

A paper by Nick Witney

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It would be easy to dismiss this paper as an idealistic proposal that is an exercise in promotion of the European Defence Agency (EDA). That would be too simplistic and would undervalue the analysis of European Defence and the recent history of European operations. The paper details the trials and tribulations of European Defence and suggests a number of perfectly valid reasons why the initial aspirations have fallen short in reality. Not least because NATO nations do not want to see the Alliance 'diluted' and the US war on terror has provided a ready excuse for many nations to accept the status quo.

The paper clearly deplores duplication but throughout it is endeavouring to create structures and activities that are already in existence within NATO and are therefore supported by those European nations that are members of NATO or PfP nations, which is the majority. At the same time it overlooks the fact that over many decades NATO has experienced a number of the problems identified within European defence without achieving robust solutions. One might ask how different is the European Vision Document to the NATO Comprehensive Political Guidance, which is quickly glossed over. Indeed, the lack of reference to NATO throughout the paper leads the reader to suspect that the author has a personal agenda given his previous post with the EDA.

Much is made of the more recent US support for European defence but the underlying factors are not explored to test their validity. More likely is that the US frustrated by the lack of European contribution to NATO over the years sees a European defence entity as a means of European nations increasing their defence budgets that would ultimately read-across to improve the NATO inventory. The argument that the US has chosen recourse to coalitions as a parallel European justification for military pooling is hollow in that the Pentagon abhors coalitions as militarily unnecessary but has to accept that the US politically does seek coalition allies.

In terms of a 2-speed arrangement for European defence, there is a strong argument for the pioneer approach made up of those nations who demonstrate their commitments to various aspects of defence. However, there is an unresolved contradiction in that the paper provides a compelling reason why this approach is unlikely to work. There is a further contradiction over the underlying concept that nations volunteer to participate in European defence but the author metaphorically wrings his hands over those same nations not voluntarily offering force

capabilities when they are needed.

There is a thread of naivety and wishful thinking running through the paper alongside a number of unstated assumptions. It is surely unrealistic following the Helsinki Headline Goals to expect nations to declare redundant legacy military equipment that could have a life of up to 40 years. In the same context it is naïve to assume that nations can start afresh to rebuild their military capabilities with a European focus. In particular, those nations that support European defence objectives but are also established members of NATO would likely find many of the capability requirements identified are in conflict. The criticism of defence establishments being risk averse and committed to more programmes than they can afford is primarily the result of the bureaucratic burden imposed by national treasuries through policies that are designed to retain control with no concessions to wider political-military issues.

The idea of a pioneer group of self-selecting states making binding commitments to each other is a purely political ideal that totally lacks appreciation of the realities of operating together. Nations have different political objectives for every crisis that inevitably results in differing Rules of Engagement and caveats for the employment of their national forces. National military and civilian doctrines are not aligned (or do not exist). There are critical technical differences due to lack of standardisation between nations (outside the NATO nations) and there are robust intelligence release restraints arising out of national bilateral agreements. It is true that NATO has largely overcome many of these problems in support of its own strategies - both military and civilian by developing supporting architectures, but these problems have yet to be resolved within a European defence context where equivalent supporting architectures are virtually non-existent.

Europe has agreed broad concepts for European defence and professes a strategic culture, but this alone is insufficient and probably a reason why nations have been slow to support the initiative. The paper identifies the need for a set of policy documents filling out the broad principles and approaches of the European Security Strategy (ESS). Also, it acknowledges the need to develop a better sense of strategic context and priority for European operations. However, it is not a better sense that is required but a compelling and definitive strategy based on the defence objectives of the ESS to intervene in crises to restore security and rebuild societies. The boundaries and restraints of that strategy must then be rigorously determined followed by the development of a European doctrine for crisis management. With the strategy in place the necessary prioritised military and civilian capabilities to support it can be identified and assessed by nations for affordability. This is a more logical sequence of steps than the perverse way the situation was approached at Helsinki. With a strategy and doctrines in place, nations volunteering to participate in a crisis will no longer feel that it will be a "leap in the dark", particularly if costs are shared by all as is proposed by the paper.

The issue of role specialisation by nation has been raised before as a means of creating better returns from the total European defence funds available but was widely decried. Although this idea looks good in theory it does rely on all the nations committing to a common cause in a crisis and most critically with common political objectives. Recent history has shown this not to be the case and there is no substantial sign of the fundamental political changes to sovereign authority necessary to achieve this state of affairs.

A parallel argument can be used with regards to a European "Last Supper" for industrial consolidation. Modern forces rely on advanced technology for their superiority in a crisis and such equipment has to be acquired from whichever nation has that capability. Competition promotes advances in technology. Post-consolidation the US retained fewer but sufficient firms to provide internal competition. However, a post consolidation European defence industry would lose the stimulus of European competition and would have to compete against these US firms where the governmental rules would be different. Whereas some form of rationalisation for European defence industry is clearly desirable, national governments would need to be very certain of the long-term advantages before committing to the proposal in this paper.

Overall, this paper has adopted a single-minded approach without considering any alternatives. It assumes that only European cooperation can provide the cure for European defence ills. Could it be that the reason the European Security and Defence Policy lacks support is that member states do not believe it to be the right vehicle or because its lack of a defined strategy, doctrine and standardisation demonstrates a feeble organisation in which they have no confidence? Indeed, without an agreed strategy to give substance to the broad concepts and policies, it is difficult to see how the EDA can be expected to discharge its responsibilities listed under Articles 42 and 45 as set out in the Lisbon Treaty.

What is evident is that politicians attending high-level European defence conferences tend to have a rosy view of the possible until they return home and are faced with the realities of tight defence budgets with rigid restraints applied by national treasuries and little room to manoeuvre. To develop a truly robust European Defence, that will of necessity complement NATO, will require a far greater vision than has so far been offered by the European leadership.

President Sarkozy is the President of the EU for the next 6 months. He has stated his intention of using his presidency to reinvigorate European Defence and for European leaders to agree a new European Security Strategy. When the details of President Sarkozy's proposals are publicised it will be interesting to see what degree of influence this paper has had on them.