



As the EU Said at the NATO Summit

Sven Biscop

The May 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago will see the first results of the new attempt to make Europeans more capable militarily. Having decided last December on projects addressing some of the key shortfalls, the EU has a unique opportunity to deliver a strong message – if projects become reality. The European Council can be the tool, and its President the voice, of a strong collective effort.

In December 2010, the EU launched the “Ghent Framework” for Pooling & Sharing of military capabilities. A few months later, at the February 2011 Munich Security Conference, the NATO Secretary-General followed suit and announced Smart Defence.

The genesis of the two processes is closely linked. Pooling & Sharing emerged as a way of addressing the absence of coordination between Member States under financial pressure cutting defence budgets, while circumventing the deadlocked debate about Permanent Structured Cooperation. Smart Defence was very much a NATO reaction to the dynamic thus initially generated in the CSDP. At the top political level, the beauty contest between the two remains as intense as ever...

The two processes pursue similar aims through similar ways – and both struggle with a lack of means. In times of austerity, the aim is to do more with less: stimulating Europeans to pool their efforts, enhancing cost-effectiveness, in order to maintain and upgrade relevant capabilities, but also to undertake *new* capability initiatives addressing the strategic shortfalls in the European arsenal.

The aims are quite ambitious therefore – more so perhaps than some of the Member States concerned care to know. But they have to be. The Libya campaign once again highlighted the well-known European deficiencies, especially as concerns strategic enablers – 90% of which had to be provided by the US. And the latter have now repeatedly made it clear (in Defence Secretary Robert Gates’ Brussels farewell speech of 10 June 2011, and most recently in the January 2012 *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*) that in the future they expect Europeans to take charge of crises in their own neighbourhood on their own.

Thus Pooling & Sharing/Smart Defence cannot just be about preserving the capabilities that Europeans have – it is about getting more.

SMART POOLING?

In an essentially Member State-driven process, capitals proposed opportunities for new cooperative schemes, on which the European Defence Agency (EDA) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT) built to generate project proposals in the most promising areas. Excellent informal staff-to-staff contacts ensured that work on both sides was coordinated to a much greater extent than before, and de-conflicted as much as possible. Each process yielded hundreds of potential projects, yet each somehow left the proponents of a major leap forward wanting. Of course, the mass of proposed projects were all positive in themselves, but overall there was a certain lack of ambition.

On the EU-side, Pooling & Sharing started the only way an ambitious collective endeavour can, potentially, work: as a *political* initiative of the combined EU Ministers of Defence. Up to each Minister in his/her country then to, in a top-down manner, steer national defence planning in the direction agreed upon with his/her colleagues. In all too many countries, follow-up appeared lacklustre however and the national defence apparatus was left much leeway. Predictably enough, this was used to slow down the integrative dynamic created at the political level. This was the case in Germany especially, although it had been instrumental in launching the Ghent Framework – a rare but welcome example of Germany acting as an engine of the CSDP. The focus of the key Member States in the military field, France and the UK, was on their bilateral cooperation and so they did not initially assume a driving role.

Even more than before, as defence budgets are under heavy pressure across Europe, contributing to new collective capability projects is only possible by cutting national capabilities. Member States fear contributing

too much of their limited budgets to a collective capability as compared to the extent to which they expect to have to draw on it, and invoke sovereignty to resist pooling even of existing capabilities. This reluctance is understandable, but not justifiable. Many of the national capabilities that conservative-minded defence establishments cling to, to the detriment of new programmes, are in fact not capabilities at all, for they cannot be employed for any expeditionary operation. The sovereignty thus protected is largely illusory: without usable capabilities, national governments have full freedom of inaction. By contrast, the examples of EATC and Admiral Benelux prove that far-reaching yet flexible pooling is perfectly reconcilable with maximal sovereignty. Pooling in reality increases sovereignty, empowering Member States to operate at levels and in capability areas which on their own they could never hope to achieve.

SHARED DEFENCE?

As Pooling & Sharing fizzled out, Smart Defence kicked in and gave new impetus to the same process in a different organization – which soon went the same way.

An indispensable (though not in itself sufficient) condition for a NATO capability project to work is that the US contribute, with money, personnel, and equipment. Then the European Allies can be convinced to put in their share. For the US, the point of Smart Defence however is exactly the opposite: to convince the *Europeans* to solve the European capability problem, without American support. Why would the US pay for, say, European air-to-air refuelling capacity of which it has an abundance already when its defence budget is undergoing a major cut? (Even so “abundance” remains an apt term to describe the US budget when compared with the rest of the world). The aim is for Europeans to pay for a European capacity, not simply to “do

more stuff together”, but to acquire their own enablers, thus allowing US capacity to be diverted elsewhere – that would be true burden-sharing. Therefore the prerequisite for the US to safely shift their strategic focus from Europe’s neighbourhood to the Asia-Pacific and redeploy their means accordingly, is *European strategic autonomy*, at least regionally.

Rather than an American threat, this strategic shift is a desire, which is partly dependent on Europe’s ability to defend itself. If Europe were seriously threatened, the US would have no choice but to intervene because of its *own* vital interests. In that sense, the US remains a European power. European capitals, all too well aware of this, ignore at their peril however that the US might decide to make the point by withholding its military support for a crisis management operation of importance to Europeans without threatening vital interests – like Libya. Meanwhile however, absent American money, European enthusiasm for Smart Defence began to ebb once concrete projects, and therefore budgets, had to be defined. Just like the Defence Capabilities Initiative and the Prague Capabilities Commitment before it.

On the face of it, the US is now more supportive than ever of European military cooperation. But old ways die hard and certain American attitudes continue in reality to undermine it.

Unlike the Cold War era, European Allies no longer have the scale to generate significant new national capabilities, certainly not in the field of strategic enablers, hence the need for collective initiatives. Logically, a new collective level will have to be introduced into the NATO Defence Planning Process: instead of dealing only with individual Allies, it will have to take into account collective targets and contributions by the European Allies. The need

for both European strategic autonomy and a collective European defence planning level: is not the evident conclusion that this level already exists – we call it the CSDP? Yet for the moment the US appears reticent to put two and two together, for fear of losing the initiative and leadership over the process. The European autonomy which their new strategy requires cannot be achieved however without a platform for European coordination, for which NATO is not now configured. How else can Europeans decide on capability priorities, which are a function of their interests and foreign policy priorities – which if and when they define them collectively they do so through the EU? The natural US desire to steer everything through NATO at 28, because it allows Washington to steer the decisions of the Europeans, now stands in the way of US strategy.

Similarly, US industrial interests risk getting in the way of the wider strategic objective. In the corridors of Brussels it is called “Pooling & Charging”: the use of Smart Defence to stimulate Europeans to fill their shortfalls through pooling – to buy American equipment. But this only serves to reinforce the existing divides among Europeans. Reluctance to invest in collective projects being considerable already, those Europeans with defence industrial interests will certainly not be convinced by the prospect of equipping Europe with American enablers. Those without a significant defence industry might be so enticed, but without participation of the former, they lack the critical mass to acquire enablers at the level required for European autonomy. Continued fragmentation will be the logical result. Europe risks ending up without an autonomous Defence Industrial and Technological Base. Are the Member States without significant defence industry today certain that then their interests will be better served? And is the US certain that then in the

long term Europeans will always buy American – rather than Indian, Brazilian...?

In short, European strategic autonomy in terms of capabilities can neither exist without autonomy in terms of strategy-making nor without defence-industrial autonomy.

ON TO CHICAGO: ENTER THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

At the NATO Summit in Chicago in May 2012 a first assessment of the results and prospects of Smart Defence is expected, as of Pooling & Sharing, for the EU is invited as such. On the NATO-side in particular there is a search for “flagship projects” substantial enough to present to the Heads of State and Government. The EU should not necessarily follow the NATO calendar – unless it has something to say.

And indeed it has. On 1 December 2011 already, the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council welcomed Member States’ commitments to 11 “specific concrete projects” (8 new, 3 based on existing initiatives) facilitated by the EDA. They are the result of the new drive prevalent in the EDA, and from the initiative of specific Member States, among others France and Italy. French industrial interests undoubtedly play a role, but the fact of the matter is that these projects directly address some of the key shortfalls in terms of enablers, among others: air-to-air refuelling, smart munitions, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance including space situational awareness, and military satellite communications. It is now crucial therefore that follow-up is ensured and a critical mass of Member States recruited to make sure that these key projects will be implemented.

Promising these projects certainly are. So promising in fact that the US have proposed to merge certain Pooling & Sharing and Smart Defence initiatives into a common flagship

project. Better proof of the CSDP projects’ potential there could not be, nor of the difficulties NATO is facing to arrive at equally promising proposals. For the time being, the projects listed under the heading of Smart Defence are all useful, but none is consequential enough to merit the “flagship” label. As the capability problem NATO faces is a European one, it is probably logical that it proved more easy to find (the beginnings of) a solution among Europeans, through CSDP. There is no need for *Schadenfreude* or envy on the part of the respective bureaucracies though. What counts is that the European Member States, at the service of which both the CSDP and NATO are, have agreed on what could be the first step towards a major enhancement of Europe’s capabilities.

Could be – for this to materialize, disturbance must be avoided and follow-up ensured.

The US must avoid disturbing and potentially fatally undermining the still modest European dynamic in function of industrial interests. Its bid to create a common air-to-air refuelling project using American equipment is an example of how the “Pooling & Charging” attitude can be counter-productive. Objectively, Washington should welcome a European initiative in an area in which in the Libyan crisis Europeans were almost wholly dependent on US assets. Its idea of a common American-equipped Pooling & Sharing/Smart Defence project risks dividing the Europeans with the result that neither project reaches the critical mass to generate a substantial capability increase – and burden-sharing will remain an illusion. Furthermore it is especially prone to create bad blood as it comes in the wake of the US cancelling a major air-to-air refuelling contract with Northrop Grumman/EADS in favour of Boeing, on grounds which are contentious to say the least.

Europe must ensure through quick and concrete follow-up that the momentum is not lost. Europeans must adopt “Pooling & Charging” – they must charge ahead and pool their efforts to make the announced projects a reality. Just like launching the Ghent Framework itself, this requires collective and top-down *political* decision-making. Only the top political leaders of the Member States have the authority to order their defence establishments to make this happen, by reorienting both investments and cuts in function of the need to participate in collective projects. Perhaps the time has come to lift defence up to the level of the European Council, which until now has never taken charge of the CSDP. Under its President, Herman Van Rompuy, the European Council has started the practice of preparing the key summits between the EU and the great powers. Is not the NATO Summit such an occasion? Putting Pooling & Sharing on the agenda of the European Council prior to Chicago would create the best chance of starting a political dynamic that would stimulate sufficient Member States to sign up to one or more of the key projects. Even if not all of the 27 would be able and willing to join in now, it could create the critical mass for each individual project to start for real.

Thus a unique opportunity would be created for Mr. Van Rompuy to deliver a strong message in Chicago on behalf of the EU: these are the strategic enablers which through these collective projects EU Member States have *decided* to acquire.

CONCLUSION: DEFENCE IN 3D

Many might instinctively draw back before what they see as the dreaded “European caucus” within the Alliance. Yet this evolution is inevitable, for unless they do so collectively, Europeans do not have the means to address their capability shortfalls. It is but logical that it proves slightly easier to solve a European

problem among Europeans in the framework that was purpose-built to that end: the CSDP. And though not all EU Member States are NATO Allies: is this not the era of NATO partnerships, of working closely with non-members?

More importantly, capability development through the CSDP and NATO is 100% compatible. Capabilities developed by Member States with the EDA or NATO acting as facilitator can be deployed in any framework. NATO remains the forum to initiate those programmes to which Europeans and Americans want to contribute together. The new collective targets and capabilities which Europeans set and create among themselves, through the CSDP, can be incorporated as such in NATO defence planning. The aim is not for all European Member States to contribute to all projects. European capabilities will remain a complex puzzle of national and multinational capabilities. In some multinational areas, pooling will take place in several clusters of a few Member States each; in others, requiring a larger critical mass, there will probably be just one capability constituted by a dozen or more Member States.

To manage this puzzle and make sure that in the end the sum of it all produces a coherent set of European capabilities, tactical-level coordination of cooperation, project-by-project, will not suffice. In fact, both the Ghent Framework and Smart Defence explicitly call for a three-dimensional approach. Besides (1) pooling or Cooperation, on which both processes now focus, there is a need to decide (2) which capabilities are to be maintained in the first place or Prioritization, and (3) which capabilities will be provided by role- and task-sharing or Specialization. This can only be achieved if the Member States willing to contribute complement the current

project-by-project approach with strategic-level coordination of national defence planning as a whole.

Only a permanent and structured dialogue at the political level, between the EU Ministers of Defence, can produce transparency, certainty and confidence. That will allow the Ministers each to effectively and convincingly instruct their Chief of Defence: to focus the national defence effort on a reduced range of employable capabilities; to scrap redundant capabilities, of which there are far too many in Europe today; and to use the full potential for cluster-based pooling; thus to create budgetary space to invest in the major new collective projects to acquire strategic enablers. In this strategic dialogue between national defence planning lies the true added value of the CSDP. All concerned would be wise to encourage it.

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