

By Chris Newton

Throughout its period in opposition the Conservative Party continually criticised many aspects of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). This culminated in the party's opposition to the Lisbon Treaty and its defence provisions, including a mutual defence clause and permanent structured co-operation. Some commentators have expressed concern about the future of Anglo-European defence relations now that the Conservatives have been elected to power. But how justified are the concerns? Will the next few years prove to be the nadir of Anglo-European defence co-operation, a continuation of the past few years, or even an improvement from the past few years?

**The Reality after the General Election**

So far statements from government ministers about the EU have been warm. Foreign Secretary William Hague has indicated that Britain will play a greater role in the EU, and has expressed his wish to see more British officials in the Commission. Defence Secretary Liam Fox has stressed the importance of France as a key ally, and he has continued the negotiations with the French that had begun when he was in opposition.

Furthermore, the fact that the Conservatives are in coalition with the Liberal Democrats means that government policy will be moderated. David Cameron is not as reliant on the eurosceptic backbench element of his party for legislative support. And many of the more hard line policies in the Conservative manifesto, including the proposals to 'release spending on unnecessary and bureaucratic EU defence initiatives' and to re-evaluate the Britain's position with the European Defence Agency, are conspicuously absent from the Coalition agreement.

There is one additional factor that may come into play on European Defence and Security Policy specifically. There are a number of contentious issues that David Cameron wishes to negotiate with the EU, including the budget. Given that Britain is one of the most influential defence players in the EU, David Cameron has the option of trading concessions on defence matters in return for some of his other demands. This would not be popular with his Defence Secretary or elements within the Conservative Party, but it is theoretically a powerful negotiation card nevertheless. He may wish to play this card, he may not.

**Hurdles**

But there are still significant differences between the British and continental approaches, and the British and other European governments will have to reconcile their competing visions about the future of European defence. From a British perspective, there are four main hurdles:

1. The spending hurdle. Despite the debates within the UK about its level of defence spending as a proportion of GDP, Liam Fox has expressed frustration with the even lower levels spent on the continent. To the Conservatives, the EU has focus too much on creating new defence structures; the real effort needed to be diverted towards the creation of tangible defence capabilities and assets. The Conservatives are further frustrated by what they consider to be some EU members' reluctance to provide an adequate share of resources for the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.
- Senior Conservatives have suggested that European members should prove they can fulfil their obligations to NATO first before ESDP can be developed any further. Liam Fox said: 'until we fix the alliance which has guaranteed Europe's security for the past 60 years, further EU defence integration outside of NATO, when there is duplication and no additionality, should wait'.
- However, as a result of the global financial crisis, EU members will have greater difficulties in achieving the levels of defence spending the British would like to see. And given that the spending review is likely to result in a significant reduction in the British MoD budget, Dr Fox will be in a less powerful position to argue this point in the future.
2. The institutional hurdle. There are also differences of opinion about the respective roles of NATO and the EU. Britain has always maintained that NATO should be the

cornerstone of European defence and that the EU should play a complementary role to it. The Conservative defence team have concerns that Madeleine Albright's three 'd's' of decoupling, discrimination, and duplication between the EU and NATO are becoming reality. They particularly feel that scarce resources are being duplicated through the creation of parallel institutions and missions - the decision to conduct a simultaneous EU airlift mission alongside a NATO one in Darfur in 2005 being a case in point. Similar concerns are shared by others, including the former NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, who said that the EU and NATO have been engaged in a 'beauty pageant'.  
Furthermore, Liam Fox favours bilateral and multilateral approaches to European co-operation rather than an EU institutional one. This is in contrast to the approach taken by German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who has suggested that further European defence co-operation should progress within the EU common security and defence policy framework.

3. The conceptual hurdle. There are differences over what should constitute the definition and scope of European defence. Should it primarily relate to EU Europe or geographical Europe? Whilst for some the defence policy of the EU is the priority; Liam Fox has emphasised that any European defence arrangements must involve Norway and Turkey – two countries that are located in important geo-strategic positions. The question of EU-Turkish relations also remains a particularly contentious issue.

4. The foreign policy hurdle. Different members of the EU have different foreign policy priorities and these will still be difficult to reconcile. The Iraq War was a key example of how bitterly divided EU members can be over foreign policy. Whilst European politics may have moved on since then, issues such as Ukrainian and Georgian membership of NATO have exposed the fact that EU members still have profound disagreements over major issues. In addition, there are notable differences over strategic priorities. British priorities lie towards the Atlantic, the Middle East, and South Asia, whereas other countries such as France would place greater emphasis on Africa. The differences in priorities were evident in Liam Fox's concerns that the EU mission in Chad was diverting vital resources away from Afghanistan.

Britain's atlanticist leanings and scepticism to the European Defence Agency (EDA) might also have implications for EU defence industrial policy. Whilst Liam Fox has said that the British government would like greater freedom for British companies to purchase French defence concerns, it remains to be seen how the Strategic Defence and Security Review will balance out the government's American and European industrial priorities.

**Common Ground**

But whilst there are considerable differences between British and other European attitudes, the hurdles are not necessarily insurmountable. The French Defence White Paper and documents such as the report on NATO's Strategic Concept highlighted the common threats that all nations in Europe face - terrorism, failed states, missile threats, cyber attack, to name a few. Afghanistan remains a common endeavour. Across Europe defence budgets are tight, and there is a financial need for European countries to co-operate more.

Therefore, this period should be used as an opportunity to address fundamental issues such as the lack of clarity over the roles and responsibilities of organisations. The NATO conference and the publication of the new Strategic Concept provides the ideal time for European countries to think about the role of NATO, the EU, other security organisations. And just because there are disagreements over the future direction of ESDP, it should not mean that further European defence co-operation will be impossible. If the British do resist further EU defence integration, this could be a good time to think about the potential multilateral arrangements that could be made instead. The British and French are the two most powerful players in the EU with similar budgetary problems, and it would make strategic sense

to explore where they could work together more closely. The following four areas should be explored further:

1. Joint procurement, technological development, and equipment pooling - although lessons of projects such as Typhoon and the A400M will need to be learned.
2. Joint training, doctrine development, and knowledge sharing on an inter-governmental basis. The counter-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa illustrated that there is scope to develop naval co-operation further, although it must be stressed that Anglo-French carrier sharing is not on the UK's agenda for both political and military reasons.
3. The inclusion of Turkey and Norway in any inter-governmental joint collaborative ventures. Including the former would certainly get round the difficulties in NATO-EU relations.
4. Further thought must also be given as to how European countries can co-operate further on post-conflict reconstruction, stabilisation, and civilian crisis management doctrines and capabilities - the latter of which the EU has already established a considerable amount of expertise in. The operations in Iraq and Afghanistan illustrated that there is a real need for improvement here, and the EUPOL mission in Afghanistan has highlighted the shortcomings in EU police training.

Despite the fears of some that a new Conservative-led government will harm UK-EU relations, the realities of coalition government will force them to take a more co-operative stance. Rather than focus obsessively on where they disagree, the British government and its counterparts on the continent must seize this opportunity to make progress on where they do agree. If they can do this, Europe will be able to weather the financial storm as well as improve its defence capabilities.

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