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European Defense Reform: The Beginning of the Beginning

By Radek Sikorski

Europe has been slow to respond to the menace of terrorism, but there are signs that its perception of threats is converging with that of the United States. Paradoxically, America's costly war in Iraq is convincing Europeans that they need a more capable military to give them greater influence over how the West uses force beyond its perimeter.

Non-U.S. NATO members own 13,000 tanks, 30,000 armored infantry vehicles, 11,000 aircraft, and numerous ships, including aircraft carriers. Europe keeps about two million men and women in uniform and spends close to \$200 billion annually on defense, making it—if it were a country—the second military power in the world after the United States by a long stretch. Yet Europe's pathetic defense posture is such a cliché these days that it barely requires explanation. Most of the equipment is old, most of the money is spent on personnel, and most of the troops cannot actually be deployed beyond its shores.

The technological gap is so wide that the United States has to step down and endanger its own soldiers to fight alongside the Europeans, as happened during the Kosovo air campaign when it was found that European planes could not plug into the secure U.S. communication system. Famously, German troops had to hire Ukrainian transport planes to get to Afghanistan, and British troops found themselves with no flak jackets in Basra. Europe is at least a generation behind the United States in transport planes, satellite intelligence, mid-air refueling, and battle-field integration between the services.

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Even when it comes to conventional or peacekeeping operations, the record has been lamentable. Dutch troops stood by as the Serbs butchered the Muslim men of Srebrenica. Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops stayed in their barracks during anti-Serb riots in Kosovo in March this year. Typically, when Afghan interim president Hamid Karzai begged the NATO Istanbul summit in June to bolster NATO's strength in his country to secure the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections—a goal that Europeans say they fervently share—barely 3,000 extra soldiers and three helicopters could be scraped together in response.

The gap has political consequences. Europeans thought they were being good allies of the United States in September 2001 when, for the first time, NATO unanimously invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty in response to the 9/11 attacks. Before the authorship of the attacks was fully established, they were pledging themselves to go to war with whoever was responsible—the first time ever that the alliance made such a decision. It still rankles with them that the United States brushed the offer aside like an unwelcome distraction. The Pentagon, having been set an ambitious task of fighting a war on the other side of the globe, did not have the patience to deal with allies who, in the words of one of my interlocutors, were “in the way.”

The Roots of the Problem

On the other hand, it would be unfair to forget the reasons for Europe's unwieldy posture. For the forty-five years of the Cold War, defending Western Europe's own territory against a Warsaw Pact invasion was the agreed mission within the NATO division of labor. Europeans were supposed to fight long enough on their own soil to give the United States time to mobilize and send the cavalry from over the horizon. While Europe guarded the Fulda Gap, Americans roamed the rest of the world. In those days, all of NATO's conventional military might was in any case assumed to be insufficient to stop the Soviet hammering ram from reaching the Atlantic, which is why NATO kept the option of using nuclear weapons first. What makes the difference today is the different way in which Europe and America chose to consume the peace dividend that the Soviet collapse yielded in the 1990s. Europe mostly left its defense establishment as it was and just denied it the resources to keep it in shape. Instead of slashing manpower levels, it economized on research and procurement. The United States downsized, shedding two million jobs in the military and the military-industrial complex, thus enabling today's leaner, high-technology fighting force to be born. While the United States applied creative destruction, Europe treated the military as yet another socialist job maintenance scheme.

There are deeper, cultural forces at play as well. The very word "war" has a different meaning in Europe, particularly Continental Europe, than in the United States. If you have wisely chosen to live on land that separates you from your significant rivals by sea, war is something you go to, an expedition from which you return home, perhaps even victorious more often than not. When a continental European thinks "war," on the other hand, he or she smells the stench of corpses rotting in the trenches, Messerschmitts spitting fire at columns of refugees, foreign troops raping and pillaging, burnt-out cities. The ethos of Europe today is antiwar for honorable reasons. While the European Union's claim that it won the Cold War and brought the Berlin Wall down is bogus—NATO and Ronald Reagan did incomparably more—it is true that it was the Europeans' revulsion at the horrors of World War II that made the unprecedented pooling of attributes of national power within the EU possible. Aversion to the use of force is in this sense a part of the EU's DNA, and it would take an environmental shock for the creature to adjust.

There is also the pragmatic argument. Europe has lost its will to power and does not seek to be the top dog in the international system or to rule nations beyond its borders. It just wants to be left alone to enjoy its new-found peace and prosperity. If your only goal is self-defense, then the classic rule of ratio of forces still applies: an aggressor needs three times the forces to overwhelm an entrenched defender. Only the United States has that military capacity but, as bad as things may be between Washington and some European capitals, Europe is not wrong to feel that it does not face a threat to its survival as a society. And when it comes to lesser threats—protecting commuters in Madrid, schoolchildren in Beslan, or your citizen journalists in Iraq—better intelligence is more important than better arms. A European cynic might even say that a judicious mixture of appeasement, bribery, and positioning sometimes gives you a better chance of survival than a manly stand. Rome and Byzantium both faced waves of invasions, but it was the weaker Byzantium with its strategic withdrawals and tribute paying that outlasted Rome by a millennium.

There are at least three ways in which Europe's weakness can be handled. One is to dispose with the "strategic nostalgia" that gave Europe undue prominence in American policymaking and to learn to "live without Europe," as an eloquent recent paper by one of my colleagues argued.¹ Instead of reviving the alliance with Europe, the United States should shove it aside and treat the continent as a refueling stop for planes that prowl the globe in search of targets in the struggle for democracy. In a similar vein, NATO itself, argued another influential commentator,² is a cocoon that allows Europeans to continue as eternal strategic teenagers. It should be dissolved if the United States ever wants the continent to grow up and be a useful partner.

The mirror image of such American nationalist musings are pan-European nationalist fantasies that would like to build Europe into a strategic and military counterweight to the American hyperpower. According to this view, the United States and George W. Bush personally, are so immediate a threat to the life on the planet, that even alliances with such democracies as Russia and China are preferable to the wretchedness of life under Pax Americana. The unspoken assumption of this view is that Europe can only be mobilized to pool its military assets, the last vestige of national sovereignty, if a powerful ideology spurs them to action. There is only one candidate for such an ideology that posits a clear enemy, that addresses powerful historical, cultural, and social

prejudices, and that many Europeans share or can be taught to share: anti-Americanism.

The third option is to read what the Bush administration is actually saying rather than how it is caricatured in the press. "There is little of lasting consequence that the United States can accomplish in this world without the sustained cooperation of its allies and friends in Europe," says the famous *National Security Strategy of the United States* of September 2002. Indeed, one only needs to look at the hopeful developments in Afghanistan on the one hand, and the mess in Iraq on the other, to appreciate the utility of international legitimacy that is achieved only when the West speaks with one voice.

What Is to Be Done?

If Europe is too important either to ignore or to subordinate, and too weak to warrant proper strategic consultations, then what, in comrade Lenin's words, is to be done? Let us note the good news first: U.S. and European threat perceptions are converging. Terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are identified as the top two threats in the European Union's Security Strategy adopted in December 2003. After the carnage in Madrid in March 2004, the recent school outrage in Russia's North Ossetia, and the kidnapping of French journalists in Iraq, Europe's top politicians and generals know that Europe is not immune from Islamic terrorism. Germany's best-known general in the United States and the former chairman of NATO's military committee, Klaus Naumann, thus formulated the Atlantic Community's joint security agenda in a recent speech in Washington, D.C.:

The unfinished process of establishing lasting and durable stability in Europe, which requires the transformation of Russia into a true democracy in which the rule of law prevails, will never be brought to a successful end unless the U.S. and the Europeans cooperated smoothly and coordinated their approaches carefully.

Neither the U.S. nor Europe will ever live at peace if the European periphery remains as unstable as it is today. At the center of this instability is the Middle East, for which one cannot find a solution without a comprehensive strategy for the Greater Middle East.

There are still differences as to the methods that should be employed, but Europe is now sufficiently scared to know that military force has to be a part of the mix. Therefore, the obvious path is for Europe to retool its military force in strategic harmony with the United States, so that the aggregate power of the Western democracies is enhanced and Europe obtains the respect it craves. Unfortunately, the precedents are not encouraging. When Lord Robertson took up his post as NATO secretary-general, he said he had three priorities: "capabilities, capabilities, capabilities." Despite his best efforts, he left office a disappointed man. "With only 55,000 soldiers currently deployed on multinational missions, most of your countries plead that they are overstretched and can do no more. That is quite simply unacceptable," he said in his farewell address.

It would be unrealistic to expect Europe to spend more on defense. If Europe was unwilling to match the U.S. effort even in the time of the Cold War, when the threat was tangible, it is unlikely to do so now, when the world—as the Europeans see it—is essentially at peace. Europe may produce a third of the world's GNP but, given the budgetary pressures most European countries suffer and the increasing demands of aging populations on the public purse, 2 percent of GNP on defense is the most one can realistically expect. Yet, 2 percent of a GNP that is bigger than America's is a lot of money—between a third and half of what the United States spends on defense. It should purchase plenty of bang, and high-tech bang at that. If Europe could deploy a third of what America can deploy, it would certainly be worth cajoling.

How do we get from here to there? Paradoxically, the intellectual, political, and institutional framework for a new model alliance is virtually in place. After the decisions at the NATO summits in Prague and Istanbul, we know what future transatlantic cooperation will look like: in addition to national forces, NATO will have a Response Force of 20,000 men while the EU will have a Rapid Reaction Force of 60,000 troops, and both will be able to use some of the same assets under the so-called Berlin Plus rules. There will be organizational division of labor: while NATO takes the lead in expeditionary deployments, EU forces will secure Europe's periphery. NATO's new Transformation Command will develop ways for Europeans and Americans to work together at the technological and tactical cutting edge.

What is needed now is greater energy in fulfilling the agenda and imaginative ideas for squeezing more resources to fund it. Here are a few modest proposals:

1. **Europeans should stop treating the military as an extension of the welfare state.** Keeping young people in the barracks may reduce unemployment, but is not a wise allocation of public funds. Like a bloated company with cash flow problems, European militaries need to do what the United States did in the 1990s: downsize and retool. If Europe adopted for budgetary purposes an assumption that no major conventional conflict threatens it in the next five years, then resources now being wasted could be applied where they would yield the largest dividends at the end of that period: research and development, strategic lift and mid-air refueling, precision munitions, and electronic intelligence gathering.
2. **Europeans should privatize non-lethal aspects of war fighting.** Although this was pioneered in Britain under the last Tory government, in most European countries the debate is still at the stage of draft versus professional forces. Discussion of defense contracting usually makes an appearance in the context of dark conspiracy theories about interests behind the Iraq war. But if Europe is to increase its teeth-to-tail ratio, the contracting out of training, sealift, and base maintenance is unavoidable. It may be irritating to soldiers on duty in Iraq and elsewhere to rub shoulders with Kellogg, Brown, and Root personnel who receive more pay for a similar job, but from the taxpayer's point of view, the fact that a private contract can be terminated the moment the mission is accomplished is a boon. Defense privatization would be particularly important at the time of downsizing, so that personnel with military skills could be soaked up by the private sector.
3. **NATO should be funded differently.** Currently, a central fund to which members contribute on the basis of an agreed formula relative to their wealth pays for NATO's central institutions. Countries pay for military deployments from their own treasuries. This was workable during the Cold War because a Soviet invasion was such an overwhelming threat that members could be expected to react irrespective of cost. In today's world of lower-order perils and out-of-area operations in particular, this creates perverse incentives: the more a country wants to rally to the allied cause, the more out-of-pocket it is, whereas free riders—free ride. Funding NATO-agreed operations

from the central fund as well would at last channel resources to those willing to take their alliance obligations seriously. A virtuous circle would ensue: the more robust a country is in pursuing NATO objectives, the more money it would have for modernizing its military. Instead of offering excuses, countries would have incentives to queue up for missions.

4. **The United States should award military assistance to those countries that are actually being helpful.** It is a paradox that the United States spends billions of dollars annually sustaining allies in the Middle East, but when it finds itself fighting a tough insurgency in that very region, not a single soldier from those countries is available for support. If two or three divisions from poorer European countries were deployed for a fraction of the funds that Egypt gets for doing nothing, this would be cost-effective, pedagogical, and transformation-friendly.
5. **European nations should reduce duplication of staffs and capabilities.** If each U.S. state had its own general staff, its own army, navy, and air force, U.S. defense dollars would be as misallocated as they currently are in Europe. While countries are unlikely to give up their ability to act independently, they can coordinate their procurement policies and the development of new capabilities to achieve the sorts of economies of scale that benefit the United States.

In the meantime, three crucial tests are underway: Iran's bid to acquire nuclear weapons is testing Europe's efficacy in dealing with the crisis through diplomacy and, if diplomacy fails, Europe's seriousness in applying different methods. Iraq is testing America's staying power and the plausibility of circumventing alliance channels through coalitions of the willing. Afghanistan is testing both the U.S. ability to hunt down terrorists and NATO's seriousness in guiding the country toward self-sustainability. Only by staying together does the West have a chance to pass these tests.

Notes

1. Thomas Donnelly, "Learning to Live without Europe," *AEI National Security Outlook*, May 2004.
2. Wayne Merry "Therapy's End—Thinking Beyond NATO," *The National Interest*, Winter 2003–2004.