

Prof. **Jolyon Howorth** is Jean Monnet Professor of European Politics and Professor Emeritus of European Studies at the University of Bath and a Visiting Professor of Political Science at Yale University.