

A European army ?

Defence is not always thought of as a priority for Europe. Yet it is arguably the one area where the EU has made the greatest strides in the past decade. Since it was launched in 1999, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP, formerly ESDP) has included the definition of military capability targets (the so-called 'Headline Goals' 2003 and 2010), a 'European Capabilities Action Plan' (ECAP) in 2001 and the creation of a European Defence Agency in 2004. These efforts aim at improving the effectiveness and interoperability of the European defence forces, with a focus on standardisation of materials and procedures. The goals and missions of this emerging European defence apparatus were first set out in the so-called 'Petersberg tasks', in 1992, and expanded in the subsequent 'European Security Strategy' (2003). They include humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping, peacemaking and international crisis management (the latter including so-called 'high intensity' operations).

With Member States retaining complete sovereignty over their armed forces, the EU is still far from possessing its own military. Nevertheless, the Lisbon Treaty has strengthened the institutional framework, notably through the creation of the office of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (backed by the soon-to-be-created External Action Service) and the reinforcement of the procedures for 'enhanced cooperation' and 'permanent structured cooperation'. The main impediment to further progress is the dearth of financial resources, compounded by the economic crisis and deficit-cutting policies across the EU : the combined military budget of all 27 EU members currently amounts to less than half the US military budget and is, for obvious reasons, much more inefficiently spent. This, combined with a general weakness in the realm of fighting and projection capacities (only a very few European countries have any capacity for independent military projection), means that the EU is still a long way from its stated goal of independent self-defence capability.

Yet the desirability of this goal should be doubted by no one.

An independent and effective all-European military is needed for several reasons. Top of these is the old-fashioned need for physical security. While large-scale warfare in the heart of the European Continent may well be a thing of the past, the past two decades have seen several major conflicts in the EU's immediate vicinity – in former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. The capacity of these conflicts to spill over the EU's borders can hardly be overestimated. The wars in the Balkans resulted in massive inflows of refugees, as well as greatly facilitated drugs and weapons trafficking across Europe. The various conflicts in the Middle East are directly responsible for large-scale terrorism against Europe's major capitals – Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 being the most prominent examples. And the 2008 Russo-Georgian war was interpreted by several new Member States (notably the Baltic states and Poland) as a direct threat against their security and independence. These threats won't go away, and Europeans will remain bound to their volatile neighbourhood. The EU might therefore consider retaining a credible military option in its armoury, should it ever need one – unless it wishes to forever rely on US military power for its security (as it did during the Yugoslav wars of 1995 and 1999).

From the point of view of cost-effectiveness, relying on the US may well seem an attractive option. Yet, quite apart from the risk of relying on the kindness of strangers, such reliance imposes all kinds of burdens on EU foreign policy. To start with, the EU has no control over US decision-making, meaning it has to give up any pretense to independent policy-making, at least in times of war. And in times of peace, the EU is still regarded by many outside the West (notably in Russia, China or Iran) as little more than a US protectorate, at least on geostrategic issues. The refusal of Russia, among others, to take the EU seriously as an international partner, stems directly from this perception that EU military-strategic policy is actually defined neither in Brussels, nor even in European capitals, but in Washington, D.C. The behaviour of many EU countries during the most recent international crises – most notably the war in Iraq – can hardly have failed to reinforce that perception.

Indeed, the example of Iraq points to another, more immediate danger in the lack of a credible European military capacity. As long as many EU members will continue to (rightly) consider Washington as the ultimate guarantor of their security, they will remain wedded to the US on all matters of war and peace - even if US policy happens to be obviously illegal or antagonistic to Europe's overall security interests, and even if, for this reason, it should be opposed by several EU Member States. As the diplomatic crisis over Iraq in 2003 vividly demonstrated, the lack of a credible and independent self-defence capacity is a permanent threat to the EU's unity, and therefore to its very existence. Anyone interested in shoring up European unity and internal peace should strive to ensure that the fundamental intra-European divide triggered by America's invasion of Iraq will never happen again.

Yet the most elemental rationale for a quasi-unified European military establishment is plain common sense. What sense, indeed, does it still make for each EU country to retain an independent army - unless it betrays a remaining mistrust of their neighbours ? Indeed, such common sense was, and remains, the most decisive impetus behind the decade-old Security and Defence Policy. For the continuing existence of separate armies for each Member State is not simply useless, or worse; it is quite wasteful as well. Should the EU member states manage to complete the process of pooling their resources and standardising their procedures and equipments, they would bypass a lot of unnecessary duplication, cut loose a lot of redundant bureaucracy – and save a lot of money. In an era of straightened budgets, this last consideration might prove to be the most decisive of all.