

European Defence at a Crossroads

Written by Robert Clark

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ROBERT CLARK, JUN 29 2018

For the last seven decades responsibility for European defence and security has ultimately fallen to the United States, guaranteed by the size of both its conventional military capability, and by its nuclear arsenal. This security guarantee has often been enhanced by the relationship between Washington and London, the United Kingdom assuming the role of the second military power in a trans-Atlantic security agreement solidified by the creation of NATO in 1949.

Whilst each member state of NATO holds equal status, it is the US which underpins the majority of the hard military power of the alliance, providing three quarters of NATO's budget, and still retaining a military which out surpasses every conceivable enemy in each theatre of war, be it land, sea, air or space.

Between the last five and ten years, however, the European Union has increasingly sought to assert itself as a regional security actor. Originally established in the aftermath of the Second World War and the near-destruction of Europe, the EU was primarily a trade and financial regional institution, seeking to ensure that shared fiscal policies and trade would increase regional interdependence, thus limiting the likelihood of war returning to Europe.

Whilst this has largely been achieved, the EU has started to stray from its original mandate. Though still far from the concept of a 'European army', there have been developments in the last twelve months which signal cause for concern for the continued role of the traditional trans-Atlantic security guarantee of European defence.

Specifically, the last year has seen the development of three issues which have the potential to destabilise the European defence underwritten by NATO. The first is the implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a security and defense pact implemented in December 2017. Introduced in the Lisbon Treaty, PESCO creates a joint framework for participating states to develop joint defence capabilities, to invest in shared projects, and to enhance the operational readiness of their armed forces, specifically in cyberspace.

It has been criticised by both the US and the UK for potential direct competition with NATO, including by members of the UK Defence Select Committee. A senior Pentagon official was quoted as stating that Washington was supportive of PESCO, "as long as it's complementary to and not distracting from NATO's activities and requirements". Considering that the majority of the European member states of NATO struggle to fulfill their obligation of committing 2% of GDP to defence, unrolling new defence policies, implemented by the EU, may indeed distract from NATO objectives and current missions.

The second recent development in EU defence policy is the suggested European Intervention Initiative (EII), the brainchild of France's President Macron, with strong support from Germany and other EU member states. Conceived in November 2017, the EII would allow EU member states who wish to do so, to participate in foreign military interventions, without having to resort to a NATO-led command and control.

This is a perplexing development for European defence, due to a much reduced political appetite for such interventions across the continent, and at a time when recent NATO interventions have proven militarily highly successful, such as the 2011 air campaign in Libya to enforce UNSC resolution 1973.

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The possibility that this could simply be a means for France and Germany to affirm the EU as a military actor, as a direct challenge to NATO, is a high probability when considering that as of 2019 the UK will no longer be an EU member, and that the gravity therefore of the traditional model for European defence will be firmly outside of the EU, in Washington and London, despite NATO's headquarters remaining in Brussels.

In a move considered at best problematic by the EU toward NATO, the EU has sought to exclude the UK from continued participation in the Galileo satellite system currently being developed, citing security concerns once the UK leaves the EU. With British firms having already invested €1.4 billion in the project, it leaves the UK forced to develop its own next-generation military satellite system. Far from merely being considered an EU-UK concern, to have NATO states operate satellite capability which differs from that of EU member states could prove highly problematic in the event of future NATO missions, further compromising NATO operational efficiency.

In a further, more recent, escalation of instability for future UK-EU defence cooperation, the Commission has proposed to routinely exclude US and UK companies from a €13 bn defence programme to develop the EU's "strategic autonomy", in key strategic areas such as cyber security and drone technology. The Commission proposal justifies such curbs on the basis that the fund must aim to protect "essential security and defence interests", which until very recently in Europe has been the preserve of NATO, or at least NATO-led, with US and UK defence spending and capability underpinning that responsibility.

These three recent developments around EU defence policy have challenged the Anglo-American driven, NATO-led leadership of European defence. Whilst an argument can certainly be made that EU defence policies can serve to complement existing NATO strategies, such as in overall defence spending, and in increasing military mobility throughout Europe, there needs to be a closer examination of Europe defence; specifically the physical territorial space from where threats to Europe emanate, in order to best determine how NATO can mitigate this new role that the EU has developed for itself.

European defence is focused on three territorial boundaries, or spaces: the eastern flank, the southern flank, and the internal space. The eastern flank is focused on the threat from a resurgent Russia, mitigated by the Enhanced Forward Presence and NATO troops stationed in the Baltics. The internal space concerns hybrid and asymmetric methods of warfare, and how to protect against these rapidly evolving threats such as cyber terrorism/crime, and espionage.

The southern flank concerns the space occupied to the south of the European continent, ranging broadly from Morocco to Pakistan. As a geopolitical area, there are many security issues in this region, ranging from political instability across the MENA region, to ongoing conflicts and civil wars. These issues have given rise to one of the largest threats to European security since the end of the Cold War; the current migration crisis witnessed across the continent.

Unprecedented numbers of vulnerable and displaced people have sought refuge within Europe's borders, with the vast majority of these people holding legitimate claims for asylum, which European states are legally obliged to process (at the correct point of entry). However, there have been rising security concerns regarding individuals who have either travelled with or fought with proscribed terrorist organisations, including Islamic State, and who seek to cause harm in Europe. In addition to this very obvious and real threat, there have also been concerns for European social integration.

Europe's southern boundary has largely been securitised by the EU, and not by NATO, in direct contrast to both the eastern boundary and the internal space. Currently, there are EU missions operating in Mali, Somalia, Niger, Central African Republic, Iraq and Libya. A number of these states are seeing some of the highest figures for migration to Europe, with Libya especially playing a crucial role in the migration process as a point of departure.

A 2017 Gallup poll highlighted that 173 million adults from NATO's southern boundary wish to migrate to European states, with the desire to migrate in sub-Saharan Africa hovering at 30% of the population. These are alarming figures if accurate, and such sombre data requires serious evidence-based policy decisions.

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With the NATO summit in July 2018 set to focus on countering the Russian threat, as well as the continuing threat posed from both international and cyber terrorism, there is space for a discussion of how to reaffirm NATO's leadership of contemporary European defence issues, with a view to improving the stability of Europe's southern boundary.

A US-led NATO training mission to Iraq will begin this summer, aimed at improving the operational capability of Iraqi forces which have largely defeated IS, and who must now hold the ground captured, building on their hard-fought success. Specialised training in counter-IED awareness, medical training and 'hearts and minds' for Iraqi security personnel will prove essential to ensure continued Iraqi security, and subsequently that of European.

In 2015 there were over 91,000 reported Iraqi migrants to Europe. By improving the security situation on the ground in the worst affected regions, increased stability will hopefully lead to fewer individuals feeling the need to make the dangerous journey to Europe, shoring up Europe's southern boundary in the process.

Thus by 'train the trainer', a model can be replicated across Europe's southern boundary to the worst affected areas. At present, this role has been the preserve of the EU training missions discussed above, though there is the capacity for so much more in this regard, and a role in which NATO has had previous experiences and success, including the continuing training and advisory mission in Afghanistan.

By developing local capacities in these regions through operating small, short term training missions, several strategic goals of NATO would be met. The southern boundary will become more secure, which leads to a long-term strengthening of European security. The recent emergence of the EU as a regional defence actor is gradually eroding the notion of the traditional Anglo-American driven European defence leadership of NATO. By utilising the opportunity of the upcoming summit held in Brussels, NATO can reaffirm its long-held leadership of European defence and security.

About the author:

Robert Clark is a serving member of the British Armed Forces. He is a researcher with experience in security and strategy as well as defence, both with private think tanks and within the British Ministry of Defence (MoD).