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**FIGHTING FOR EUROPE**

**European Strategic Autonomy and  
the Use of Force**

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## INTRODUCTION

*“An appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe’s ability to foster peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders”.*

*European Union Global Strategy*

Strategic autonomy: yes! But to do what exactly? To protect ourselves, or to protect others, outside Europe, as well? To protect ourselves by defeating the enemy on his own ground, in Europe’s neighbourhood or further afield? Or only by making sure he doesn’t breach the walls of Europe? To protect us from all enemies, or only from some? Who is the “enemy” anyway?

The June 2016 *European Union Global Strategy* (EUGS) for the first time explicitly mentions strategic autonomy as an objective for the Union, and that raises a lot of questions. This is an important step in European strategic thinking. It is certainly seen as such in the US, where the security and defence establishment has unanimously condemned it as a move that will undermine NATO. On some things, Republicans and Democrats can still agree. But do Europeans themselves agree what strategic autonomy means? The EUGS itself doesn’t spell it out, and neither do subsequent decisions, such as the *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence* (IPSD) from November 2016.

I will argue that the EU’s priorities should be:

- In the short term, to further strengthen its strategic autonomy in protecting our domestic security, and to achieve full strategic autonomy in crisis response, across the whole spectrum of operations, in our broad neighbourhood.
- In the medium term, to achieve a significant degree of autonomy in securing Europe’s “connectivity” with the world, in space, air space and cyberspace and on the seas.
- In the long term, to achieve a significant degree of autonomy for the European allies and partners of NATO (who, pace Cyprus, happen to constitute the EU), to deter and defend against threats against our territory, in case the attention of our main non-EU allies is pulled away by contingencies outside the North Atlantic area.

Many EU practitioners have warned against what they see as just another theological debate. Let’s just get on with the practical stuff and turn Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) into reality so as to give body to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). But if we don’t know exactly what it is that we want to be able to do, then how can we make the best use

of these instruments to shape our militaries? Furthermore, introducing the notion of strategic autonomy has generated both expectations and resistance, inside as well as outside the Union. Like it or not, it already has an impact on the EU's position. The debate must be had, therefore.

The decision to achieve strategic autonomy is a choice at the level of grand strategy. Strategic autonomy has many dimensions: military, industry, intelligence, decision-making, strategizing. In this paper I will tackle strategic autonomy from the military-operational side: which military tasks should the Europeans collectively be able to undertake alone, without the support of non-EU allies, if necessary? But before this military-operational question can be answered and strategic autonomy translated into a list of military tasks, another question of grand strategy must be answered: under what circumstances are the Europeans willing to use force in the first place? This is the most sensitive question, of course. Some EU Member States have a clear national conception of the role of armed force, but many have not. The EU in any case has but a very weak collective view. Since Europeans can only mount operations of any scale collectively, that means we have a problem.

I do not seek, of course, to establish a checklist that would allow us to decide in each and every case whether to intervene militarily or not – that would obviously never work. The aim is to sharpen our idea of the military responsibilities that we must assume if we take strategic autonomy seriously, so that we can collectively prepare for them. Not only in terms of capabilities, but mentally as well, which is perhaps even more important. Furthermore, we can then manage the expectations of our allies and partners – and of our potential adversaries. One thing is certain, as High Representative Federica Mogherini points out in the foreword to the EUGS: “For Europe, soft and hard power go hand in hand”.

# FROM EUGS TO IPSD: INTERESTS AND PRIORITIES, MILITARY TASKS AND OPERATIONS

The starting point of any discussion on strategic autonomy must be the vital interests of the EU. Our vital interests are the minimum that we must be able to safeguard for ourselves if strategic autonomy is to become a reality, for they concern the very survival of the European way of life. Acting alone to defend these interests is not an objective in its own right, of course: the EU should act with allies and partners whenever it can, but alone when it must.

The EUGS defines four vital interests:

- The security of the Union's citizens and territory
- The prosperity of its people
- Democracy
- A rules-based global order

From these vital interests, the EUGS derives five priorities for EU external action:

- The security of our Union
- State and societal resilience to our east and south
- An integrated approach to conflicts
- Cooperative regional orders
- Global governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century

In that first area of security and defence, the EUGS then goes on to define three tasks, which serve as the starting point of the IPSD. According to the EUGS, "Europeans must be able to":

- Protect Europe
- Respond to external crisis
- Assist in developing our partners' security and defence capacities<sup>1</sup>

The IPSD details which types of activities each of these tasks implies, and arrives at a list of the operations that "the EU should thus be capable to undertake":

- Joint crisis management operations in situations of high security risk in the regions surrounding the EU
- Joint stabilisation operations, including air and special operations
- Civilian and military rapid response, including military rapid response operations inter alia using the EU Battlegroups as a whole or within a mission-tailored Force package
- Substitution/executive civilian missions

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<sup>1</sup> According to the IPSD, however, the EU must only be able to *contribute* to these tasks, which it puts in a different order: "As set out in the EUGS, the EU must contribute to: (a) responding to external conflicts and crises, (b) building the capacities of partners, and (c) protecting the Union and its citizens".

- Air security operations including close air support and air surveillance
- Maritime security or surveillance operations, including longer term in the vicinity of Europe
- Civilian capacity building and security sector reform missions (monitoring, mentoring and advising, training) inter alia on police, rule of law, border management, counter-terrorism, resilience, response to hybrid threats, and civil administration as well as civilian monitoring missions
- Military capacity building through advisory, training, and mentoring missions, including robust force protection if necessary, as well as military monitoring/observation missions

Do these four lists (interests, priorities, tasks, and operations) really tell us what the EU means by strategic autonomy? In fact, they do not. We have a relatively clear idea of the types of operations that we must be able to mount in implementing the three core military tasks, but much less so of what those operations are actually meant to achieve. The reason is that the link between operations and tasks on the one hand and priorities and vital interests on the other remains underdefined. As a result, we have yet to clearly answer the question: When, why, and where do we think it may be our responsibility, alone if necessary, to intervene militarily?

## STRATEGIC GUIDANCE FOR THE MILITARY TASKS: NOT GOOD ENOUGH

The EUGS and the IPSD do give us some elements of the answer to those questions, but they are incomplete and partially contradictory. Let us analyse what guidance we have for each of the three core military tasks.

### Responding to External Crises: More than a Humanitarian Concern

The EU cannot respond to each and every crisis in the world, even if it wanted to. Under “the principles guiding our external action”, the EUGS rightly states therefore that: “We will take responsibility foremost in Europe and its surrounding regions, while pursuing targeted engagement further afield”. This is echoed in the IPSD: “As a security provider, the EU should have a wide reach, while focusing on its surrounding regions”. The EUGS defines the surrounding regions very ambitiously, “to the east stretching into Central Asia, and south down to Central Africa”. This goes far beyond the area covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), but it is a correct assessment. It’s not only the stability of the neighbours with whom we share a border that is important for the security of Europe’s vital interests. North Africa and the Sahel, the Middle East and the Gulf, eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and (to a lesser extent, perhaps) Central Asia constitute four interlinked regions whose security situation has a major impact on our own stability.

This gives us an idea of the primary geographic area in which the EU wants to assume responsibility, but not yet of what we feel responsible for. Even in its own neighbourhood, the EU must not necessarily respond to every crisis, at least not militarily.

The EUGS does provide some additional guidance. The Strategy seems to have been inspired by the Responsibility to Protect (R2P):<sup>2</sup> “European security and defence must become better equipped to build peace, guarantee security and protect human lives, notably civilians”. And: “In the midst of violent conflict, this means ensuring humanitarian aid access to allow basic goods and services to be provided”. This sounds benign, but if acted upon it may actually lead to major combat operations. At the height of the Syrian civil war, for example, many called for a humanitarian corridor. Creating that against the will of the Assad regime would have meant a massive intervention on the ground, and Europe would inevitably have been drawn completely into the war, and incurred many casualties.

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<sup>2</sup> In military-operational terms, R2P as adopted by the United Nations means that if a state is unwilling or unable to protect its citizens from, or is itself the perpetrator of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, or crimes against humanity, the Security Council (and only the Security Council) can mandate the use of force in order to protect civilians.



Acting on R2P may contribute to upholding the rules-based global order, which is one of our vital interests. But it may be in contradiction with our other vital interests. Consider the Euro-American intervention in Libya, the first to be mandated on the basis of R2P (and which, to make things clear, I strongly supported at the time). The intervention led to the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime,<sup>3</sup> but not to a stable Libya. What concerns us here is not who is to blame for that outcome, but the fact that our intervention in Libya directly or indirectly produced the need for three more interventions. With Libya in chaos, its borders were no longer controlled, and we had to launch a naval operation to help manage the ensuing surge of people trying to cross the Mediterranean (where to this day many continue to drown in the process). As combatants escaped Libya and swelled the insurgent ranks in Mali, we had to intervene in order to halt the escalation of that war and stop the rebel militias from taking the capital. Since we had intervened in Libya, the Syrian opposition reckoned we would assist them too, which we did not, until the emergence of IS and the merger of Syria and Iraq into one theatre of war forced us to intervene anyway.

Now consider the likely outcome had we not intervened in Libya. Qadhafi, who until the outbreak of the civil war was treated as a close partner of Europe, would have stayed in power; brutal repression would unfortunately have been the lot of the opposition. But the impact on Europe's own interests would most probably have been negligible – so was it really wise to intervene? The assessment at the time (which proved to be totally wrong) was that the war in Libya was unlikely to spill over to other countries, hence it was considered safe to intervene. But should this assessment not have been a reason *not* to intervene? Instead, our desire to position ourselves on “the right side of history” prevailed, in combination with a sincere humanitarian concern. That was a legitimate political interest after our hesitant reaction to the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, where Europeans and Americans switched their allegiance from the deposed presidents to the opposition only at the last possible moment. Our vital security interests suffered for it, however.

My conclusion is that a humanitarian concern alone is insufficient to warrant direct military intervention in a conflict, in view of the difficult to control second and third order effects that the use of force always entails. As a rule, we should only consider military intervention as a legitimate instrument if a crisis in our broad neighbourhood directly threatens the vital interests of the EU itself. If, for example, a war threatens to spill over to EU territory, generates terrorism in Europe, or leads to the blocking of vital trade routes or energy supply, the use of military force may impose itself. A credible power projection capacity to deal with such contingencies in our broad

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<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this was the western powers' intent from the start, it was the evitable outcome of the campaign. In order to protect civilians in a civil war, one has to end the war, which was only going to happen if Qadhafi compromised (which was always unlikely), if there was a palace coup (always possible, but obviously too late, if indeed it had been considered at all), or if Qadhafi was defeated (which is what came to pass, as we basically became the air force of the opposition).

neighbourhood is the priority dimension of strategic autonomy, for the US will no longer automatically address all security problems in Europe's backyard – and rightly so. The US will likely still support us if and when we take action, but it will not initiate action on our behalf when its own interests are not at stake.

As vital interests should drive decision-making on intervention, the EU should not itself push for further military interventions on the basis of R2P alone (which are unlikely anyhow, as Russia and China see the Libyan intervention as the West abusing R2P and will probably veto its application for some time to come). Were the Security Council, sometime in the future, to activate R2P in another crisis, in our neighbourhood or beyond, the EU should, of course, contribute. But even then we should not shoulder the burden alone, but endeavour to have all permanent members of the Security Council and the regional actors concerned assume responsibility too. In general though, strategic autonomy requires that whenever we do decide to intervene, we must be able to; not that we intervene in every crisis. That doesn't mean that the EU should not care at all about crises that don't affect its vital interests; what it does mean is that it should mainly deploy political and economic instruments, and avoid direct military intervention if its own vital interests are not at stake.

There is another issue, however, which might lead the EU to consider military intervention in our neighbourhood. The EUGS aims to create resilient neighbouring states – a vague notion if ever there was one. More to the point, perhaps, is that the EU should seek to have *sovereign* neighbours: states that are nobody's clients or satellites (including ourselves), but that take their own sovereign decisions. My argument is that the EU can cooperate with all of our neighbours, regardless of their domestic political system, whenever interests coincide, as long as by cooperating we do not ourselves become involved in actions that violate our values. The aim of such cooperation is not to democratise our neighbours – that is beyond our capacity, as experience has shown. That doesn't detract from the fact that democracy is always in the interest of the EU though, for well-functioning democracies create stability. The question imposes itself therefore: what is our responsibility in case the sovereignty of an existing democracy, or a state transitioning towards democracy, in our neighbourhood is threatened?

One can put the question differently: can and should the EU offer an alliance to certain democratic states in its neighbourhood? It's a question we never ask, since we ourselves feel so insecure that we constantly ask the US for confirmation of its security guarantee to us (one wonders sometimes how often the US has to say that NATO's Article 5 is real before we believe it – and how that affects the Russian perception). But as the US will likely engage less in certain parts of our neighbourhood, the EU is the only remaining western power that can offer a security guarantee to our democratic neighbours. That is a heavy burden, for once offered a guarantee must be upheld when it is invoked, on pain of losing one's credibility forever. If we

don't offer support, however, the risk is that our neighbours will look elsewhere, and other powers may gain new footholds right on our doorstep. The EU must carefully consider therefore which democratic neighbouring states merit our military support in which types of contingencies.

### **Capacity-Building: Not a Panacea**

The military instrument has other applications than the use of force, of course. The EU can employ the armed forces to monitor an embargo, and it can engage in peace-keeping, with the agreement of all parties, in order to prevent conflict from erupting or resuming. And we can deploy European troops for the purpose of capacity-building.

One wonders, however, whether the EU does not put too much faith in capacity-building. Many seem to forget that in some cases, as in Mali, a forceful intervention to stabilise the situation is necessary before capacity-building is at all possible. Had France not intervened, there would have been no Mali army left for the EU to train. It is hard to build others' capacity, furthermore, when you don't have much capacity yourself. Moreover, for capacity-building to be effective, it may be necessary to accompany the troops of the host country on operations and perhaps even join them in combat, but the IPSP mentions only non-executive missions.<sup>4</sup> Where does the EU draw the line? Finally, capacity-building at the tactical level (training army battalions, coast guard crews, policemen etc.) will only generate durable effect if at the strategic level the host country leadership fully shares and owns the strategy that the EU is seeking to implement, and provides effective governance. The experience from Afghanistan and Iraq shows that, unsurprisingly, nobody will fight for a government that they don't believe in, no matter how well trained or equipped they are. If the emergence of a threat to the EU can be prevented by training someone else to address the issue, that is perfect, of course – but it will not always be possible.

Just like the EU cannot intervene in every crisis, so it cannot engage in capacity-building everywhere. Clearly, vital interests should determine where the EU undertakes capacity-building as much as they determine to which crises the EU must respond. In fact, capacity-building is not, in my view, a task at the same level as responding to external crisis and protecting Europe. Rather, it is a sub-set of the task of crisis response: it is one form of preventive military (and civilian) deployment that the EU can have recourse to in order to avert conflict from erupting or resuming.

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<sup>4</sup> In the IPSP: “[...] the EU may deploy non-executive CSDP civilian and military missions, upon invitation of the host country, to provide strategic advice, training, mentoring and monitoring. These missions may require robust force protection depending on the security situation on the ground”.

## Protecting Europe: And Defending it?

If we are attacked, we will defend ourselves: in this case, the use of force is not very contentious. The EUGS states that “Europeans, working with partners, must have the necessary capabilities to defend themselves and live up to their commitments to mutual assistance and solidarity enshrined in the Treaties”. This somewhat veiled reference to the legal basis for collective territorial defence in the Treaty, Article 42.7,<sup>5</sup> is not meant to sound too ambitious though, for the EUGS adds that: “When it comes to collective defence, NATO remains the primary framework for most Member States”. The so-called Mutual Assistance Clause of Article 42.7 has been activated once, at the request of France following the 13 November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, but this was mostly a symbolic move.

There is a whole range of contingencies, however, that fall below the threshold of NATO’s Article 5, in which the armed forces have a mostly supporting role to play, and in which the EU arguably is better placed to act as the central coordinating authority. The EUGS lists terrorism, hybrid threats, cyber and energy security, organised crime, and external border management. As the IPSD notes, however, “CSDP missions and operations are deployed *outside* the Union” (my italics). The IPSD rightly adds though that internal and external security form a continuum. And indeed: homeland security may require defeating an enemy abroad, such as the Islamic State, in addition to patrolling the streets at home; border security may be conditional upon creating a safe and secure environment in Europe’s neighbouring countries; and cyber security may be the theatre of confrontation that replaces (or precedes!) warfare between regular forces. The IPSD usefully lists how external operations can contribute to the internal security of the EU.<sup>6</sup> This list actually provides more guidance on why the EU should respond to external crises, including by using force, than the paragraphs on crisis response in both the IPSD itself and the EUGS: we intervene abroad to protect *our* security.

Nevertheless, it does seem necessary to think further about how to employ the armed forces *inside* the EU as well, precisely because EU mechanisms to coordinate the relevant civilian actors are the most promising. Therefore, be it through the CSDP or other mechanisms, the Member States’ armed forces must be able to link up with and be integrated into such EU schemes for “the protection of Europe”.

<sup>5</sup> Article 42.7 states that “if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power”.

<sup>6</sup> IPSD § 5(c): “While CSDP missions and operations are deployed outside the Union, the EU can contribute from a security and defence perspective to strengthening the protection and resilience of its networks and critical infrastructure; the security of its external borders as well as building partners’ capacities to manage their borders; civil protection and disaster response; ensuring stable access to and use of the global commons, including the high seas and space; countering hybrid threats; cyber security; preventing and countering terrorism and radicalisation; combatting people smuggling and trafficking; building capacities to manage irregular migration flows; promoting compliance with non-proliferation regimes and countering arms trafficking and organised crime”.

In the medium to long term, Europeans would be well advised to re-think their role in defence proper as well, and to re-configure NATO accordingly. The aim certainly is to maintain an effective military alliance with the US. But that will require adaptation, to a changed world order, and to a changed US grand strategy. The world has become multipolar again, which means a return of great power rivalry. For the US, China now is the number one priority, because only China can challenge American global predominance. Consequently, NATO must prepare for a scenario in which the US would be absorbed by an immediate contingency in Asia. American forces would still have to remain in Europe and elsewhere, in order to deter instances of horizontal escalation by the same enemy or acts of opportunism by another, but clearly a much greater burden would be placed on the European allies. What is the deterrence and defensive value of the European pillar of NATO alone? Is Europe's military might sufficiently credible to deter all potential aggressors? And if not, for how long can Europe hold out until major US reinforcements arrive?

This strategic context imposes a consideration of what strategic autonomy means for collective territorial defence. Without including this dimension, even as a long-term objective, it is questionable moreover whether Europeans can ever create the mindset of strategic autonomy. A strategic actor requires a strategy and the means to pursue it, but above all the will to act upon it. It is difficult to see how a polity that ultimately counts upon another to defend it, can ever emancipate itself and achieve autonomy of thinking. Real defence technological and industrial autonomy will similarly remain beyond our grasp if we do not include the ultima ratio of self-defence into the guidelines for our programmes. In spite of the promising creation of the European Defence Fund by the European Commission, Europe will not be able to play a leading role in the development of new technologies and weapons systems if the scope of what the EU and the Member States are willing to fund and procure remains limited to the types of operations that we have hitherto undertaken through the CSDP. That said, Europe will have to continue to rely on the US nuclear umbrella, given its own limited nuclear arsenal in France and the UK.

### **The UN and the Global Commons: Additional Tasks?**

In addition to the three military tasks that the EUGS defines under the heading of “the security of our Union”, other sections of the document set more tasks for the armed forces.

Under the heading of “global governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, the Strategy states that “CSDP could assist further and complement UN peacekeeping through bridging, stabilisation or other operations”. The IPSD includes a more narrow version of this task within the remit of responding to external crises (which focuses on Europe's broader neighbourhood): “rapidly providing EU bridging operations for the deployment of wider UN peacekeeping missions, including in non-permissive

environments”. Just like contributing to R2P, contributing to UN peacekeeping may serve to strengthen the rules-based global order, which is a vital interest of the EU. But experience shows that when Europe’s other vital interests are not directly at stake, EU Member States are reluctant to deploy forces for the sake of collective security and the protection of civilians alone, certainly for operations outside Europe’s neighbourhood. The Central African Republic is a case in point: for a country where only France and the EU as such even have an embassy, it proved very difficult to generate the forces required for the operation that the EU launched there in 2014.

There are further strategic considerations, however. For the collective security system of the UN to work, all of the major security actors must assume their responsibility and seek to address the major security concerns of the whole UN membership rather than just their own. Furthermore, it would not be in the EU’s interest to downplay the importance of the UN, because we want the other powers to continue to invest in the UN and the broader multilateral system rather than withdraw from it and potentially build a parallel system of their own. At the same time, China in particular has become very active in UN peacekeeping, hence it would seem unwise for Europe to leave a void that China already seems determined to fill – at least in countries where that serves the Chinese national interest. Indeed, UN peacekeeping could become a way for Europe to engage China in military cooperation, which in a multipolar world would constitute an important confidence-building measure.

It seems advisable therefore to plan for a permanent European military contribution to UN peacekeeping; not only bridging operations and other UN-mandated CSDP operations, but actual Blue Helmets as well. This would be a signal of Europe’s investment in the rules-based order, a way of engaging China (and other powers), and at the same time a way of safeguarding European interests by contributing to the stabilisation of specific areas. Africa comes to mind, of course, but if the UN would launch an operation in Asia, that would be a prime opportunity for cooperation with China and with Europe’s closest Asian partners at the same time.

The other issue with military implications that the EUGS mentions, under the heading of “cooperative regional orders” as well as “global governance” is “lasting access to the global commons”, with a focus on maritime security. The EUGS even talks of the EU as “a global maritime security provider”. The IPSD includes this under the protection of Europe: “secure access to the global commons (cyber, airspace, maritime, space) on which our modern societies depend in order to thrive”. One could also refer to the new Brussels buzzword of “connectivity”, developed mostly as a reaction to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By investing in the infrastructure of a series of corridors (overland through Russia and Central Asia to Europe, and through Pakistan to the Indian Ocean, for example), China seeks to develop alternatives to the direct maritime route and guarantee its access to the global markets under all

circumstances. The EU’s first connectivity strategy focuses on Asia, therefore.<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of strategy and defining the military tasks, connectivity would perhaps be a more helpful notion than the global commons. What is at stake is not the freedom of the global commons per se, but maintaining Europe’s connectivity with the world, in all of its dimensions: people, goods, and data; the seas, space, airspace and cyberspace. In order to guide the armed forces, however, the EU should adopt a more comprehensive and precise definition of the security of its connectivity, or what is also called “flow security”.<sup>8</sup>

In the first instance, the logical focus in defending connectivity is on Europe and its periphery, where the EU is notably playing a leading role in maritime security. But free access to the global commons is, of course, a global issue. Were the sea lane that connects Antwerp and Shanghai to be cut in the Straits of Malacca, that would be as much of a problem as when it is threatened by Somali pirates. Ensuring connectivity in and around Europe is part and parcel of the tasks of protecting Europe and responding to external crises (since the latter focuses on the neighbourhood). But Europe has but limited global power projection capacity to address worldwide threats to its connectivity. In the maritime area, for now, the US upholds the freedom of the seas, but the question is being put in the EU institutions whether the US will always be able and willing to act in every situation of concern to the EU. In many such contingencies diplomacy rather than the military will be called for, but if vital interests are at stake, the use of force may legitimately be considered if connectivity cannot otherwise be restored. Even a small but permanent European military presence in key regions would offer the possibility of engaging in military-to-military activities with all relevant actors, and underpin our diplomacy.

Safeguarding Europe’s global connectivity and contributing to the collective security system of the UN constitute, in my view, a task at the same level of importance as protecting Europe and responding to external crises (while capacity-building is but a sub-set of the latter).

Can these considerations form the basis of a European doctrine for military intervention and the use of force?

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission and High Representative, *Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy*. Brussels, EU, 19 September 2018.

<sup>8</sup> The current strategy refers only to the rather fuzzy definition contained in the Chair’s statement following the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting in Myanmar in November 2017: “Connectivity is about bringing countries, people and societies closer together. It facilitates access and is a means to foster deeper economic and people-to-people ties. It encompasses the hard and soft aspects, including the physical and institutional social-cultural linkages that are the fundamental supportive means to enhance the economic, political-security, and socio-cultural ties between Asia and Europe which also contribute to the narrowing of the varying levels of development and capacities”.

## TOWARDS A DOCTRINE OF MINIMAL INTERVENTION AND MAXIMAL DIPLOMACY

I contend that unless Europe's own territory is directly attacked by an armed aggressor, in which case we will of course defend ourselves with all available means, our doctrine should be one of minimal intervention.

### Priorities for Strategic Autonomy

Minimal intervention is not the same as non-intervention. We don't want to signal to less than benign actors that, short of invading Europe, they can do as they please. Possessing a credible capacity for power projection has a deterrent effect: it will influence the calculation of other actors, notably in our broad neighbourhood. Paradoxically therefore, the more capable we are of military intervention, the less we may need to revert to it, whereas the weaker we are, the more others may seek to take advantage and create situations that will require us to intervene.

Minimal intervention does mean that, as a rule, the EU should only consider direct military intervention when our vital interests (our security, prosperity, and democracy) are directly at stake. In my view the fourth vital interest listed in the EUGS, a rules-based global order, is in fact mostly of an instrumental nature: a rules-based global order must enable us to safeguard our vital interests proper, i.e. the first three. Hence, not all violations of the rules-based global order warrant military intervention by Europe – we should only take that into consideration if such violation directly threatens our own security, prosperity, or democracy, or if it threatens the global order as a whole.

Minimal intervention also means that we should abandon the idea that whenever and wherever a security problem arises, it is up to us to come up with a military solution. Rather we should push the local and regional actors, whose vital interests will actually be at stake, to assume their responsibility. At the same time, the EU can of course use other instruments than direct military intervention: diplomatic initiatives, economic pressure, and military actions short of the use of force. The EU can notably bring its substantial hard economic power to bear. Not intervening militarily is not the same as not caring.

Minimal intervention calls for maximal diplomacy therefore: to prevent conflict in the first place and, when conflict does break out, to put pressure on the warring parties (to cease hostilities) and on the relevant local and regional actors (to assume their responsibility, including military intervention if necessary).

Starting from this doctrine of minimal intervention, the military tasks can be finetuned, and the priority areas in which the EU has to achieve strategic autonomy



first can be identified. The following three tasks are overlapping, as internal and external security form a continuum. They are all equally important, for all concern our vital interests. But the available means imply that the EU cannot realistically aspire to strategic autonomy in all areas at once – sequencing is in order.

## Protecting and defending Europe

The task of domestic security is self-evident and uncontentious. All EU Member States are fully capable of maintaining domestic security and to address such areas as counter-terrorism, cyber security, and border security. Coordination and, in some areas, the creation of capabilities at the EU level is strengthening Member State capacity to do so in the face of cross-border threats. These are often linked to the security situation in Europe's neighbourhood, which may have unintended consequences for Europe, but certain actors in the neighbourhood also purposely inspire, commission, or perpetrate acts against our security.

Too many divisions remain between Member States for the EU to develop a single strategy for each of these areas, however. Specific questions are, for example: Can EU-wide terrorist threats be monitored and averted without an EU-level domestic intelligence service (which could also focus on a limited number of other specific cross-border threats)? What is the role of an offensive cyber capacity, and the appropriate level of organizing it? What is the most effective division of labour to ensure border security, and what is the role of military and paramilitary forces? In these areas the role of the armed forces mostly is to support the civilian authorities and agencies, though in certain specific domains the military will probably be in the lead (offensive cyber, for example). But for lack of sufficiently precise and consensual strategies in many areas, the EU has yet to develop a fully integrated approach that allows for the seamless cooperation between civilian actors and the armed forces *inside* the Union.

Even though the EU is thus ensuring domestic security in a strategically autonomous way, a lack of strategy and coordination results in suboptimal performance and cost-effectiveness. Treaty change is in order so as to allow CSDP actions on the territory of the Union. This in turn would allow the EU to give body to the Mutual Assistance Clause in non-Article 5 contingencies.

When it comes to Article 5-type scenarios, however, the limited readiness of European forces and the lack of agility in decision-making, as well as our capability shortfalls, mean that without the US and other non-EU NATO allies our capacity for deterrence and defence is severely constrained. Even taking into account that Europe will remain under the American nuclear umbrella, a minimal degree of strategic autonomy is nonetheless called for, given the real possibility of US attention and assets being pulled away in the case of a major crisis in Asia. Increased defence

spending in the context of NATO is welcome and necessary, but will not be sufficient. The European allies and partners, i.e. the EU, will also have to design the right capability mix, allowing them to deter certain threats and to defend themselves autonomously against them pending reinforcement from non-EU allies, while also assuming the other two tasks. In view of available resources, a significant degree of strategic autonomy can only be a long-term objective. Nevertheless, the objective must be fixed upon now, so that relevant priorities can notably guide PESCO projects from today onwards. A consensus is indeed emerging that PESCO must develop capabilities for the full spectrum of military tasks rather than only for expeditionary operations.

Fortunately, the main potential aggressor, Russia, with a GDP of just about 10% of that of the EU, does not have the economic resources to wage great power war, nor does the readiness of the bulk of its forces compare with the tip of the spear that is on show in their major manoeuvres. But that does not mean that Europe can be complacent about its lack of strategic autonomy in deterrence and defence.

### **Stabilising the broad neighbourhood**

That the EU needs the capacity to project power in its neighbourhood is not contentious; in fact, that was the purpose when the CSDP (then ESDP) was created in 1999. But we have to clarify which type of contingencies warrant which kind of engagement. In my view, rather than crisis response in general, our task is to stabilise the neighbourhood, i.e. to directly intervene militarily only when our own security, prosperity or democracy are threatened. The EU would thus be sending a strong signal to any actors with malicious intent: our vital interests do constitute a red line, and we will act when it is crossed.

The EU ought to have achieved strategic autonomy in this area a long time ago, as this is what the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal purported. But it hasn't, for lack of investment in the right capabilities (notably strategic enablers) and for lack of real defence integration. This is what PESCO and the EDF should correct: achieving real strategic autonomy in full-spectrum operations in the broad neighbourhood should be our number one priority now. Many countries in our neighbourhood are at war, and in many instances the US will not bear the brunt of the burden – the urgency is obvious.

Capacity-building is an integral part of this task, and fits perfectly in the doctrine of minimal intervention: the more local and regional actors are capable of maintaining their own security, the less we will have to intervene ourselves.

If the EU were to decide that it can offer a security guarantee to democratic partner countries in its neighbourhood, that will have to be incorporated in the military level of ambition. If such a guarantee is to be real and credible, the capability require-

ments will be significant, hence increasing our strategic autonomy into this domain would be a medium-term objective, building upon the short-term objective of strategic autonomy in crisis response.

### **Maintaining global connectivity and collective security**

The EU has the capacity, of course, to contribute on a permanent basis to UN collective security. Securing our connectivity with the world beyond our own neighbourhood will, however, require additional capabilities, notably in the maritime domain. While two EU Member States (for the moment), France and Britain, have military bases in key regions, a “Europeanised” approach and a stronger permanent presence are in order to at least allow the EU to engage in military-to-military activities with, for example, all concerned parties in the Indian Ocean and in the South China Sea. In this sense, a degree of autonomy can be a short-to-medium-term objective. A more significant degree of autonomy, based on a closer study of connectivity and its security implications, must be a medium-to-long-term objective.

### **An updated military level of ambition**

These three core tasks and the desired degree of strategic autonomy can then be translated into a more detailed military level of ambition: Which operations, at which scale, do the EU and the Member States want to be capable of conducting simultaneously? This means putting numbers to the list of operations mentioned in the IPSD. Such a level of ambition should guide PESCO. Ultimately, the benchmark to judge the success of PESCO is not how many projects have been launched or even which additional capability has been generated, but how much more power we can project than today.

The following is an illustration of what could be the short-to-medium term objective that the EU should focus on as of now. We need the strategic autonomy to undertake:

- Long-term military support to EU border security (complementing the police and civilian services).
- Long-term capacity-building (CBSD) in several neighbouring states.
- Long-term cooperation activities with states across the globe, including in the maritime domain, and notably in Asia.
- 3 long-term stabilisation operations (before or after a conflict), of a brigade each, in Europe’s periphery.
- 3 long-term contributions to UN peacekeeping operations (before or after a conflict), of a battalion each, beyond Europe’s periphery.
- 3 long-term maritime operations (before, during, or after a conflict) in Europe’s periphery.

- 1 evacuation operation of EU citizens, of a battalion, anywhere in the world.
- 1 combat operation, of several brigades and/or air force squadrons, in Europe's periphery.

Putting forward such a level of ambition is not the same as saying that in each and every contingency Europeans must act under the EU flag and through the CSDP. In certain scenarios, EU Member States may wish to operate via NATO, or the UN, or create an ad hoc coalition. But regardless of the framework for deployment, Member States must have an idea of the required scale and concurrency of operations, in order to shape a force package that is fit for purpose. Creating that force package they can do through the EU, making use of PESCO and the EDF. Than strategic autonomy will be more than a slogan.

## CONCLUSION

The day another state decides against a specific course of action because it reckons that Europe will oppose it and it doesn't want to risk Europe's ire, that is when the EU will be a true strategic actor. This is not a plea for interventionism, but a plea to build the capacity and the will to act when our vital interests are at stake, according to a doctrine of minimal intervention and maximal diplomacy. We will know we have achieved strategic autonomy when our power projection capacity figures in the cost-benefit calculations of others.

One very significant other, the US, may at first sight not like the idea of European strategic autonomy. Let us not allow that to restrain us. There is no pleasing the current US President anyway. Let us just act, and the results will speak for themselves. A Europe that has strategic autonomy can be a real ally for the US, allowing for more substantial cooperation as well as for a division of labour without the US incurring any risk. And it allows for European action, of course, in instances when the US is not inclined to act in line with the European interest. Europeans can only emancipate themselves from self-imposed American tutelage. Not to act *against* the US, but to be much more capable of acting *with* the US – whenever that is in our joint interest.

In the end, strategic autonomy is as much about our mindset as anything else. It requires political, economic and military power, but most importantly, willpower.

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