

Strategies and Tools for Achieving Responsible Security

Some Reflections from a European Perspective

Patrick Keller

Coordinator of Foreign and Security Policy at the
Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Berlin, Germany

“Security” is hardly a topic of concern for European policymakers these days. At least not in the sense of protecting the homeland and the people from war and other forms of external violence. They rather worry about “securities” with regard to the EU debt and currency crises and about the effects a fracturing Union and a crumbling euro might have on “social security” programs in European nation-states. Under the stress of political and economic turmoil, more typical questions of international security policy have been relegated to the back pages of European newspapers and to the very bottom of the EU Council’s agenda. How to withdraw from Afghanistan while still stabilizing the country? How to deal with the challenge of the Iranian nuclear program? How to manage increasing instability in Asia Pacific? These are just three examples of the pressing issues that receive short shrift by European strategists and politicians.

Given the severity of the debt crisis and its political consequences, it is understandable that security policy is not a priority. But it would also be a dangerous mistake to ignore security issues altogether—the World keeps turning regardless of current European preoccupations, and security challenges, even existential ones, have a habit of occurring with sudden inevitability. Once a security crisis is there, the time for sufficient preparation and effective action will often have evaporated. Hence it is important for Europeans, while struggling to solve the internal problems of the European Union, not to lose sight of the bigger picture of global security affairs.

Of course, both realms—the internal affairs of the European Union and the global security agenda—are more deeply interconnected than is usually acknowledged. The idea of European integration (in combination with more than just a little help from our American friends) created an unparalleled era of peace on the old continent. For centuries, war and conflict between European nation-states, kingdoms, and tribes was usual, peace being the exception. Today, armed conflict between members of the European Union is almost unthinkable. This is not just a boon for Europeans themselves, but also for the world at large, as European wars—due to the geostrategic and economic importance of the region—have a tendency to involve other powers. (Think World Wars I and II which both started as European “civil wars”.) Solving the euro crisis and strengthening the European Union for the future is thus a significant contribution to international stability and security.

The security relationship between Europe and the wider world also works the other way around. It is obvious already how the debt crisis affects the defense budgets of EU member States.¹ With the notable exception of Poland, all major and mid-size players in the European Union’s foreign and security policy are significantly reducing military spending, shrinking their armed forces, and reducing investment in research and development. So even if Europeans manage to preserve and strengthen their Union and the peace and stability it ensures, they will certainly be less visible and in all likelihood also less effective players on the international stage when it comes to providing security and enforcing Western interests and values.

Against this backdrop, one must ask: What exactly will Europe’s role in international security look like in the future? What are the strategies and tools Europeans might employ to live up to their responsibilities in international security affairs? And what, after all, is a “responsible” security policy, anyway? In the scope of this essay, such sweeping questions can of course only be addressed, not fully answered. But it is possible to provide a few thoughts that might serve as guidelines for further inquiry.

A good starting point is the much abused term “strategy”. Nowadays, governments are awash in “strategies”: Administrations have got a strategy for everything, from a “Strategy on Biological Diversity” to a “Broadband Strategy” (to name just two examples from the rich portfolio of the German government). In other words, the phrase “strategy” gives a sheen of thoughtful authority to even the most mundane policies. The true test of strategy, however, is the prioritized alignment of resources, means, and goals under conditions of uncertainty. Since survival is the most basic purpose of statecraft, security policy is the ultimate field of political strategy.

Hence, the conception of strategy in foreign and security affairs cannot start with the formulation of goals. A State’s goals in international security policy are either self-evident or trivial. Many a White Book has spelled out the litany of survival, freedom, prosperity, and peace as the aim of all political efforts. This is all commendable, but such motherhood and apple pie aspirations are of little help when it comes to actual strategy-making. They are generalizations as extreme as they are uncontroversial. They will not provide orientation when it comes to setting priorities or assigning resources and developing tactics.

What will focus the mind of the strategist, however, are concrete threats to a State's survival or its other self-evident goals. It is thus the analysis of threats which serious strategy-making in security policy needs to start with. Of course, threat perception differs substantially among the member States of the European Union. Differences in geography, history, political culture, and power account for diverging interpretations of the international security landscape between, say, Riga and Berlin. Still, it is possible to define three broad types of threat facing the European Union as a whole as well as the individual member States.

The first threat is the danger of interstate war. Many Europeans, especially among the younger generations, might view this as an anachronism. After all, the whole "European project" is built on the idea of overcoming war between nation-States. Indeed, the scenario of war between major European powers has become exceedingly unlikely. And yet, its impact would be so catastrophic that it warrants inclusion in the list of threats. Moreover, whenever Europeans believed that they had escaped the bloody tracks of history, they were in for an unpleasant surprise: consider the Balkan Wars in the 1990s or the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008. Based on such experience, NATO was right in its current 2010 Strategic Concept to list interstate war as the number one threat to Alliance security. (And this is not even touching on the truly gloomy scenario of what might happen to European security if the Euro and the European Union should disintegrate—a scenario that does not seem as far-fetched these days as it did over the last twenty or more years.)

The second type of threat to European security is the so-called "new threats". This category basically encompasses every security risk or danger except traditional warfare, no matter how long they have been in existence. Examples range from international terrorism to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to State failure and instability in crucial regions (often precipitated by other "new" threats such as climate change and migration). The list could be easily expanded, as both the European Security Strategy (2003) and the NATO Strategic Concept demonstrate.



In fact, hardly any of these phenomena are really new in the sense that they are without historical precedent. What is new, however, especially from a European perspective, is that they affect international and Western security. Terrorism, for instance, used to be a distinctly domestic problem; Munich, Lockerbie, and other heinous acts of international proportions were the exception rather than the rule.

As a consequence of globalization, that changed. A “smaller” world of more porous borders, truly global and instantaneous information and communication, and multifaceted interdependencies creates more opportunities for the spread of prosperity and freedom. But it also creates more vulnerabilities as well as more opportunities for what Thomas Friedman calls “super-empowered angry men” to disrupt and destroy. One of the tragic lessons of 9/11 is that, in the 21st century, even the most powerful Western nations have to care about what is going on in remote and destitute places such as Afghanistan—or suffer the consequences of their neglect.

The third broad type of threat facing Europe today is the shift of power in the international system. Compared to the first two types of threat, this third is rather more abstract. It is a threat on the systemic level of analysis, not a threat within the international system. Because of that, and because it does not imply an immediate damage to public safety, prosperity, or the European way of life, it is easily overlooked in casual discussion. Yet it is no less dangerous than the first two types of threat, and it might even exacerbate the likelihood and/or the effects of those threats actually affecting Europe.

The two fundamental trends characterizing the international system in the early 21st century are changes in the distribution of power and the increasing diffusion of power. The latter means that power is more difficult to locate than it ever was since the dawn of the Westphalian system. Nation-states are no longer the only—or even the major—actors in power politics. Non-governmental organizations as diverse as Apple, Moody’s, Greenpeace, and al-Qaeda enjoy growing influence over international affairs in a globalized world. This poses fundamental theoretical and practical problems for international security policy. But for the purposes of this essay, we should set all that aside for a moment—especially since this author is of the contrarian opinion that, counter-intuitively, the rise of the NGOs in turn strengthens the influence, credibility, and legitimacy of the State.

What is more interesting in the context of threat assessment is the change in power distribution among States. For more than a decade, the consistent economic success of threshold countries such as China, India, and Brazil has been a challenge to old conceptions of world order. It is only a question of time until this new economic power will be translated into military and, most importantly, political power. In many ways, this is already happening as the creation of the G-20 indicates.

From a European perspective, this could be seen as good news. More stakeholders in the international system, more evenly distributed wealth, and more stable trading partners are, after all, very much in the interest of Europe. However, there is no guarantee that international politics will not, yet again, turn into a zero-sum game. Then, other players’

gain will be Europe's loss. Already one can make the case that Europe's influence on global affairs, its ability to shape general rules of the game and political outcomes, is waning. The international negotiations on how to battle climate change are a case in point. It is easy to see how such a development, in the long term, will not only affect Europe's prosperity and way of life but that it will also have a security dimension to it. As before, this is not even touching on the worst-case scenario, which would be a military confrontation between a rising power and a status quo power. If History is any guide, it is not at all unlikely that China and the United States might engage in a hegemonic war over dominance in the international system. One hesitates to think where that might leave Europe.

So these are the three types of threat to European security that require a strategic response: "traditional" interstate conflict and war; "new" transnational threats; and systemic change. It is very difficult to prioritize them because no one can say today with any degree of reliability which of these threats will materialize sooner than others and which will have the most dire repercussions. It might also be unwise to prioritize too much because that would reduce much-needed flexibility in case the assumptions turn out to be wrong. Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that at least some of these threats will manifest themselves simultaneously, thus reinforcing each other. A prudent strategy retains the necessary adaptability to overcome such a confluence of challenges.

The scarcity of resources demands nevertheless to focus on challenges of greatest urgency and greatest possible impact. In doing so, the NATO Strategic Concept with its — at least implicit — ranking of threats is a useful guideline. The bigger challenge than discussing abstract priorities is to discern the actual tools and instruments of European security policy. As we will see, there remains a lot of work to do for Europe to develop an effective and coherent toolkit in dealing with the threats at hand.

Before examining the state of the EU security policy toolbox, however, an obligatory preliminary remark needs to be made: Not all, not even most, of the threats described in this essay require the use of military force. In fact, military force will be of little use or might even be counterproductive in dealing with type two and type three threats. It is a bitter lesson of the last decade and the operations in Afghanistan and in Iraq in particular that military force cannot achieve political solutions. Political problems, however, are the root cause of almost all "new" security challenges. For this reason—and because of their relative military weakness—European states are always quick to point out that European security policy does and should focus on political and civilian measures. For historical reasons, this reflex is prevalent especially in Germany.

Such considerations notwithstanding, military power remains an essential asset not only in international security affairs, but in international politics more generally. For one thing, it is indispensable in unstable situations. After all, this is a lesson of Afghanistan and Iraq as well: Military superiority is often a precondition for the implementation of civilian approaches. Without security, especially in post-conflict situations, there can be no development. Even more importantly, military power is the ultimate guarantee of a State's survival. The most basic of all national interests is to keep existing, to hedge against

foreign invasion or violent secession. Only military strength can reliably deliver that security. And for this very reason, military power is the most credible expression of a nation's assertiveness.

This ancient relationship between a state's military power and its ambition of self-preservation (and of enforcing other political interests) is understood all over the world. A nation's prestige and its influence in international affairs are usually reflected in its military posture. This is why rising states such as China and Brazil continue to expand their military capabilities. It is only in Europe where such a connection between military and political power is sometimes disputed — an aftereffect of the decades spent under the comfortable U.S. security umbrella. Since this umbrella is becoming somewhat threadbare, Europeans are well-advised to overcome this misperception and to get serious about maintaining the military aspect of their strength in international affairs as well.

The distinction between the respective qualities and uses of “hard” military and “soft” civilian power in mind, it makes sense to look at the international security threats facing the European Union not individually or by region, but rather to discuss the means and instruments Europeans have at their disposal to counter them. Those tools can be roughly divided into two categories: means of conflict prevention and means of conflict management (including defense and preemptive measures).

Conflict prevention is usually less costly in blood and treasure than conflict management, but it requires a greater and more sustained political effort at implementation. In a sense, all foreign policy can be interpreted as contributing to conflict prevention. International economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, “classical” diplomacy, and so on—they all serve the greater cause of peaceful development, mutual understanding, and the relaxation of possible tensions. Following a more narrow understanding of security policy, however, there are four particularly prominent examples of the tools of conflict prevention employed by the Europeans; two in the context of NATO, and two in the context of the European Union.



At the Lisbon summit in 2010, NATO allies agreed to create an — albeit modest — civilian crisis management capability. This is intended to help the alliance come to grips with the often frustrating problems of a military actor like NATO coordinating various civilian actors in post-conflict scenarios. In the future, NATO will be able to do some of that work by itself (instead of getting blamed for the shortfalls of others). At the same time, this small capability contains the nucleus of a civilian conflict prevention capability, overseen by NATO. This is a quality in line with the Alliance's more policy - rather than defense - related Article IV obligations. European members have been pushing for that for quite some time now. It would also fall in line with what the British call "upstream engagement": security sector reform, military training, and similar efforts by NATO at keeping possible crises from developing into full-fledged conflicts.

Cooperative security is, next to civilian crisis management, the second key idea for conflict prevention that received a boost at the Lisbon summit. It was also stressed again this year at the — otherwise quite unspectacular — summit in Chicago. Cooperative security pertains to the ever-growing network of partnerships that has developed around the transatlantic alliance, in particular with regard to the missions out of area. The hope of many European allies is that these relationships can be maintained and deepened even after the end of operations such as International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). If that were the case, NATO could develop into a hub for several regional security arrangements — and thus play a truly stabilizing role in global security affairs. Again, this is not primarily an issue of military-to-military cooperation or of burden-sharing in expeditionary missions. Instead, it is seen as a political network that should contribute to preventing crises from turning into conflict.

The European Union has also developed a number of instruments to strengthen conflict prevention. The two most notable are the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Neighborhood Policy. The Service was launched as recently as December 2010 under the leadership of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Lady Catherine Ashton. Accordingly, it is yet too early to fully assess its impact and potential. However, it is already discernible that European foreign policy gains a somewhat more unified presence in international affairs due to the EEAS. Moreover, the Service puts particular emphasis on conflict prevention and, according to its mission statement, "addresses the root-causes of violent conflict, like poverty, degradation, exploitation and unequal distribution and access to land and natural resources, weak governance, human rights abuses and gender inequality."

The European Neighborhood Policy, in turn, is a program that currently addresses sixteen countries, focusing on the Northern Africa and Middle East region as well as on Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. As part of that program, the European Union offers financial assistance to those States which adhere to government reform, economic reform, and other issues surrounding positive transformation. For some participating countries, eventual membership or at least ever closer association with the European Union are additional "carrots". In doing so, the EU seeks to create not just better living conditions in the neighboring countries but also to strengthen the stability of its geopolitical rim, thus fostering European security.

As the rebellions in Northern Africa, and especially in Libya, have demonstrated, sometimes reform and long-term stability require the use of force. Moreover, several of the pressing security challenges discussed in this essay — prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fighting terrorism, and checking aggressively expansive States — call for at least a credible military threat to deter troublemakers. And credibility is achieved, in the final analysis, by the convincing and effective use of military force when necessary.

Over the last decades, that has been a weakness of European security policy. The difficulty of mustering political will and strategic coherence among the States of Europe has often been an impediment to responsible security. That was perhaps most tragically evident in the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. It also betrayed the ossifying consequences of an outsized reliance on U.S. leadership in international and also in European security affairs. Today, the European capacity to act is further reduced by the crunch exerted on nearly all Western defense budgets by the financial and economic crisis.

The answer to that problem is increased cooperation. European States — within the European Union, but also within NATO — need to find new ways of arranging the military aspects of their common security. They must do more *together* instead of in parallel. They must achieve more integrated procurement of capabilities and develop shared usage of armed forces. This process is called “Smart Defense” in NATO jargon and “Pooling and Sharing” in EU parlance.

Declarations of intent such as the German-Swedish Ghent Initiative of 2010 serve as a roadmap of how to proceed, stressing in particular the need for identified priorities: In the end, not every European country should and will maintain a full-spectrum force. Individual states will focus on specific strengths, specific capabilities. Those capabilities, in turn, will be used with and by other states as well.

So far, NATO and EU countries have a sizeable list of projects pointing in the right direction. In the NATO context, the joint air policing in the Baltics, the development of the Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) system, and the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) are all examples of a successful smarter defense. In the context of the EU, prime examples would include the helicopter training program, development of joint air-to-air refueling capabilities, and the many initiatives currently pushed by the European Defense Agency, the institutional embodiment of the idea of pooling and sharing.

Still, these are all rather limited efforts. A real breakthrough in jointly procured and operated capabilities is yet to be achieved. Why not organize, for instance, the air forces of several central and eastern European states as a joint force, perhaps under German leadership? Cooperation on that scale is not yet happening, although it might be the only way towards a truly effective and lasting European role in international security affairs.

There are three main reasons why Europeans have such a hard time taking this crucial next step. The first reason is that defense cooperation, especially “Pooling and Sharing”,

has been born out of financial constraints. The rationale behind all such efforts was therefore simple economics: defense cooperation as a means of saving money. This, however, is both insufficient and misleading. It is insufficient because effective defense reforms need to be driven by strategic concerns; the rationale needs to be security-driven, not budget-driven. Otherwise, the resulting armed forces will not be serving their purpose, they will not be applicable to the threats and missions at hand. It is misleading because “Pooling and Sharing” will not save money, at least not in the short run. In fact, it might initially cost even more to restructure the various European defense organizations and capabilities into a coherent whole. But it is nonetheless an investment worth making, because it will strengthen European security and save money in the long run.

The second reason is the perennial problem of national sovereignty. Once Europeans create a truly coherent joint force structure, there will be very little room for national caveats. That sword cuts both ways: It will be almost impossible for a single nation to drop out of a military mission that was agreed upon by the NATO Council or the relevant EU body. At the same time, there will be occasions when a state would prefer to use military force but must refrain from it because the majority of European partners is opposed. Because certain capabilities are no longer under national but under collective control, options of unilateral action will narrow. Thus, the political implications of deeper defense cooperation are enormous; they ultimately affect the core business of the sovereign state, its ability to protect itself and on its own.

This leads to the third reason why Europeans are reluctant to undertake further steps towards defense integration: the problem of credibility. Exactly because so much is at stake—the very heart of national sovereignty and the State’s survival—it is mandatory that shared capabilities can be used with great reliability. No State will agree with shared solutions if there is no certainty that those capabilities will be ready when needed. The experience with shared capabilities so far is, unfortunately, not encouraging. When Germany, for example, refused to let AWACS (a shared capability under German leadership) participate in the controversial Libya mission, many allies saw that as evidence that “Pooling and Sharing” does not work—or at least, that it puts the participants’ security at risk because shared forces were obviously no reliable assets in crisis situations.

None of these problems lends itself to easy solutions, but the challenges are not insurmountable either. It is the task of political leadership to find ways, on a step-by-step basis, to overcome the remaining hurdles. Europeans need ideas and creativity, and, above all else, the courage and political will to move forward before a security crisis more severe than we can currently deal with befalls us. It is the hope of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation that conferences such as the Forte de Copacabana help to contribute to that understanding and help to generate fresh ideas on common approaches to common security challenges.

Notes

¹ See Patrick Keller, Challenges for European Defense Budgets after the Economic Crisis, AEI National Security Outlook, No. 1, July 2011. (<http://www.aei.org/files/2011/07/11/NSO-2011-07-No-1-g.pdf>)