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Europe’s Chequered Security Integration

While Europe has a rich history of security integration, many projects have been hampered by rivalries and national self-interest.

By Ian Shields for ISN

From the end of the Second World War to the conclusion of the Cold War and beyond, all attempts at fomenting deeper European security coordination and integration have been underscored by a set of fundamental questions. What form should the European security project take, for example, and should it be primarily inward-looking, or outward facing? Indeed, why are such considerations so important and does enhanced European cooperation even provide the answers to this conundrum of concerns? To address these issues we begin this week by first reviewing how Europe reached its present security paradigm through the creation of successive, and often contradictory, treaties and agreements. What we find is a ‘patchwork’ approach to European security integration that encompasses continent-wide projects, transatlantic and regional partnerships, as well as national self-interest.

Forged Out of Necessity

Western European attempts at forging common security policies began almost immediately after the end of the Second World War. Initially, these new alliances sought to safeguard countries against internal threats while discouraging external aggression. The little-remembered first step was the Anglo-French Treaty of Dunkirk (1947) that sought to deter future attacks by Germany. This short-lived agreement was replaced by the Brussels Treaty (1948) between France, Britain, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. In the same year the founders agreed to form the Western European Defence Organization (WEDO) with formal headquarters at Fontainebleau, France. Accordingly, the first post-war alliances were entirely composed of European partners and focussed upon preventing recent past history repeating itself.

However, increasing concerns over the threat of Communism (as typified by Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech) and a Soviet-led invasion of Western Europe eventually brought an external dimension to European security structures. Following initially secret discussions between Britain, Canada and the United States, Western Europe sought a transatlantic defense pact. This resulted in the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 and the formation of NATO. Nevertheless, European-led defense initiatives continued unabated. In 1954, for example, West Germany and Italy were invited to join the WEDO which was, in turn, re-named the Western European Union (WEU). The WEU remained (at least in theory) a distinctly European defense and security apparatus until the Treaty of Lisbon assumed its mutual defense clause.

But not all European states were happy with the United States' leadership of Western security structures. In particular, France was vocal in its concerns that the US had too big a say in the running of NATO. By the mid-1960s, concerns regarding the perceived Anglo-American "special relationship" prompted France to withdraw its troops from the NATO military command and develop its own independent defense forces to counter Soviet aggression. The then President Charles de Gaulle also asked for all non-French NATO troops to withdraw from French soil. However, this was by no means the end of distinctly European attempts to develop mutual security cooperation. In 1987, for example, the Franco-German Brigade was formed. The Brigade not only forms the core of NATO's Eurocorps, it also prompted the stationing of a German battalion on French soil in 2009.

Indeed, closer Franco-German military cooperation serves to remind us of a treaty that was seemingly based on economic cooperation but that nevertheless had security at its heart. Signed in 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Treaty sought to assist in the reconstruction of war-ravaged Europe by pooling Franco-German steel and coal production, and avoid another conflict by binding previously adversarial states together. From this Treaty eventually came the European Union (EU), itself an economic and political project seeking ever greater integration.

From One to Many Threats

It was inevitable that the end of the Cold War would have a profound impact upon Europe's security dynamics. In place of concerns regarding an invasion by Warsaw Pact forces - coupled with fundamental structural changes to the international system - Europe's armed forces eventually began to address a more diverse range of security challenges. These included peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and overseas deployments in relation to the War on Terror. To reflect the fluid and rapidly-changing nature of the threats confronting Europe, the EU's European Security Strategy (2003) identifies a number of challenges that require more than just a military response. These are:

1. Terrorism
2. Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction
3. Regional Conflicts
4. Failed States
5. Organized Crime

Underpinning the EU's response to these problems is the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Formulated in 1991 alongside the Maastricht Treaty, the CFSP today reflects the EU's commitment to strengthening its ability to address security concerns by utilizing military and civilian capabilities. One of the CFSP's key instruments is the Common Security Defence Policy (CSDP). Launched in 1999, the CSDP coordinates the EU's common capabilities goals through a network of offices in Brussels. To reflect the civil-military nature of the CSDP, managing bodies include the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) and Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC).

Since its inception, the ESDP has deployed over 20 civil and military operations across Europe and beyond. To reflect that the European security project now looks beyond the continent, ESDP activities have included policing missions to Afghanistan and Palestine and the protection of refugees from Darfur based in Chad and Central African Republic. Among its distinctly European missions is EULEX Kosovo. Since 2007, this CSDP mission has been responsible for upholding policing and a civilian rule of law in Kosovo. The CSDP also runs a similar policing mission in Bosnia-Hercegovina.

Moving Forward After Lisbon?

Taken at face value, the diversity of CFSP and CSDP activities suggests that the EU has successfully coordinated its civil-military responses to security threats. Yet from the outset, the CFSP was mired in seemingly familiar bureaucratic inertia at the EU. The Maastricht Treaty ushered in a three pillar approach for EU policy coordination - an inter-governmental pillar for the CFSP, another for Justice Home Affairs and finally a supranational Community pillar. However, where an issue straddled two pillars, separate agreements had to be obtained from administrative bodies. This, in turn, complicated planning for operations and determining what EU consensus actually was on particular security matters.

Yet in the name of better coordination and coherence, the EU attempted to overcome such problems by signing the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) (the Treaty). Not only is the EU now solely responsible for coordinating supranational and intergovernmental policy areas, the Treaty also created a High Representative to better coordinate foreign and security policies. However, the Treaty also upholds an important caveat. The CFSP remains separated from other policy frameworks with no general transfer of foreign policy powers from member states to the EU.

Central to the continuation of such terms and conditions are member states like the United Kingdom. To prevent further erosion of an independent foreign policy, the UK government introduced ‘red lines’ to safeguard its right to national self-determination. Accordingly, the CFSP’s attempts to better coordinate the EU’s foreign and security policies continue on occasions to be thwarted by national self-interest. These arrangements have also compromised the High Representative’s political mandate of coordinating decisive and proactive foreign policy decisions. In response to the Arab Spring, for example, countries like the UK and France have advanced their foreign policy goals outside of the EU framework.

Indeed, when it comes to greater European security integration, Paris and London demonstrate that, in terms of partnerships, less may in fact be more. In 2010 both countries signed a 50 year defense treaty that envisages a shared aircraft carrier group, a 10,000 strong joint expeditionary force and greater defense-industrial cooperation. Yet what is most interesting about the treaty is its set of terms and conditions. While the rhetoric emphasized that France and the UK were ‘logical’ strategic partners, both countries reiterated that their ability to act independently in the sphere of foreign and security policies had nevertheless been retained.

More or Less?

However, there can be no doubt that Europe’s continuing economic malaise and plummeting defense budgets are continuing to shape the continent’s security policies. Defense spending in France, for example, remains relatively buoyant ($43.1 billion for 2012 from $40.1 billion in 2011), whereas in Germany – the economic powerhouse of the Euro Zone – expenditure has shrunk to less than a third of its Cold War peak. And as Anglo-French military commitments in Afghanistan, Iraq and over Libya demonstrate, Europe still retains a need for traditional hard power and the ability to project military force.

But whether it is born out of financial necessity or geopolitical calculations, integration efforts have been at the heart of Europe’s security since at least the end of the Second World War. The very earliest efforts were based on treaties for mutual defense. Yet wider economic (and through that political) integration has consistently played a major role in safeguarding European security to such an extent that war within Europe seems so remote as to be readily dismissed. But as the nature of security threats become increasingly non-traditional, the argument for greater European integration to overcome them retains its credibility. And all coordinated responses remain dependent on the willingness of each member state’s government.

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Editor's note:

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