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More union in European defence

March 12, 2015

By Javier Solana and Steven Blockmans



One of the EU's so-called founding fathers, Jean Monnet, has taught Europeans that "Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises". Multiple emergencies and rapidly evolving global trends have undermined the European Union's role as a security actor in recent years.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, its provocations of EU member states' maritime and air defences have delivered a blow to the post-Cold War security order and have revived awareness about the possibility of military attack and occupation in Europe.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Syria is bleeding out far over the country's borders. Libya is rapidly descending into a vortex of violence, allowing armed smugglers to process ever greater numbers of migrants hazarding the journey across the Mediterranean, and jihadi extremists to stage terrorist attacks. Extremism in the neighbourhood and radicalisation at home act as "communicating vessels" and blur the difference between what is internal or external to the EU.

Rather than being surrounded by a ring of friends, the EU is surrounded by a ring of fire stretching from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, through the Middle East and the Caucasus up to the new frontlines in eastern Europe. No other global player is facing so much mayhem in its strategic neighbourhood. But at the same time, and sadly, security and defence are the weakest links in the European integration project. Years of uncoordinated cuts in national defence spending have eroded the EU's role as a security actor in what is now a multipolar world, whose economic centre of gravity is moving away from Europe, towards Asia. Differences between member states in threat perceptions, divergences in intentions and preferences and, in some cases, lack of mutual trust and solidarity have prevented the emergence of a common strategic culture and hampered the creation of joint structures, procedures, and assets at the EU level.

EU treaty

Yet, the EU Treaty demands and permits a great deal more in terms of common security and defence

activities. By national navel-gazing, member states' political leaders are not only in denial of threats faced throughout the EU, they also underestimate the degree of expectation among the European public, which for the past 10 years has consistently polled over 70 percent in favour of a broad European project in the area of defence.

It is high time that EU member states took bold and concrete steps towards a more efficient and effective framework for military co-operation. The cost implications of non-Europe in defence – currently estimated at €26 billion per year in a 2013 European Parliament report – could rise to €130 billion as the security environment in the EU's strategic neighbourhood worsens. Member states could achieve much more value for money than the €190 billion that they spend to keep up 28 national armies, comprising roughly 1.5 million service personnel.

In addition to the obvious economic costs, political, moral and strategic imperatives urge the EU to step up its efforts in defence cooperation, in full coherence with Nato. The EU's strategic, institutional, capabilities, and resources cooperation in the field of defence needs to be strengthened. Ultimately, further integration should amount to a European Defence Union (EDU). This EDU should support Nato in its task to provide territorial defence.

Moreover, an ambitious EU foreign policy aimed at reducing instability and state fragility at its borders would have to take on and live up to security responsibilities in the strategic neighbourhood through the use of military force and rapid response as needed. It should also stimulate investment in innovative research programmes, leading to the creation of a competitive defence and technological industrial base.

June summit

At its June summit, the European Council should define a roadmap with practical and realistic steps to move, by stages, from the blueprint to the launch of the EDU. To that end, EU leaders should appoint an independent committee, supported by the EU institutions, to propose such a roadmap, involving the attainment of harmonisation criteria and mandatory milestones for upgrades in each of several areas.

Those would include developing a new European Security Strategy in the context of the ongoing strategic review of EU foreign policy; creating a permanent structure to facilitate co-operation between able and willing member states to facilitate political and military decision-making, as well as pooling and sharing of capabilities; revising and simplifying the financing mechanisms to allow for faster and better deployment of EU operations; and re-galvanizing the European defense technological and industrial base.

Although the process of bringing European armies to a more structured co-operation and, where appropriate, closer integration, will certainly be a complex one, the numerous crises facing Europe have made change possible. These crises also offer an opportunity to secure a more peaceful and prosperous future for the EU. If not now, then when will the EU meet expectations of its citizens and international partners?

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