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On the Way to a Common Strategic Culture

How far along is the development of a European Security and Defence Union, and what does that mean for the Bundeswehr?

by Armin Staigis

In this fragile multipolar world, the European Union must become a political player capable of protecting and defending its values and interests. To do so, Europe needs the “common strategic culture” for security and defence policy that President Macron called for in 2017, an appeal that Chancellor Merkel has since echoed. What does this mean for the development of a European strategy and the necessary capabilities, and what are the consequences for the Bundeswehr?¹

Europe in an Uncertain World

The multipolar world many hoped would take the place of U.S. hegemony has now become a reality, yet this world looks nothing like the pleasant utopia some people had in mind. Founded to make peace within its own borders, the European Union is now realising in light of the crises and conflicts in its immediate vicinity that the EU is not only an economic community, but also a political player with common values and interests that it must protect and defend.

As Chancellor Angela Merkel said even in 2017, Europeans “really have to take their fate into their own hands” because they “can no longer completely rely on others¹”. For the EU, this means establishing a culture of declaring and asserting itself in times of Brexit and unresolved economic, refugee and migration crises in which some countries are exhibiting very different views on the European Union’s basic principles of freedom and democracy. Global challenges need European answers.

Is the EU on Its Way to a Security and Defence Union?

Europe can no longer adhere to security policy that makes it effectively a U.S. protectorate. This demand did not originally come from the self-centred Trump administration with its “America First” policy, but rather dates back to a 1997 statement made by President Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. In this multipolar world, it is no longer reasonable for 320 million Americans to continue taking on the main responsibility and bearing the major burdens for the security and defence of 500 million Europeans.

¹ This working paper initially appeared in a slightly shorter version in: *zur sache bw – Evangelische Kommentare zu Fragen der Zeit*, 33, 1/2018, p. 45-48.

In recent years, many Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) initiatives based on the Treaty of Lisbon and the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy have been launched in order to work towards an EU Security and Defence Union. In future, new conceptual and planning measures are supposed to build on the successes of the CSDP's first 15 years, which are still underestimated, to drive the necessary capability development of national armed forces in the EU. The instrument for achieving these goals is the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which is based on the Treaty on European Union and which 25 EU countries have joined.

The first 17 projects for closing military capabilities gaps and developing common armaments projects have been identified. The creation of the European Defence Fund, initiated by the European Commission and funded by the EU's budget, will support specific research and capability development projects in the Member States. A coordinated annual review of the national plans, similar to the European Semesters already practised in other areas, is to monitor plans for work, scheduling and funding, and develop them further. There will also be a review of the funding for the shared costs of military operations. In this overall context, it is also worth noting the close cooperation between NATO and the EU resumed in 2016, with a current total of 74 projects such as countering hybrid threats, cybersecurity and cooperation on operations in the Mediterranean.

Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, praised these achievements as a "historic moment in European defence" at the European Council in December 2017. Yet while we should by no means disregard what the CSDP has accomplished, these achievements are only the first steps on the way to a European Security and Defence Union. The afore-mentioned individual projects do not demonstrate any viable strategic orientation for European security and defence – and that is exactly what we need now, in times of American self-centredness and Russia's efforts to expand its influence and power, as our neighbours to the south are going up in flames and bloodshed, and Asian powers continue to advance.

The EU's Strategic Focus in Cooperation with NATO

In his speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017, French President Macron characterised the current shortcomings of the EU's strategic orientation as follows: "What Europe, Defence Europe, lacks most today is a common strategic culture". President Macron links the development of this common culture to a European intervention initiative using a common intervention force. Chancellor Merkel has responded positively with the caveat that they would have to be integrated into the structure of European defence cooperation. Federica Mogherini also speaks of the need for a "common strategic culture". It is a matter of giving concrete strategic form to the words of the Rome Declaration: "a Union committed to strengthening its common security and defence, also in cooperation and complementarity with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation".

This certainly will not be easy in the future with 27 EU countries, 21 of which are NATO member countries, with different constitutional foreign and security policy obligations and the varying strategic cultures they have developed. In the final analysis, it is a matter of targeted pooling of sovereignty within the EU. After all, it is becoming increasingly evident that the EU can only survive in this fragile multipolar world not as a loose association of nation states constantly struggling to overcome their differences, but rather as an integrated, united, highly effective whole.

With that in mind, this kind of approach would have to result in an alignment of strategic cultures, a common understanding of risks and threats, and an agreement as to suitable prevention measures and responses. This will inevitably involve strategically shaping NATO and the EU's relationship and cooperation. We must find an answer to the question of how we can implement the mutual defence commitments from the North Atlantic Treaty and the Treaty on European Union so that they reinforce each other.

The issue of political decision-making structures would have to be discussed against this backdrop. Chancellor Merkel has now introduced the idea of a European security council with rotating members that would enable the EU to act faster and more effectively. Furthermore, a comprehensive approach to the entire range of EU and NATO tasks will likely be necessary in an age in which the distinction between domestic and foreign security has ceased to apply, hybrid threats are on the rise, and new technological dimensions such as cyberspace are being used systematically.

Capabilities and Structures of a European Security and Defence Union

The Europeans themselves bear the primary responsibility for improving European security and defence. They would have the resources to do so because the EU countries' defence expenditures add up to the second highest in the world. All 27 Member States combined spend some 200 billion euros on defence, and, with 1.5 million soldiers, their armed forces are among the largest on the planet. The EU countries and European NATO member countries in particular have already done a great deal within a bilateral and multilateral framework to pool their capabilities and create common structures.

Nevertheless, armed forces planning processes that still take place at the national level, combined with predominantly national defence interests, mean that the output is too low for 27 countries and still too fragmented. For example, Europeans still use many different types of armoured combat vehicles to this day, and award 80 percent of their defence contracts to their own national industries. The aforementioned CSDP initiatives of recent years will bring about improvements in these areas, but are unlikely to achieve the desired breakthrough. If we look at the bigger picture, there is more than a European intervention initiative at stake.

In keeping with the strategic orientation, the EU must work together to further develop its armed forces planning in close coordination with NATO's requirements. There have been many initiatives to this effect in the past, yet they all lacked one thing: consistent implementation. The 2011 "Ghent Initiative", for example, was quite a promising approach but, unfortunately, was not implemented. This initiative left the countries with a great deal of autonomy because they were free to decide which capabilities and structures they wanted to continue to provide at the national level and which they would merge with those of other countries ("pooling"), or share with or provide for other countries ("sharing").

This kind of national bottom-up approach would then be coordinated through a top-down process in the EU and developed further to form a set of European armed forces by mutual agreement. High-value future projects such as strategic reconnaissance, command and control or information systems, cybersecurity, drones and strategic transport capabilities could be allocated to either sharing or pooling. In further steps, European armed forces structures could be developed on this basis and led by a strategic civil-military headquarters in Brussels, which would be compatible with and complementary to the NATO command structures.

The Bundeswehr as Part of the "Army of Europeans"

With its sense of identity, background and structural characteristics, the Bundeswehr is well-equipped for the transition to an "Army of Europeans" as stipulated in the coalition agreement for the 19th legislative period. Yet Germany must also be prepared to move forward with France as it addresses the issues of a "strategic culture" and its own political and military responsibility for European security and defence. Furthermore, we need to make our armed forces planning and armaments far more multinational, that is, more European, than ever before, taking into account the relevant constitutional and budgetary requirements. In this process, we will have to dramatically increase our focus on certain capabilities and let go of some things we have grown attached to, and we will have to learn to rely on others as others rely on us.

In future, even Germany as the EU country with the strongest economy will have to forgo certain capability categories in part or whole within the scope and depth of its armed forces in order to make focussed, targeted use of the personnel, equipment and financial resources available. Which capabilities those would

ultimately and necessarily be decided in the aforementioned top-down approach to common armed forces planning with our partners in the EU and NATO. If Germany and its partners in the EU and NATO do not take this path, even NATO's targeted increase in defence spending to two percent of its members' gross domestic products will remain fragmented among the different countries, meaning that it will only produce a limited increase in capabilities for the EU and NATO as a whole. This change in the planning culture should also be accompanied by an actual cultural change where, in the future, Europeans from other EU countries can serve in the Bundeswehr or German citizens can serve in the armed forces of other EU countries, helping to bring about a forward-looking "Army of Europeans".

Promoting World Peace in a United Europe

Establishing a European Security and Defence Union with an "Army of Europeans" is an essential step in enabling the European Union to take action, maintain its status as a global player and take on the responsibility that comes with this status. Initially, a few Member States will most likely have to lead the way and create precedents for strategy development, armed forces planning and common structures, which will then ultimately also be attractive for other countries. For us Germans, it would be an important step toward fulfilling the commitment set out in the preamble to our Basic Law: "to promote world peace [...] in a united Europe".

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