By Dirk Siebels

NATO-bashing is a recurring topic among left-wing politicians and intellectuals, especially in western Europe. Even during the Cold War, NATO was never the most popular organisation and it seems unlikely that popularity can be gained from actually fighting wars such as in Kosovo or in Afghanistan. Without being populistic, however, NATO really has expired its best before-date. For various reasons, European countries should find another arena to discuss security matters:

• NATO will continue to be heavily influenced by US politics; in large parts of the world, Europeans are seen as not much more than aides-de-camp to the Americans.

• To develop a common identity in security politics, it is necessary for Europeans to develop common institutions and procedures, independent of US influence.

• Overlapping security interests can still be dealt with on a case-by-case basis; European interests, however, are for Europeans to defend.

More importantly, even though wars and interventions may be necessary at times, they cannot be won by military means alone. The "real work" has to be taken care of parallel to an intervention; issues like the future status of the area, the return of refugees or justice for war crimes have to be solved as quickly as possible. One famous line, often quoted by official delegations and non-governmental organisations when it comes to the task of nation-building, goes as follows: "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime." In reality, however, the important questions are which warlord has enough power to demand bribes for a fishing permit or whether the riverbank is covered with landmines.

Another aspect is the sustainability of simple intervention politics. Humanitarian crises generally have to be addressed with a long-term political perspective. The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 serves as a perfect example: It was primarily designed as a humanitarian operation to resolve the imminent refugee crisis, but the crisis became even worse by the time the NATO attacks started. Overall, the whole situation was only a tragic indicator of a long period of misguided politics that eventually generated a province that was de facto independent but de jure still a part of Serbia.

The very nature of security politics makes it virtually impossible to come up with decisions that a large majority of the population can agree upon. Ultimately, these decisions are about war and peace, about life and death. To make it even more complicated, it is not only the lives of soldiers that are at stake. In today´s complicated security environment, civilians may be held hostage by insurgents, attacked by armed rebels or placed in the line of fire when soldiers try to hunt down suspected terrorists.

Even worse, there is not always a clear line that can be drawn between a civilian and a fighter. Who dares to say that the proverbial $10 a day-Taliban in Afghanistan has to be neutralised, i.e. killed, to bring lasting peace to the country? The son of a simple farmer in the Helmand valley who is forced at gunpoint to participate in an attack on a British convoy is far from being convinced by the goals behind his actions. Yet there is not much of an alternative as long as there is no education, no job and no security, something the West promised to provide ever since NATO forces first arrived in Afghanistan.

In the end, it is first and foremost the European Union that has to clean up the political mess, together with other international organisations. The EU, however, is the single most important organisation when it comes to projecting soft power worldwide. And even though there can be no doubt about the fact that soft power is real power, it it necessary for Europeans to develop their own military capabilities to be even more convincing on the international stage.

Today, military cooperation within Europe is still underdeveloped, but the first steps have been made in recent years. The European Defence Agency, founded in 2006, is supposed to make suggestions on how to streamline organisational structures and how to make procurement decisions more efficient. In December 2009, the Lisbon Treaty redefined the

Common Security and Defence Policy and introduced the EU´s External Action Service, creating in effect a European diplomatic corps.

Still, much more has to be done on an operational level. Some procurement decisions seem to be promising at first glance, but do not hold up to the promise on closer inspection. The Tiger attack helicopter, for example, has been ordered by France and Germany with officials in both countries requesting some special modifications. The result is that there are only limited economies of scale and crews have to be trained on a national level rather than in a combined training centre.

Decisions about military equipment are influenced by staff officers, but finally made by politicians. It is therefore much more of a political question than a military one whether it really is necessary to have certain equipment only because it is manufactured by a company that happens to be located in the respective country. Both German and French pilots would be perfectly happy to be trained together on the same helicopter, and if Dutch sailors are deployed on a frigate, that same type of ship is certainly sophisticated enough to be used by British or Danish sailors as well.

It is by no means necessary to have sixteen naval shipyards scattered throughout the European Union while there are only three in the United States, taking care of a much bigger navy. To have one ship deployed at all times, up to three ships of the same type are needed as maintenance and crew training take up a lot of time. Yet which European country can afford to build and maintain three aircraft carriers to have one that can be deployed to play a part in a regional crisis that comes up on short notice?

In the age of budget cuts, it is necessary to organise security much more efficiently than it has been done in the past. The phrase "more bang for the buck" was coined to describe the development of US nuclear weapons, but it can easily be applied to European military capabilities today. Most European countries have more admirals than ships and more generals than fighter jets, but a fully-fledged military is much more a matter of national pride than of necessity.

It is highly improbable that any EU member state will go to war without the support of other countries. By combining military capabilities, Europeans can catch two birds with one stone. First, they give a credible example of cooperation when it comes to negotiations with other regional organisations. Secondly, a large amount of money can be saved when cooperation replaces duplication. To continue the naval example from above: France and the UK could combine their aircraft carriers, Germany, Italy and Spain could provide most of the support vessels while smaller countries such as Denmark or Portugal develop equipment and expertise for more specialised capabilities, e.g. for naval operations in shallow or confined waters.

To combine these capabilities under the EU flag has the added advantage that non-NATO members like Sweden, Austria or Ireland could easily add their assets. On an operational level, it would be easy to integrate soldiers from these countries as they already cooperate with NATO countries. For example, both Sweden and Austria support the NATO mission in Kosovo with a sizable contingent.

Some people may say that all the mentioned benefits can just as well be had by combining military capabilities within NATO itself. While this may be true on an operational level, it would be more than complicated to come up with a political strategy that combines European and US interests as can be illustrated by the debates around a new strategy for NATO. The current strategy was released in 1999, i.e. in an age before terrorism was widely acknowledged to be a major security problem. In the post-9/11 world, however, there was no way to find a middle way between a US administration largely dominated by neo-conservative politicians and European governments trying to make the first steps on the way to a common security identity.

The new strategy that will finally be decided upon is likely to be the smallest common denominator, a phrase that is usually attributed to politics within Europe. At this point in time, however, Europeans have the chance to build on their own security strategy, adopted in 2003 and revised five years later. By promoting good governance as well as the concept of human security and by signing up to the concept of Responsibility to Protect, Europe has developed a very distinctive approach to foreign and security politics.

To spread their values on the international stage, EU member states should combine

forces, both literally and figuratively. Some efforts have been made already, but much more has yet to be accomplished to turn Europe´s potential into a greater ability to influence events on the international stage. As Niccolò Machiavelli noted in Discourses on Livy: "Those who possess a great deal can with greater power and speed bring about change".

About the author

Dirk Siebels is a Masters student in International Studies at Durham University. As a reserve officer with the German Navy, he focuses on maritime security.