

Does the European Union have a strategic culture?

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IJ BENNEYWORTH, FEB 14 2011

'Strategic culture can be defined as a set of beliefs, attitudes and norms towards the use of military force', often moulded according to historical experience (Chappell 2009, p. 419). For the European Union (EU) Cornish and Edwards see it as 'the institutional confidence and processes to manage and deploy military force as part of the accepted range of legitimate and effective policy instruments' (2001, p. 587). However, can this be realised 'within the constraints of a liberal, democratic politics that 'speaks softly and carries a big carrot'?' (Matlary 2006, p. 106) This essay will posit that the EU does have a strategic culture, but one still in infancy, beset by weaknesses and potentially insurmountable obstacles. To demonstrate this, we shall explore key diplomatic efforts to enhance European strategic integration, responses to world events and operational deployments, how these have progressively shaped a common strategic culture, and how numerous issues undermine it.

Though there were initiatives from the late-1940's onwards, it was with the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 that efforts to forge a European strategic identity gathered pace. Despite initial enthusiasm, actual progress was sluggish. One suggested reason was that early (and still present) EU positions on defence were, like other areas of evolving policy, more about developing the Union itself, concentrating on internal institution-building and domestic affairs than external concerns (Rynning 2003, p. 480). Also the 'constructive ambiguity' surrounding early and more recent discussions did not help assuage the concerns of some member states as to where the overall process was heading (Cornish and Edwards 2001, p. 587). One worry was of NATO being undermined, though early efforts to address this included the 1996 agreement of a European Security and Defence Identity, allowing European Combined Joint Task Forces to be generated from inside NATO on a 'separable but not separate' basis (Howorth 2008, p. 85).

During this period war raged in the Balkans, largely unchecked. Whether European ineffectiveness lay with the reasons above, failure of political will, calculations that the EU was toothless, or a combination of all, it was left to NATO to force a peace. The EU's strategic impotence had to be addressed and so the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty (ratified in 1999) reinforced CFSP principles in more specific terms and reiterated 'progressive framing of a common defence policy... which might lead to a common defence', albeit 'should the European Council so decide' (Duke 2000, p. 133). The words 'progressive' and 'might' certainly did not indicate great forward momentum for the process. The introduction of a High Representative for CFSP and a Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit were also intended to increase the EU's participation in security. However, member states were still preeminent, despite an attempt to overcome veto threats by allowing 'constructive abstention', whereby a third of members could opt out of Joint Actions without vetoing involvement of others (Dover 2010, p. 246).

Whether through negotiation or reactions to world events, these resulting drives towards greater policy and institutional clarity demonstrate a focus on establishing an EU strategic culture, yet neither NATO's predominance nor the necessity of securing member consensus could be ignored. These early efforts show the promise and weakness in EU strategic culture: recognition that streamlining policy direction and institutional development was essential, yet the ever-present need to address the potentially different and conflicting concerns and interests of members.

The pace of European security integration was reenergised with the EU's 1999 agreement at Helsinki to adopt a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) – eventually codified with the 2001 Nice Treaty signing – in order to

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strategically and structurally boost the CFSP. The Petersberg Tasks, a series of mission types including humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping, rescue operations and crisis management, were to be incorporated into the CFSP with the Western European Union's eventual absorption into the EU, adding further definition and shape to its defence responsibilities and strategic culture (Sperling 2001, p. 129). Agreement was also made to provide the necessary infrastructure for the ESDP. These included a Political and Security Committee to assume competences for EU foreign, security and defence policies; the EU Military Staff to carry out situation assessment and strategic planning in regards to the Petersberg Tasks; and an EU Military Committee consisting of representatives of national defence chiefs to advise the previous two bodies (Cornish and Edwards 2001, p. 594). These new measures were EU centric yet retained national controls and inputs, and so again the EU attempted to enhance its own strategic infrastructure but was bound by member interests. The Berlin-Plus arrangement agreed in 1999 and activated in 2003, which allowed NATO assets to be made available to the EU, in theory added capability to these institutional initiatives and enhanced the partnership between the two, assuring joint EU/NATO members, as well as addressing the EU's capabilities shortfall (Menotti and Vencato 2008, p. 114).

The 1999 Kosovo conflict demonstrated this shortfall when compared to NATO, which was essential to the campaign, not only militarily but especially in the areas of intelligence and logistics. This spurred efforts to further develop autonomous European capability, principally the Helsinki Headline Goal, intended to be a 'Force Catalogue' of 60,000 troops, 100 ships and 400 aircraft deployable within sixty days for up to a year for possible future operations (Howorth 2007, p. 103). Delivery on promises was not necessarily guaranteed however, and less ambitious targets appeared with the later Battlegroup initiative. Berlin-Plus demonstrated the recognition that NATO was still vital, but the EU's capability pursuits suggested that strategic self-reliance was still a principal aim. As French Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine, said regarding enhanced NATO/EU cooperation: 'the mutual information and consultation mechanisms are... satisfactory, but the tempo has to be that of the establishment of Defence Europe' (Cornish and Edwards 2001, p. 590).

With policy and institutional foundations laid, the EU began commencing operations, including deployment in 2002 to facilitate reconstruction in Afghanistan, and the first action under the ESDP, that of sending military assistance to FYROM in 2003 under Operation Concordia, as well as a general transfer of policing in the Balkans from NATO to the EU. The nature of these operations demonstrate how the EU's strategic culture has developed to reflect its values of promoting stability, security, human rights, all within the remit of international law, often through UN approval. These operations gathered pace, especially following the 2003 peacekeeping Operation ARTEMIS in the Congo, which also provided the template for the EU Battlegroup initiative, which aimed for battalion-sized pooling of forces on a rotating basis, promoting readily deployable capability and encouraging member contributions regardless of size, moving towards a more 'quality over quantity' approach (Howorth 2008, p. 91), though some critiqued that the goalposts of the original Headline Goal had been 'not so much moved as dismantled altogether' (Menon 2009, p. 233). The European Security Strategy of 2003 sought to further clarify strategic priorities and featured proactive language about providing for a secure Europe in 'a better world' and making it a more global player (Europa 2006). Provisions of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty (finally ratified in 2009) also aimed to enhance strategic coordination and capabilities, the first by expanding the role of High Representative for CFSP into becoming High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, chairing the council of EU foreign ministers; and the second via the coordinating European Defence Agency (Dover 2010, p. 251), though its effectiveness is subject to how cooperative member states are willing to be.

These progressive initiatives, and accompanying policy and institutional developments, are key to establishing an EU strategic culture. As Andréani writes regarding the importance of such measures to integration efforts, especially regarding defence: 'only in a specialised institutional setting will such a culture hopefully be imported into it, and solidify' (2000, p. 83).

These institutions are not ideologically lacking. It can be suggested that the norms shared by EU members – that provide foundations for a strategic culture – lie in the notion of human security. The Petersberg Tasks and operational deployments, with their humanitarian or policing dimensions (Rynning 2003, pp. 484-485), attest to this. Some suggest that the EU, despite these principles, displays acute self-interest with the 'pick and choose' nature of deployments into relatively low-risk theatres so as to maintain consensus (Bailes 2008, p. 123). However, given that

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the EU's strategic culture, like the capabilities available to it and the political will to use them, are still in infancy, it is only logical that it take on manageable operations and ones where its potential contribution will be valuable.

Yet this still highlights the EU's shortfall as a fast, effective and decisive strategic actor, limited in what it can (or would wish to) do by adherence to inherent institutional processes, remits, consensus and desire for UN mandates. The EU still possesses more structural than coercive power. This does not undermine its claim to a strategic culture, but in comparison to robust, national cultures that wield their power effectively, such as America, the difference is clear. The EU can engage swiftly by using a framework nation to pave the way until other forces join an operation, as was France's role in ARTEMIS, however should complications arise on the ground, disagreements could ensue between contributors over how forcefully to tackle them. As Rynning writes of the EU's approach to force: 'Its less robust nature is indicative of the same European inhibition that was seen in Kosovo with regard to applying force to win campaigns' (2003, p. 485). Despite streamlining efforts, such as the High Representative's enhanced role, the EU lacks the executive power and direction required for effective military responses and swift decision making during campaigns.

When the EU does deploy there remains the capabilities issue, from only 400 personnel in FYROM to failure to provide the promised numbers of police trainers to Afghanistan (Menon 2009, p. 230 & p. 233). Progress in asset-sharing between members is often made outside the EU framework, such as the recent Anglo-French defence treaty and the pooling of several countries' resources under the new European Air Transport Command (Defence Industry Daily 2010). This is not to say military capability is non-existent, yet lack of resources could explain why ten out of fourteen ESDP missions up to 2007 were non-military ones, mainly assisting in policing, border control, security reform, etc (Bailes 2008, p. 118), and how EU military interventions have often followed or accompanied NATO or UN forces (Menon 2009, p. 230). Deployments themselves are also subject to ever-problematic consensus, as demonstrated by the failure to approve a 2008 Battlegroup intervention in the Congo, even with direct appeal by the UN Secretary General (Menon 2009, p. 232). Member state insistence on some form of involvement in EU planning and operational matters are unavoidable, but often impede development towards an effective strategic culture.

Differing strategic cultures between EU members are also significant. Many believe in restraint whereas others, especially those with imperial histories such as Britain and France, see intervention as a legitimate way of securing interests, and yet even these notionally similar countries differ on close transatlantic security relations versus greater European autonomy. The range of views is not new, and the EU has attempted to develop a strategic vision based on human security that is acceptable to all. Members may share basic norms but militarily capable nations, i.e. the UK and France, can still go their own ways, as demonstrated in their Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast interventions. While those examples complemented the ESDP, Iraq did not and the fractures were obvious. Where the priorities of native strategic cultures match, they have complemented the development of an EU one, but when incompatibilities emerge they can and have led to incoherence, drift and paralysis, or at the very least the impression of these (Meyer 2006, p. 28).

Whereas states develop strategic cultures from historical experiences, the EU has had to form its own through policy. It is a political project and so its identity, including security, is more a product of political will than historical development, demonstrated by treaties featuring increasingly proactive language, policy initiatives and institution-building. This has risked placing the institutional cart before the strategy horse, and so the EU has had to balance advancement towards strategic autonomy with addressing member concerns. Members possess differing strategic cultures and attitudes towards European autonomy, plus desire to have a say regardless of size or contribution. The lack of a strong executive within a unified political environment to direct campaigns, and insufficient capabilities to carry out operations beyond a certain scale (and the risk of veto even if they were) also weaken the robustness and credibility of any strategic culture.

Yet if we examine the definition of what a strategic culture is, then the EU complies. The issue of a culture being 'moulded according to historical experience' has been addressed above in the context of the EU's unique development. Through this development the EU, and its members, share a basic 'set of beliefs, attitudes and norms towards the use of military force' with foundations in the Petersberg Tasks and adherence to international law. Despite their limited scale, whether due to inadequate capabilities or mollifying risk-averse members, and some

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critique over performance, the EU continues to mount operations within these reimits. A more militarised interventionism is unlikely given the EU's experience as a 'soft power', and the differing attitudes of members would prohibit this anyway. An EU strategic culture *has* developed, but while it adheres to a 'lowest common denominator' approach to satisfy its members, the robustness and effectiveness it aspires to will likely elude it.

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