

Why do Europeans need armed forces?

James Rogers

European armed forces are in a malaise. For the past 20 years, European spending on armaments has continued to drop. The 2013 edition of *The Military Balance* (published each year by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London), shows that only the United Kingdom (UK), Estonia and cash-strapped Greece spend more than 2 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence, the minimum percentage recommended by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). 2012 was a critical year: for the first time in modern history, the countries of Asia outspent the countries of Europe on their militaries.

Many European countries cannot now do much more than offer token detachments and squadrons in support of coalition efforts. Even during the Libya and Mali expeditions in 2011 and 2013, respectively, the British and French needed help from the United States (US), particularly with ‘critical enabling’ capabilities like cruise missiles to suppress enemy air defences and remote-controlled aircraft for surveillance and target acquisition. That Europe’s two leading military powers required assistance in their own backyard, to oust a rickety Libyan dictatorship and to repress a gaggle of Malian rebels and jihadists, speaks volumes about how ‘compressed’ even the strongest European armed forces have become.

This harms Europe’s role in the wider world. As European armed forces have weakened, one-half of NATO has become increasingly reliant on the other – the US – which in turn has been forced to accept greater

HIGHLIGHTS

- European armed forces are in a malaise, due to political complacency and a misconstrued approach to using military force.
- These failings call for a conceptual reappraisal of the utility of European military power, and a better understanding of both the active and passive uses of armed force.
- Europeans should focus the use of their military power on two geopolitical zones: one stretching from Suez to Shanghai, the other curving from Marrakech to Moscow.

»»»»» responsibilities than it can probably take on alone. To the detriment of both sides, Europeans have become increasingly junior partners, less able to operate militarily with the US (which, along with its vast range of existing strategic capabilities, continues to invest heavily in future technologies such as directed-energy weaponry). This comes at a time when the evolution of a more multipolar world is accelerating and when the US is rebalancing its military posture towards East Asia. It also comes at a time when emerging powers' development of potent anti-access and area-denial systems is increasing, which could eventually neuter the residue of European military superiority.

WHAT IS TO BLAME FOR THE MALAISE IN EUROPEAN MILITARY POWER?

The financial crisis of 2007–9 is frequently identified as the root cause of the European military malaise. But this argument does not stand up to closer scrutiny. True, the fiscal difficulties in many European countries have had some detrimental impact on armaments spending. However, European military spending has been in relative decline as a proportion of national income for over 20 years. The malaise is not therefore driven exclusively by economic problems, but also by two political ones: complacency, and a misconstrued approach to using military force.

Firstly, much like H. G. Wells' delicate 'Eloi' in the *The Time Machine*, many Europeans, long sheltered by the US (and the UK and France), have either become complacent or naive. Some Europeans continue to cling to the old dichotomy between territorial defence and overseas intervention, which is a reactive anachronism from the second half of the twentieth century. While NATO will likely continue to deter external actors from military attacks on 'allied territory', most of the future challenges to European security will need to be tackled beyond the European homeland.

Unfortunately, after the post-Cold War era's numerous 'small wars', even those European

countries that understand the external character of modern threats have lost their appetite for expeditionary operations. And when they do take part, some send only token contributions (frequently with multiple caveats attached) and often only as part of a wider coalition effort led by the US, the UK or France. As a result, while many European countries have paid lip-service to acquiring greater strategic mobility since the 1990s – encouraged both by NATO and the European Union (EU) – their armed forces have continued to decay. For example, the Dutch Navy, once one of the most capable European maritime forces, has shrunk from nearly 20 frigates in the early 1990s to only eight today, while the Italian Navy has halved its destroyers and frigates over a similar timeframe. Modern ships are far more potent than those of only a decade ago, but sufficient quantity is still needed to sustain an international presence.

Secondly, those Europeans who remain staunch advocates of the use of military power have fallen into a trap: they have come to believe near unre-servedly in the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's famous quip that war is a continuation of politics by other means. Military power is therefore seen as a last resort, and is equated to overseas operations, like the armed interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. The problem here is that, while war and politics are both organised forms of competition, the use of armed force is not only a continuation of politics. The threat of coercion exists within almost all politics, even in highly institutionalised democracies like the EU's member states, as a deterrent against the infringement of rules. It is in this sense that there is a police officer with a baton (or a gun) behind every law in

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a democratic country. Extrapolated to the international environment, the paradox is that it is the threat of the use of force that often keeps international politics non-violent.

The EU's 'comprehensive approach' is often touted as a bridge between development programmes, diplomatic instruments and military power. Unfortunately, this still fails to get to the nub of the matter, as it remains predicated on the concept of intervention and long-term stabilisation. It is devoid of a deterring function (which, admittedly, it was never designed to have, but is a major gap in the European approach). Thus, having taken Clausewitz's dictum to its logical conclusion, the European advocates of armed power have overlooked – or forgotten – the insights of US geo-strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan. He understood the true *raison d'être* of military power: 'Force is never more operative than when it is known to exist but is not brandished'. The point being that military power is best used as an extended deterrent; or as a security blanket to wrap around smaller or weaker countries in exchange for supporting the security-provider's international preferences.

THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE USES OF ARMED FORCE

These failings call for a conceptual reappraisal of the utility of European military power. Military power can be used both actively (in the 'Clauswitzian' way) and passively (*a la* Mahan). The active use of military power is primarily about external intervention. It includes 'force projection' (or 'power projection') operations, which, due to Europe's maritime geography and worldwide interests, usually occur overseas. Meanwhile, the passive use of military power is more about using armed force preventatively to shape and mould relationships around the world, and includes operations that aim towards 'power extension'.

The active use of armed force (force projection) occurs when a country wishes to do one of two

things: either to use its armed forces to compel an opponent into a particular course of action, or to counter situations where deterrence has failed. Interventions may be undertaken to prevent a foreign regime from doing something it should not do (as in Iraq in 1991 and 1998) or to force it from power, i.e., 'regime change' (as in Iraq in 2003 or Libya in 2011); to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe (as in Kosovo in 1999); or to support a faction or restore order during a civil war (such as in the Ivory Coast in 2004 and 2012 or in Mali in 2013). Another example of active use of armed force would be in 1982, when the UK dispatched an expeditionary fleet to reverse the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands. It could also include smaller stabilisation missions, when one country or alliance sends troops into another country's territory or naval vessels off the coast – sometimes with its active consent – to maintain law and order (like in Sierra Leone in 2000, the Republic of Macedonia in 2003 or off Somalia from 2008).

The passive use of armed force (power extension – sometimes described as 'forward presence' or even 'global posture') involves the preventive application of military power. This can be done through the construction of global or regionally concentrated networks of air and naval stations in foreign countries or overseas territories, enduring naval or air patrols, and military exercises with foreign powers. It can also include the posting of military attachés in foreign capitals and arms sales to important allies and partners.

In short, power extension aims to solidify and sustain a geopolitical order by generating a security community – or forging an alliance or security arrangement – to build progressively closer levels of trust with foreign governments. It does this by dissuading any potential usurper from either establishing its own network, or building armed forces strong enough to challenge the regional or international status-quo. This form of military power contributes, for example, to upholding open global economic flows, on which Europeans depend for their well-being and prosperity. Examples of power extension include



»»»»» NATO, the US network of allies and friends in East Asia, and the British and French deployments to (and exercises with) countries in the Gulf and South-East Asia (i.e. the Five Power Defence Arrangements).

The active use of military power requires a high degree of strategic mobility, while the passive use of military power also requires determination and persistence. The former is a more temporary exercise of power, whereas the latter is more enduring – or, at its most effective, permanent. While the passive use of military power – if used properly – should prevent foreign crises from emerging, sometimes Europeans may have to react to events and intervene more robustly. Thus, both the active and passive uses of armed force are necessary and interlocking.

However, while active and passive military power are frequently entwined and co-dependent, the paradox is that of the two, it is passive military power – particularly power extension – that is the most potent. Governments that know how best to use military power deploy it in the Mahanian way – as opposed to the Clausewitzian – i.e., silently and quietly, passively threading it through the capitals of friends and rivals alike to strengthen ties and keep them from becoming enemies. Meanwhile, governments that resort to the active use of the armed forces may look more hawkish, but frequently are using it only because their foreign policy has failed. Europeans should bear Mahan's dictum in mind as they continue to cut and compress their own armed forces, which may lead to a decline in their international influence.

HOW CAN EUROPEANS USE THEIR ARMED FORCES MORE EFFECTIVELY?

Europeans should come to realise that their military power and foreign policy are linked together in strategic synthesis. Consequentially, Europeans need a new vision for their foreign and military policy – a strategic approach – that is predicated on their armed forces' active and passive use. The

objective should be gradually to cast a European strategic shadow over two crucial and interlocking geopolitical zones – one wider and horizontal, the other shorter and arc-shaped – both anchored by a single pivot point: the Suez Canal. The first region will require primarily a passive military presence, whereas the latter one may mandate a more active role.

The horizontal zone – a maritime, open axis from Suez to Shanghai – is likely to emerge as the twenty-first century's geopolitical fulcrum, the meeting point of most of the world's pre-eminent powers: China, the EU, India, Japan, South Korea and the US. This geopolitical axis also contains the main European maritime communication line to the Middle East and South and East Asia. Keeping this crucial sea route open will become an increasingly important European priority.

This will necessitate the passive use of military power: Europeans will need to be able to maintain naval forces on a near-permanent forward deployment – to undertake surveillance, to prevent piracy, and to deter potential regional usurpers from aggressive intentions. The current operations off Somalia to tackle pirates disrupting Eurasian maritime trade – the EU's Operation Atalanta and NATO's Operation Ocean Shield – are a starting point. Plus, as Atalanta and Ocean Shield have done, Europeans should coax the navies of emerging powers into countering trans-national threats, preventing them from challenging European interests. Equally, Europeans, working with allies like the US, will need to be able to base (or quickly move) naval and air groups and adaptable brigades – lighter ground forces that can be rapidly re-calibrated depending on the context – in friendly countries, particularly in the Middle East, but also South-East Asia. These could help train those countries' armed forces, or provide a rapid response to natural disasters (similar to the British Royal Navy's response to the Haiyan Typhoon in the Philippines), while simultaneously providing a calming influence against regional aggressors and domestic extremists alike.

The other space – a half-coastal, half-terrestrial arc from Marrakech to Moscow – is no less important. Closer to the European mainland, not only does it contain the eastern and southern neighbourhoods, but it also includes three regional powers – Russia, Turkey, and Egypt. Preventing the destabilisation of these two neighbourhoods will become a key component of European geo-strategy. This will mandate a passive European capability to deter stronger neighbours from adversely intervening in smaller, weaker countries – particularly when such interventions run against European interests. In this respect, solving the so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ in the Caucasus and Moldova, and fostering stronger military-to-military relations between EU militaries with those of Ukraine and Georgia, should become European priorities.

Equally, as the US continues to ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance’ its own forces, Europeans will need to take greater responsibility for responding to crises, whether caused by surrounding governments or non-state actors, in the Moscow-Marrakech arc. The ability to threaten to use – and actually apply – force effectively throughout the two neighbourhoods will remain vital. As an illustration, consider the Franco-British led international intervention in Libya in 2011, or the French national intervention (with some international support) in Mali in 2013. Ideally, this will require developing a more extensive regional strike capability, spearheaded by France and the UK, but supported by other Europeans – often from their military stations on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. In this regard, European air-to-air refuelling tankers, surveillance systems, target acquisition infrastructure, and stealthy naval and air units armed with land attack capabilities – such as long-range artillery projectiles and cruise missiles – will become more necessary than ever. These capabilities will also re-enforce European passive military power, with potentially positive implications for European engagement in both the Moscow-Marrakech arc and the Suez-Shanghai belt.

CONCLUSION

The financial crisis of 2007–9 alone is not responsible for the European military malaise. Compounded by European governments’ lack of thinking surrounding the effective use of their armed forces, the European military malaise is primarily a political problem. Indeed, politicians in European countries have used fiscal difficulties as a convenient scapegoat to make further reductions. Europeans must now maximise the contribution that different EU member states (or clusters of them) can deliver, based on their capabilities and postures, with a view to deploying active and passive military power in prioritised regions.

This should be the driving rationale of a renewed EU defence policy, to underpin stability and prevent disruptions through an extended European military presence, as part of a broader strategic approach in cooperation with allies and partners. Europeans should thus ensure that they spend their money more effectively, not on immobile personnel and equipment, but on advanced naval and aerospace forces, which can be used to actively and passively support their global interests. This will also help Europeans to remain inter-operable with the US armed forces, thus reinforcing NATO, particularly as Washington shifts its strategic focus elsewhere. The time has come for Europeans properly to understand how they can use their armed forces to better effect, preparing the ground for stronger European engagement in zones of geo-strategic importance.

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