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Achilles, the Tortoise and CSDP: THE WAY FORWARD FOR EUROPEAN DEFENCE

BY

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They do not reflect the views of any organization.*

Comment

Last week, EU leaders gave their blessing to defence plans that should help them take the security of Europeans a bit more seriously. These efforts come from the right place. Europe does need to get its act together, and to do so on its own terms before President Obama steps down, and the EU becomes a noisy but ineffectual onlooker in the Donald Trump pantomime show.

On the whole, Brussels has done what it could to push Europeans to cooperate in recent years. Herman Van Rompuy, the former president of the European Council, put security and defence on the agenda of EU leaders back in 2013 – before the Ukraine conflict, the migration crisis, the terror attacks in Paris and Brussels, the Brexit vote and the Trump election. Since 2013, the European Commission has thrown its financial clout behind defence cooperation, and in doing so has broken an old European taboo: the fact that European money will fund research into defence capabilities is a key long-term development. The European Parliament has been pressing for proper European defence cooperation for many moons.

Nor was Federica Mogherini sparing in her efforts to implement the mandate handed down to her by European leaders in December 2013. In the summer of 2016, the EU's chief diplomat delivered her new global foreign policy strategy, which was as ponderous in the making as the document is unwieldy in the main – but which provides European policy with a philosophical compass. Its best pages argue that Europeans should be able to act autonomously in their own neighbourhood, with a full set of forces if necessary, and that the EU should have the ability to protect its own citizens. This all seems rather reasonable. However, it will prove pointless if European states do not decide to act upon it.

Now that all key Brussels institutions have skin in the game, it is up to European states themselves to match these efforts and push them over the line. Therein lies a major unknown, and the potential game-changer: do member states really want to follow through on their own commitments, and actually do something together? The alternative is to let the EU's level of ambition on security drop below what it was in December 2013 – and to leave Europeans unable to credibly complain that they ended up on the wrong side of the Trump extravaganza.

THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

The first step should be to use the political boost afforded by EU leaders on 15 December to get Europeans onto the same page: what does the collective 200 billion euros they presently spend on defence actually buy them? How will that picture change, based on current national defence plans? The European Council's mandate can help to

keep the work going at the technical level, through the political bumps of a coming year that has elections scheduled in Paris and Berlin.

The answer should be about the forest, not the trees. It should consider how the current state of play matches up against what the EU would actually need, based on the EU's Global Strategy. It can infer gaps and surpluses therefrom – and then identify opportunities for cooperation to fill gaps, or just be more cost-effective. Keeping it simple, politically endorsed, broad-brush and comprehensive is the best way forward.

National staffs in Europe will no doubt argue that the information they currently provide to the European Defence Agency is sufficient and satisfactory. This is not the case – which is why last week's meeting¹ endorsed an annual defence review. If current reporting were satisfactory, there would be no need for an annual defence review in the first place. However, if the review is based “on existing reporting”, as per the High Representative's implementation plan², it will defeat its purpose. The amendment should be dropped: if existing reporting were adequate, the EDA would have been able present member states with actionable recommendations.

EUROPEAN PLANNING – THE CHEAT SHEET

Instead, a different form of input is needed. Not more input from European states, but simpler and less – it should be about the forest, not the trees. It is about asking national ministries of defence for information which must have at their fingertips (see below) – otherwise, how would they manage their budgets, as opposed to just spend them? Nor is it unduly intrusive: no-one is arguing against the sovereign right of each member state to spend its defence budget exactly as it so chooses. But equally, no-one can argue that the political endorsements of closer cooperation do not entail the responsibility to be mutually accountable – i.e. to be ready to give partners an account of what each has, and is planning.

Inputs should include the following ten points. They would provide EU defence ministers with a valuable “cheat sheet” to European defence planning:

- (i) The current level defence spending.
- (ii) Planned defence spending over the next five years.

¹ “Le Conseil invite la haute représentante/chef de l'Agence européenne de défense, en totale concertation avec les États membres, à présenter des propositions aux ministres au printemps 2017 en vue d'une décision sur le champ d'application détaillé, les méthodes et le contenu relatifs à un examen annuel coordonné en matière de défense piloté par les États membres. [...] Un tel examen permettrait d'encourager le développement de capacités pour remédier aux lacunes, d'approfondir la coopération dans le domaine de la défense et de garantir une utilisation plus optimale, notamment pour ce qui est de la cohérence, des projets de dépenses en matière de défense”. General Secretariat of the Council, 14 November 2016.

² High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence*, 14 November 2016, §30.

- (iii) The breakdown of current and planned spending between the usual categories³: personnel, pensions, procurement, maintenance, and R&D. The EDA might suggest a European accounting methodology, for the purpose of comparing like to like⁴.
- (iv) Expected subventions from other sources, such as the ministry of industry or the ministry of economic development.
- (v) Headlines of current force structures and major platform holdings (e.g. 2 armoured brigades, 50 combat aircraft, etc.).
- (vi) Plans to change these holdings over next five years.
- (vii) Some 'utility indicators': e.g. operational readiness rates for aircraft, percentage equipped with defensive aids, holdings of smart munitions, deployability of land forces.
- (viii) Ideally, some clever, tentative methodology for measuring output, e.g. what power do these inputs allow European to project?
- (ix) Top ten planned procurements by value.
- (x) Top ten "worries" – areas which the member state would like to spend more on, but currently doesn't know how it will afford it.

In practical terms, these national inputs should be specified by the European Defence Agency, which could consolidate, analyse and present them to defence ministers for discussion.

³ "Be the level of detail high or low in financial reporting, it remains that national defence budgets are broken down in different ways across Europe. [...] Concepts do not simply differ by name: they are different accounting categories, with disparate perimeters. [...] In Hungary, the budget line for equipment modernisation is included in the same category as drug prevention programs and R&D. Romania does not distinguish new acquisitions and modernisation of existent military hardware. On the other hand, Serbia allocates different budget lines to investment in weapons and other military equipment, and for modernisation of existing equipment. Greece and Cyprus use a single budget line for equipment. Finland, Denmark and Norway use a category named "materiel investment", where Sweden distinguishes "acquisition of equipment and facilities" and "continuance, decommissioning, etc. of equipment and facilities". [...]European countries use different criteria for distinguishing such categories". *Defence Budgets and Cooperation in Europe, Trends and Investments*, IAI, Iris, SWP, PISM, Eliamep, FOI, Rusi, July 2016, p.8.

⁴ "Disparate categories and overlapping perimeters make it difficult to compare data across European countries. When the information is available and budgetary documents contain exploitable data, the analysis yields 31 slightly dissimilar answers. Comparing like to like, on the other hand, would require identifying comparable accounting blocks across European defence budgets. With regard to investments in defence equipment it could be helpful to distinguish, at minimum and where possible, budget lines which are allocated (i) to development of new equipment, (ii) to acquisition of new equipment, (iii) to maintenance of current equipment, and (iv) to modernisation of old or current equipment. Were these items identifiable across Europe, it would make for a comprehensive landscape of defence investment. It would then require using similar accounting methodologies to compare investment levels *per se* across European countries". *Ibid.*, p.9.

THE ACHILLES PARADOX

Heading into 2017, the jury is still out. EU member states will need to resist the temptation to create an unduly rigid, complicated system that would prove worse than what currently exists, and so allow them to happily go on ignoring Brussels. Instead, they need to pick up the political gauntlet laid down by the European Commission, the European Council, the Parliament and the High Representative.

In doing so, they might consider taking a leaf out of the old riddle about Achilles and his tortoise, originally handed down to us by Zeno of Elea. According to Aristotle's version in his *Physics*⁵, the illustrious Achilles would never possess sufficient speed to overtake a lowly turtle in a foot race, despite him being the fastest runner in the old world, because "the pursuer must first reach the point whence the pursued started, so that the slower must always hold a lead". Thinkers have long parsed the philosophical implications of this paradox. Fortunately for the EU, the solution to Zeno's riddle is devilishly simple in the real world: Achilles simply overtakes the tortoise. Europeans have puzzled long and hard – they now need to cut the metaphysical minutia, and take a step forward in real life. ■

The author owes a deep debt of gratitude to Nick Witney for many in-depth conversations on this topic.

⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book VI

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The Armament Industry European Research Group (Ares Group) was created in 2016 by The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (Iris), who coordinates the Group. The aim of the Ares Group, a high-level network of security and defence specialists across Europe, is to provide a forum to the European armament community, bringing together top defence industrial policy specialists, to encourage fresh strategic thinking in the field, develop innovative policy proposals and conduct studies for public and private actors.

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