Better, faster, stronger, together

10 guidelines of reflection
for a progressive European security and defence policy

Vassilis Ntousas, FEPS International Relations Policy Advisor

Over the past years, Europe has experienced a much higher degree of fluidity and rancour that in the past few decades. From the spectacular renaissance of geopolitics and great power antagonism, the persistence of exacerbating human tragedies in the Middle East and elsewhere, the profound alteration of behavioural patterns of regional cooperation and enmity, the rise in illiberalism, extremism, and nationalism, the European Union (EU) is now facing a security environment of considerable complexity and cascading risks.

And yet, despite the extensity and intensity of these risks, security and defence issues at European level have only recently entered the spotlight of public discourse and political decision-making, being for years a taboo topic, rarely touched upon and easily forgotten. Their absence from the European Council agenda from 2008-2013 can validate this latter point.

Recognising that we live in such a tremendously different environment to the one mentioned in the opening line of the 2003 European Security Strategy, which described Europe as never having been 'so prosperous, so secure nor so free',[1] the release of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS)[2] by Federica Mogherini, the High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP), in 2016 provided a very welcome break from this spiral of political idleness and analytical neglect.

Defying expectations as it was released only days after the United Kingdom's traumatic vote to leave the EU, the document presents the crystallisation of the deep-seated realisation of how transnational and transversal the problems facing the Union are, but also of how these challenges are in dire need of a Europe that stands and acts together.

Building on the general strategic direction set out by the EUGS, a series of important initiatives have also been announced since then, including the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence,[3] the proposals to increase cooperation between the EU and NATO,[4] and the European Defence Action Plan,[5] complementing this effort and providing policy pathways through which these elements can be better dovetailed with each other. This push has been a testament to the political realisation of the need to better cohere, streamline, cooperate, and integrate within the EU, and of course of the political will to do so.

In this framework, discussion now centres precisely on what kind of capabilities, instruments, schemes and initiatives will be needed for the *sui generis* construct of the EU to respond effectively to the (f)actors affecting the security of its citizens, at a transnational, regional, and national level.

Below are 10 general guidelines that aim to enhance the progressive direction that these changes can take in the months and years to come, for achieving a truly common EU security and defence policy, and therefore a stronger, more stable, and more secure Union.

---

[1] 'European Security Strategy' (2003), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf, visited 1 June 2017
[2] 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe' (2016), https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/regions/files/eugs_review_web.pdf, visited 1 June 2017
[3] 'Implementation Plan on Security and Defence' (2016) https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_implementation_plan_st14392.en16_0.pdf, visited 1 June 2017
[4] 'Council Conclusions on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization' (2016), http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15283-2016-INIT/en/pdf, visited 1 June 2017
[5] 'European Defence Action Plan' (2016), http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0950&from=EN, visited 1 June 2017

1. ADAPTING TO THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

One of the defining characteristics of the new threat *milieu* that Europe is encountering is the blurring of some traditional distinctions in the policy continuum. With the disruptive effects of new technologies, new information campaigns aimed at bending subjectivity and distorting reality, new methods and new players all being increasingly palpable, the boundary between what lies within and what lies beyond European and national borders is becoming increasingly difficult to decipher. This blurring of lines does not only concern the shrinking of space between the internal and external dimensions of security, but, unavoidably, that between the physical and cyber, civil and military dimensions as well.

As the Union moves forward, being cognisant of this emergent security conundrum is not sufficient; the primary necessity is to also ensure and strengthen the EU's adaptability. The EUGS offers general directions as to how this can become a reality: first, by introducing the novel concept of 'resilience' as the main *leitmotif* of the new comprehensive vision for the EU's foreign and security policy; and secondly, by prescribing that the EU's external action needs to be turned into a 'joined-up approach' across internal and external policies, so as to be more reflexive and more effective in addressing complex phenomena such as migration or hybrid threats such as terrorism.

The need now, as aptly captured by EUGS' implementation plan on security and defence, is to flesh out this general orientation with concrete measures of action, sets of practices, and benchmarks of implementation. This presupposes political determination to proceed despite the plethora of challenges, but it also implies that any concrete measures put forward have to actually amount to much more than merely kicking the can down the road. The necessity for adaptability requires progressive initiatives that will fundamentally alter the hitherto dynamics, being meaningful and impactful at the same time.

2. EXPLOITING THE POLITICAL MOMENTUM

For a Union that for years chose not to substantively focus on security and defence matters, and for a public that consistently demonstrated its indifference, if not antipathy, towards any such discussions, the last couple of years have seen a dramatic shift in this regard. Growing alarmed by or perhaps impatient with the burgeoning weight of reality, security and defence has meteorically risen to the forefront of the attention of decision-makers, policy experts and public opinion alike.[6]

The threat of a resurgent Russia, the experience of the migration crisis, conflicts in the Middle East, as well as the rising spectre of terrorism, organised crime, and hostile propaganda campaigns played a significant part in this development. In addition, the *annus horribilis* of 2016, which was punctuated by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States (US), also aided in making the need for a serious debate around EU security and defence both more pressing and more visible. As paradoxical as it might sound because both these events are, at face value, counter-productive for European cohesion, they created, on aggregate, a much needed slipstream of political momentum, a salutary shock of sorts, in order for Europe to convincingly securitise the absence of a truly common policy in this domain, and work towards this direction.

---

[6] For example see 'Europeans in 2016: Perceptions and expectations, the fight against terrorism and radicalisation', Special Eurobarometer of the European Parliament (2016), http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/20160623PVL00111/Europeans-in-2016-Perceptions-and-expectations-fight-against-terrorism-and-radicalisation, visited 1 June 2017

Nonetheless, if past is prologue, this propitious alignment of political fortunes will not persist forever. Alone the sloganeering of this moment being 'A wake-up call for Europe' or of the need for Europe to 'face challenges together' will not be sufficient in sustaining the momentum, and precisely for this reason, this momentum has to be exploited to the optimum level.

Doing so should also be based on greater transparency and political visibility. Ensuring the maximum level of democratic accountability, for instance, through the consistent inclusion of the European Parliament, will be key in this effort, shielding the process from a number of political games of arm-wrestling that might arise.

3. PUTTING EUROPE FIRST

Sensing the truly formidable opportunity that this constellation of factors represents, the common denominator of many policy pronouncements that have been made on the issue of security and defence during the past year and a half is the determination to put Europe first in the Union's strategic calculus. This element is evidently not devised as a reflexive antithesis to the 'America First' motto of the new US administration, but rather it encapsulates the collective desire to launch this new era of robust security and defence policy, given the deep-seated realisation that Europe can only be strong when it is united.

Of course, working towards putting Europe first requires the Union to first put its own house in order. This demands a hard look outwards, given the arduous risks posed by the aforementioned global and regional crises, Brexit, and the immense doubts that have been raised over the transatlantic relationship by Donald Trump's erratic and dismissive behaviour towards the EU.

But a hard look inwards is critically needed as well.

Within the EU, there are still many factors that have the potential to increase divisions and worsen incoherencies, rather than solidify common responses. There are still inherent contradictions between the advocates of more commons responses, and those relying more on much narrower interpretation of national interests. There are still many different conceptualisations over what needs to be done, if anything, for the EU to be in a position to achieve decisive progress in providing security for its citizens. There are still many splits, many agendas, and many differences in priorities at political, financial and geographical level. And of course, there are also the vibrations caused by the impending exit from the EU of the UK, one of the EU's two leading military powers, and the subsequent considerable decrease of EU defence capabilities that this will entail.

It is painfully clear that there are no immediate fixes for this. Many different interests act as a barrier to collective action.

Nonetheless, this needs to change, and sooner rather than later. Collective solutions have to be given precedence.

A *sine qua non* for the discussions around European security and defence to cease being an exercise in frustration is to finally (even if gradually) do away with the petty national grievances and fissures that exist, and have EU Member States cooperate more efficiently amongst themselves. This, aiming not only at fulfilling the tall order of a truly common EU security and defence policy, but also at being credible in how these policies are implemented and operationalised.

4. FINDING CLARITY, COHERENCE AND CONFIDENCE

Against the global pessimistic *zeitgeist*, it is clear that a stronger, more united Europe in security and defence also means instilling the policy design, formulation, and implementation processes with more coherence and clarity.

For a long time, Europe preached water and drank wine in its policies in these domains. It is self-evident why reversing this trend is a requirement for shaping EU security and defence policy in a more progressive fashion. Advocating a strict anti-refugee policy internally while applying a generous humanitarian aid policy externally, for instance, is not merely a paradox; it is a security policy discrepancy that cannot be justified in light of the shrinking space of internal and external security. It is therefore necessary that progressive policies and politics be more coherently placed along the internal/external policy continuum.

This coherence will in turn allow Europe to gain more clarity in its policy output. The steps taken in the last year and a half regarding security and defence are indeed sizeable, but, as this is still an on-going process, there is still great uncertainty as to what the end result will be. Emblematic of this uncertainty is the discourse around the creation or not of a European army, a term that has been cautiously denied by the European Commission and the European External Action Service, due to its symbolic ramifications. Given how high the stakes are, though, this needs to be elucidated further, so as to denote that any steps taken towards greater coordination in this regard do not indicate an inclination towards further EU militarisation or an appetite for expeditionary warfare. For the foreseeable future, they serve merely as the functional basis for a more effective way of handling military matters.

The combined effect of more coherence and greater clarity will of course be projecting a higher sense of confidence, an element interlinked to the first two, but also an equally necessary one. Acting confidently on these matters means that Europe will be more assertive when it sees its vital interests being endangered: whether it is the prospect of non-implementation of the Paris climate agreement, a unilateral US withdrawal from the Iran deal, or a new US 'grand bargain' with Moscow that risks creating a Russian sphere of influence in Europe's eastern neighbourhood.

Even with the addition of 'principled pragmatism' as the organised principle of the EU's external action, it also means that Europe as a whole must now unashamedly defend the international liberal democratic order and values it is existentially based upon. Importantly, this has to happen not only against the cohorts of leaders with autocratic or illiberal tendencies of states beyond European borders, such as the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but also those within, such as Viktor Orbán, Hungary's populist prime minister. It also has to happen in the face of a White House which is less intent on condemning transgressions of international norms in cases where there are economic advantages to be gained.

5. DEEPENING AND WIDENING THE COOPERATION

A Union that stands ready to put aside the factious nature of its decision-making necessitates not only being clearer and more coherent, but also deepening and widening the existing framework of cooperation among its Members. With Brexit looming, the EU now has the opportunity to put into action new creative ideas as to how this can be done, but also older ideas that have been lurking in the background for years, if not decades, but never came to materialise.

Indeed, this effort needs to be comprised of a push towards acquiring the means and creating the conditions for 'an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy', as stipulated in the EUGS. For instance, it should not be a deterring factor that the road towards a truly European defence union will be long and zig-zagged; it is a prerequisite for reducing European exposure to the risks invoked by the precarious global situation Europe finds itself in.

Linked to other strands of work concerning the implementation of the EUGS, measures such as the creation of the embryonic EU military headquarters to coordinate EU overseas security operations, the implementation plan on security and defence, which outlines 13 specific proposals for action in order to fulfil this ambition and achieve the EU's full potential, and the Defence Action Plan, which is *inter alia* aimed at creating a European Defence Fund and improving Europe's efficiency in defence research and spending, seem to going in the right direction. So are the announcements to boost cooperation in defence among Member States under the Permanent Structured cooperation (PESCO) mechanism, an idea included in the Lisbon Treaty but so far not utilised, which provides an incremental, albeit important, step towards becoming more independent in security terms.[7] Common defence research is also a vital component, with the objective here being to boost the autarkic nature of Europe's defence industry and decrease its reliance on third-party involvement.

Taken together, all these measures provide for the kind of tangible, qualitative step forward that is essential for a more mutually binding common decision-making at EU level, leading to deeper and wider cooperation and, ultimately, greater integration among Member States.

6. LINKING HARD TO SOFT POWER

Another critical lever in this direction is allowing the EU to create the hard power necessary so as to match its soft power influence.

This is neither to deny how indispensable NATO will continue being for Europe's security, nor to negate the significance of the EU's soft power leadership as an enabling power in the world. It is simply to amplify the toolbox the EU has at its disposal, with a hard power component complementing its credibility and the diplomatic weight it can exert globally and regionally. It is also to concretely (and symbolically) signal the intention of the EU to shoulder greater responsibility for its own security and defence.

The informal labour division where Europe does not or should not acquire collective hard power capabilities, remaining solely reliant on its diplomatic appeal, while other actors such as the US primarily pick up the hard power tab, does not hold up well against reality. Neither does the naïveté of those suggesting that the utility of hard power has all but vanished in today's international affairs.

The global and regional unpredictability and tumult suggest that there is indeed a strong case for moving forward towards this direction; the aforementioned momentum suggests there is a specific time window to do so. Evidently, there is a cultural obstacle to be overcome here, as for obvious reasons the concept of hard power is much more accepted in policy circles and the public psyche in countries such as France, Greece or the Netherlands, as compared to countries like Germany. But the point to make here is that a combination of the EU's diplomatic pull and soft power instruments with a meticulously designed hard power toolkit including the development of the capabilities that are needed to act militarily, will lead the Union to make a qualitative leap forward in ensuring internal

---

[7] But any structure that is created needs to respond to ambitious criteria and be open to interested parties that might want to join later in the process, so as to ensure its maximum effectiveness.

and external security. This will also allow the EU to avoid overpromising and under-delivering on its external action goals, enhancing even further the security provided to its citizens.

The increase in bottom-up cooperation initiatives should be accompanied by a strengthening of the structural dimension of European defence. PESCO could provide the flexibility required at this point in time to cooperate on military matters without the ever-elusive unanimity at the European Council: however, it will be crucial that PESCO achieves the correct balance between inclusivity and integration. It will also be crucial to make sure that the large number of current initiatives within this framework are mixed together in a coherent and integrated whole, avoiding the duplications of existing structures and programs and maximising the potential of each instrument and institution.

7. OPENING A NEW CHAPTER IN EU-NATO RELATIONS

Almost inescapably, the discussion of linking hard to soft power at European level is tightly intertwined with the potential of recalibrating certain aspects of the EU's relationship with NATO. The uncertainty created by Mr Trump's post-election policy pronouncements and actions vis-à-vis European security and the EU writ-large, as epitomised by his failure to affirm NATO's Article 5 mutual-defence clause explicitly, is only a fragment of why this is key. Europe now has to look at the whole host of contingencies and threats it is experiencing, and doing so in light of a precedent-breaking US president is only part of the equation.

This is evidently not to support under any circumstances the disruption of the relationship between the two sides: any calls to this direction are illusory and lack fundamental pragmatism. The US is much larger than its current administration, and the current behaviour of one of the members of the transatlantic alliance, albeit being the overwhelmingly strongest one, should not lead the European NATO members to withdraw or decrease their support to the North Atlantic Alliance. Europe cannot and should not adopt a short-sighted *cavalier seul* model of action, and for the foreseeable future, NATO will remain Europe's principal instrument of choice regarding hard power projection.

But precisely because of the current 'peculiar' circumstances, and the wider practical, political and strategic challenges NATO has been facing for years internally and externally, the EU-NATO relations must be decidedly clarified. The EU must not veer away from seeking to obtain strategic autonomy, the core principle of the EUGS, and this has to be done without jeopardising its important relationship with NATO: how this equation can be solved needs to be at the centre of a dialogue that is rigorous, continuous and substantive.

This is a process that preceded the November 2016 US presidential election, going back at least to the December 2013 European Council meeting, but was undeniably given added *gravitas* by the turbulent turn of events that followed it. As the official EU-NATO Joint Declaration, signed at the July 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, stipulates, 'the time has come to give new impetus and new substance to the NATO-EU strategic partnership'.[8] As mentioned above, the Council of the EU adopted conclusions on the implementation of the Declaration months ago. This decision endorsed 42 concrete action-oriented deliverables covering seven areas identified as of key importance with a view to enhancing the cooperation between the two organisations. Realising the urgent need to address the fraught security climate that exists within Europe and beyond European borders, swift action needs to be followed up in this area.

---

[8] 'EU-NATO Joint Declaration' (2016), http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/08-eu-nato-joint-declaration/, visited 1 June 2017

Finding new strength in the North Atlantic Alliance can take multiple paths, depending on varied interpretations and ambitions. Yet, regardless of whether it takes the form of building up a 'European pillar' of NATO or works at a much more incremental tempo and direction, an additional crucial aspect of recalibration of the EU's relation with NATO is the European allies acting more convincingly as a united group within the Alliance. More coordination in preparing common positions before Alliance meetings and summits would go a long way into ensuring that Europe is finally pulling its own weight, despite the jingoism by the US administration under President Trump. Another pathway is for the EU's common security and defence policy to be in a position to reap the advantages of more policy coordination with the Alliance, *inter alia*, through employing NATO resources more autonomously, for its own purposes and operations, especially in places and/or situations where NATO chooses not to engage. This could also mean the revitalisation of the Berlin Plus agreements.

8. MATCHING AMBITION WITH FUNDING

To act as a stronger NATO partner and to be better placed to protect its citizens, Europe also needs to match its ambition with the appropriate funding. As alluded to earlier, going beyond the platitude of simply restating that the crises encircling or engulfing Europe provide opportunities for unity and purposefulness in EU security and defence policy is no easy undertaking. Neither is it inexpensive.

Looking at the much-discussed defence component, for instance, and despite the public's scepticism towards greater defence spending due to the lingering economic crisis, upping our game in achieving better EU defence cooperation means greater investment in a number of pertinent tools, instruments, mechanisms and assets, in order to stop lagging behind concerning its security hardware and software.[9] A qualitative step forward in the degree of defence cooperation at European level would be rendered meaningless without a steady increase in investments, as neither of these alone will be successful: investing only at national, and not European, level would be a waste of resources, while cooperating without providing additional and much needed resources will not allow Europe to reach its goals.

The much discussed 2% objective of defence does provide a benchmark of this direction, but it is important to underline that achieving security means way more than reaching this artificial level of expenditure on defence. Even if the hypothesis of all EU Member States arriving at this level materialises, the deterrent the EU will present will still be insufficient to discourage any hostile moves from its neighbourhood or to fully tackle the risks of terrorism internally.

In this sense, working more actively towards a more efficient EU security and defence policy should not only be about raising budgets. At an age of scarce political and economic resources, it should also be about better and more effective coordination of what is already spent. Avoiding duplication and fragmentation while ensuring interoperability should be a guiding principle of defence spending. Within this framework, the proposals of the European Defence Action Plan, involving the creation of a European Defence Fund, to assist Member States to spend more efficiently on joint defence capabilities, go in a mostly useful direction. Even in this case, however, it will be important to ensure that resources will be spent where they are needed: on defence and not on dual use, on missing structures and instruments and not on duplications, on Member States' defence priorities and not on industry-driven goals. These proposals should now be furthered, enhanced, and of course implemented, if the ultimate aim is to strengthen European citizens' security.

---

[9] It is crucial to underline that this additional funding should not put at risk existing EU programmes

9. ENDORSING SOLIDARITY

This effort will also require a muscular reaffirmation of solidarity as one of the prime directives of European common action, despite the many remaining obstacles. As vividly exhibited by the way the Union dealt with the refugee crisis, solidarity is regularly taken for granted during normal times, only to glaringly absent when it counts.

This is linked to a dominant *modus operandi* among (certain) Member States that is based on differentiated vulnerability. It is of course an altogether different matter to experience any crisis through your TV screen than experiencing it through your window, and the experience of the past few years has shown that the manner in which each crisis is perceived in each Member State is directly related to the sense of urgency or luxury each society or political leadership has.

There is therefore no denying this is a contested policy domain.

However, the merits of doing so are not purely an ideational exercise. Moving in this direction is sensible, and indeed necessary, for the Union, as it is not too difficult to see that solidarity is also a necessary step towards greater confidence, and self-reliance. For a Europe that aims to play a more active security and defence role, solidarity is the primary symbolic glue that can keep the Union strong and united when sailing on uncertain waters.

10. TAKING STOCK OF THE PAST, MOVING FORWARD

Ultimately, as the Union turns to the future and looks ahead, it needs to also look to the past and at its major achievements. A prolonged, unprecedented period of peace, a sense of common belonging despite the myriad fissures, and a collective willingness to move forward together not least in political, economic, cultural, social, environmental terms.

Being consumed by the difficult times that we are going through, it is easy to forget about this unprecedented feat of unification. Yet, finding the political will to establish a genuine security and defence community at EU level that is enforcing a truly common security and defence sets of policies, requires being constantly cognisant of how far Europe and Europeans have come since the creation of the Union.

This is of course not to engage in an anachronistic exercise of self-satisfied complacency. It is purely to not fall in the trap of despondency. An almost unavoidable discussion of the inherent conflicts that are pestering the Union, conflicts that have become visible *ad infinitum* with Brexit, cannot linger enough for it to become an obstacle for the kind of joint actions and decisions that the 27 need to take in terms of security and defence policy.

Despite the internal fissures that need to be overcome, the EU needs to act swiftly, if the aspiration is there, to reach the level of strategic ambition needed in today's global environment. Turning the scenario of a common European security and defence policy into an actionable reality will be a marathon, but Europe was not built in a day. In order to keep building on its accomplishments as it moves forward, concerted action is a must. Facing momentous choices within and beyond its borders, the Union can only become better, faster and stronger if it acts together.