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Europe gets tough

The EU is moving towards a more integrated defence policy – with the tacit blessing of its citizens

When Federica Mogherini presented the new EU Global Strategy to the European Council back in June 2016, she offered the European strategic community a key sentence that triggered a debate on the finalité of the Common European Security and Defence Policy (CSDP): "While NATO exists to defend its members – most of which are European – from external attack, Europeans must be better equipped, trained and organized to contribute decisively to such collective efforts, as well as to act autonomously if and when necessary."

Her statement touches on three key elements of European security:

1. NATO is European: While the United States bears most of NATO's burdens, most Europeans fall short on fulfilling their part. In times of transatlantic uncertainty, in the face of Russian assertiveness, and confronted with crises on Europe's doorstep, the message is clear: it is no longer either EU or NATO, it is both. Strengthening the CDSP means strengthening NATO.

2. Europeans have to do more and better together: We can no longer afford the luxury of twenty-eight (soon twenty-seven) individual and largely uncoordinated defence policies. It is high time to start pulling together on defence.

3. The EU's level of ambition: Whether or not one likes the idea of the European Union becoming an autonomous security actor, the EU has no choice but to embark on this ambitious project. Peace and security in Europe are not a given and crises in the immediate (and remote) neighbourhood will continue to affect us one way or the other. The United States also may not be willing to serve as Europe's de facto security guarantor indefinitely. And Europeans themselves may one day aspire to a genuine European approach with the necessary independence to act accordingly, and a stronger footprint in international politics.

The EU Global Strategy represents the beginning rather than the end of the difficult debate on European defence. The EU institutions keep delivering – and the member states seem to follow. Never before have the European heads of state and government discussed CSDP so intensively, never before have they decided on so much within the space of a year since the Brexit referendum – and they keep on doing so. The perhaps most important steps so far are:

1. The decision to establish a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) within the EU Military Staff in Brussels.

2. The launch of a European Defence Fund, with joint research projects fully financed and joint development and procurement initiatives co-financed from the EU budget; thus from genuine European money. This fund matches the huge interest all member states have in closer and better cooperation in the defence industry.

3. The very quick and determined decision on an ambitious and binding road map to finally give the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) a start – after some had already written it off.

This road map for PESCO is one of the most recent results, decided at the EU summit of 22/23 June 2017 – reportedly after only five minutes of debate. Additionally, the EU's rapid response toolbox is to be strengthened to make civilian crisis management more responsive. The EU battlegroups will finally be operational after reforming the financing mechanism that has represented the most significant obstacle to their deployment.

It seems as though the heads of state and government have well understood that this is a "now or never" situation. Shaken by Brexit, confronted with increasing instability in the neighbourhood and terrorist threats on its own soil, with its legitimacy questioned by rising populism and challenged by US President Donald Trump, the CSDP seems more than a necessity. It also offers an opportunity to restore legitimacy by demonstrating agency to its citizens.

But these opportunities come with risks:

1. The most dangerous political risk is that of deception. The growing uncertainty over the robustness of the transatlantic security architecture is leading to an increasing desire for joint European efforts – even in those EU member states that

traditionally take a more sceptical view of the military aspects of CSDP. This is precious political capital that could be rapidly lost in the event of failure to deliver. The two consequences of this are firstly, that political intensions have to be transformed into palpable results in reasonable time and secondly: don't raise expectations you cannot meet.

2. Another potentially dangerous risk is a lack of courage. Ideas about what a strong and capable CSDP should look like differ widely – and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Trust, mutual understanding and recognition of other positions are more important than sharing the exact same assessment and vision. Insisting on consensus on the finalité of the CSDP would, at this stage, lead to very weak results, and exclude significant progress by the more ambitious member states. It is encouraging that France (favouring a multi-speed Europe) and Germany (insisting on an inclusive approach) have found, at the most recent EU summit, a formula that, at least for now, reconciles inclusiveness with ambition.

3. A third risk is time-related: more than two-thirds of the EU member states have already initiated a turnaround in defence spending. Armed forces are being newly staffed and modernised; material, weapons and platforms have been procured. But most of this is being done – once again – individually and largely uncoordinated. The growing number of bi- and mini-lateral initiatives is good news in terms of confidence-building and interoperability. But since these initiatives are not supervised by NATO or CSDP structures they risk rendering European solutions even more complicated. Concentrating future CSDP efforts on research and development of future fighting systems and technologies instead of limiting efforts to present-day procurement might offer one possible way out of this dilemma.

These (and other) risks should not keep Europeans from pushing towards a European Defence Union. When POLITICO called the latest EU Summit's decisions on security and defence an "'historic' (Donald Tusk) plan that could pave the way for a joint military force operating under an EU flag", this matched the will of European citizens. The recent EUROBAROMETER survey on European Defence in June 2017 again and impressively confirmed what surveys have been showing for years: 75 percent of Europeans support a common European security and defence policy, more than half (55 percent) even favour a European army. Europeans definitely want more union in their European defence.

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