

In Brief: EU and national policymakers want to give EU defense policy a long needed political boost. Their vision would have to be both appealing and politically viable. A defense strategy would have to demonstrate that it matters to EU citizens, by placing their security at the heart of the approach. In addition, the strategy must find a balance between the nature of the current security challenges and the constraints of reduced and fragmented resources for defense.

Thus the challenge for the policy makers is to ensure that the approach they take for such a strategy is compatible with the outcome they seek. This memo outlines four basic approaches decision maker could adopt for an EU defense strategy – and the costs and benefits of each approach. When it comes to setting a vision for EU Defense policy neither the method nor the scope is predetermined, but the outcome will be shaped by both.

Conservative, Comprehensive, Ambitious, or Realistic? Assessing EU Defense Strategy Approaches

by Daniel Keohane and Christian Mölling

The U.K. is poised to make its exit from the European Union, and with it goes the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) framework – at a moment when security concerns have become a top priority in Europe. At this critical juncture, many governments and experts are calling for an EU defense strategy to guide a path forward. The EU global strategy (EUGS) released in June 2016 sets out an ambitious agenda for EU security and defense policies within the broader objectives of EU foreign policies. The challenge is now to implement this agenda through a proper defense strategy. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini told EU ambassadors on September 5 that her “intention is to present, before the end of the year, an ambitious . . . implementation plan on security and defense.” EU governments essentially agreed with this timeline, declaring following an informal summit of the 27 in Bratislava on September 16 that they should decide on a concrete implementation plan for security and defense at a European Council summit in December.

The defense part of EU foreign and security policies requires the most thought, not only because it has underperformed since its inception in 1999, but also because the deployment of military assets is the most

costly act, both politically and financially, for any government. Moreover, if defense policy continues to underperform, it will hold the EU back from the ambition set out in its EUGS to have more comprehensive foreign policies and a full-spectrum set of foreign policy instruments.

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Method and Scope Define Outcomes

Ideally, a defense strategy should provide guidance on strategic objectives for EU defense policy, identify potential tasks (perhaps including potential operational scenarios), and outline clearly where more collaboration should be pursued. In turn, that should help EU governments better coordinate their various military activities (both current and future), ranging from capability development and combining armed forces, to operational deployments and defense industrial cooperation.

That may sound straightforward. But such an EU defense strategy could lead to a number of different outcomes – depending in part on the method and scope chosen to implement the EUGS agenda. The approach will shape the outcome.

In terms of method, a lot will be determined by how closely the draft relies on existing institutions. Although the focus ought to be on the EU's role in European security and defense in general, the result of this EU exercise will also be determined by the way in which existing frameworks and institutions are used to generate the strategy. Focusing too much on frame-

works and institutions already in place creates conceptual inertia and procedural path dependencies, thus prohibiting fresh approaches. Yet, too little inclusion minimizes opportunities for consensus and effective management of the process. One has to bear in mind the complex bureaucratic procedures and structures that may hinder effective implementation of their specific recommendations. The EU governance system is opaque, even for insiders, but it must be navigated successfully if one wishes to achieve results within the Brussels beltway.

The scope of a new strategy could vary widely. Focusing more narrowly on defense aspects of the CSDP framework is one thing; covering both the civilian and military aspects of the intergovernmental CSDP and how they fit with other EU foreign policy instruments such as the European Commission's development spending is quite another. The links between CSDP and EU internal security provide even more complications. For example, the EU's anti-human smuggling operation in the Mediterranean is run through CSDP structures (housed within the EU's foreign policy framework), while Frontex, the EU's border agency (housed within the EU's internal security framework), also coordinates search-and-rescue operations in the same area. EU governments have deployed national military assets for both of these endeavors. In a similar vein, the Commission's emerging roles in the defense market and in military research are based on existing market regulations and civil research programs, not the CSDP framework. Furthermore, there is also the issue of ensuring complementarity between EU military efforts and those of NATO, which remains the bedrock of European defense for most EU member states.

A lot will also depend on how the wide range of challenges and potential tasks outlined in the EUGS is interpreted. Taken to its fullest extent, the global strategy could be read as calling for EU governments to be able to autonomously carry out robust external military interventions alongside (at least some)

territorial defense tasks distinct from NATO. Based on CSDP's track record thus far, however, this level of military ambition is probably far too fanciful for most governments.

National policymakers need an EU defense policy vision that is both appealing and politically viable.

Four Approaches

While a strategy's focus is clarification, it also needs to inspire. EU defense policy is in need of a political boost; national policymakers need a vision that is both appealing and politically viable. The strategy should explain why EU governments should take EU defense policy more seriously and ideally why it matters for the security of EU citizens. This requires combining political realities with an appropriate level of ambition for EU defense policy: The strategy must find a balance between the nature of the current security challenges, the types of tasks the EU may need to carry out, and the constraints of reduced and fragmented resources for defense. In addition, a defense strategy should explain all this to the world outside the defense community, making a convincing case why any investment of financial or political resources into an EU defense framework would generate greater security.

Policymakers should make sure that the approach they take is compatible with the outcome they seek. This brief outlines four basic options for the approaches drafters could adopt for an EU defense strategy, as well as the costs and benefits of each approach. The options are neither exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive, but they can help structure initial thoughts on different visions for an EU defense strategy.

Conservative

A conservative approach would stick to existing principles and agreements, focusing on both the institutions and procedures of the classic CSDP framework: primarily defense. CSDP until now has essentially aimed to do everything but territorial defense (for example, crisis management and expeditionary operations) and has thus far been noted more for its potential than its impact.

Nevertheless, considering the realities of today, most of the CSDP building blocks are in place: CSDP institutions exist, over thirty peace support missions and operations have been carried out, and there are frameworks and procedures established for capabilities, the defense market, and industry. Thus, a defense strategy would simply be fleshed out along the lines of the current acquis: restate and modernize language on the need to continue with CSDP, refer to the EU treaties, and underline the Petersburg tasks. It could suggest continued development of European Defense Agency (EDA) military capability efforts and their link to the Commission's policies on procurement, industry, and research, explaining that improving EU battlegroups would arm the EU with a usable tool in its broader arsenal for comprehensive approach implementation.

In terms of developing European armed forces, such an approach could bind together previous capability planning instruments such as the 1999 and 2010 Headline Goals with the more recent developments of the Capability Development Plan and the December 2013 EU summit discussion on defense. On cyber or defense industry issues, it is likely that we would see nothing beyond the consensus of recent documents. It would refrain from forward-leaning suggestions on palpable policy objectives, the political role of the union, or discussion of how this could lead to an extension of CDSP into new domains like territorial defense.

The advantage of this approach is that it would not rock the boat politically, as EU governments have

already signed up to this vision in principle in existing treaties and documents agreed among national ministers at EU councils. If these existing measures were fully implemented, it would be a significant contribution to international security. A conservative strategy would draw mainly from the new EUGS, adding details that need to be fleshed out from a military point of view.

However, the consistency of such an approach is also its disadvantage, as it seems that this traditional vision has run out of steam in recent years. In 1999 the EU aimed to do effective crisis management, but CSDP today seems to do everything but, focusing mainly on less contentious and resource-heavy operations such as training and capacity-building. “More of the same,” therefore, seems unlikely to encourage EU governments to contribute more to EU military operations or to cooperate more on capability projects.

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Comprehensive

This approach would start with assessing threats, combining a geopolitical view on priority areas (for example, the broad neighborhood) with a perspective on the security challenges arising from globalization – what some might call “flow security”: the functional aspects of the resilience of states and societies. Contributing to the protection of universal norms and the global commons – to ensure continued access to trade, technology, and natural resources – will continue to be a major global security issue in the future.

The answer to these complex risks and threats is a comprehensive approach (as highlighted in the EUGS). The EU has long prided itself on this approach to international security, with military instruments forming only one part of its broader toolbox, a comparative advantage it has over NATO, for example. This approach is sound in principle, but has proven very difficult to implement effectively in practice. Adopting this approach would require going beyond a military-only (or mainly military) approach of a strict defense strategy. Tackling the challenge of the world’s fragile states, over half of which lie near the EU’s extended neighborhood, would be the main strategic focus of such an approach. Refugee migration routes, which pose a challenge to internal security within the EU, would be another key concern.

The advantage of this approach is that the EU does indeed need to learn how to better connect the disparate instruments at its disposal, from Commission development spending to member state military activities. And to be truly comprehensive would imply reviewing how the EU can better combine internal security policies and resources with external ones – a particularly important aspect of today’s security environment. The challenge for the EU is not so much disparate instruments but institutional fragmentation, which cannot be easily overcome without treaty changes. Further, the defense part of this approach would likely be greatly diluted by the focus on combining disparate policy instruments. Moreover, in practice a primarily procedural approach may be rather unconvincing without a complementary geopolitical vision in certain cases. Comprehensive action in Mali, for example, should be clearly linked to the EU’s regional strategies for North Africa and the Sahel.

Ambitious

For a mix of internal political and external environment reasons, there is a case for a more ambitious, interest-based strategic approach (in contrast to the framework- and threat assessment-based approaches addressed thus far). The security challenges facing the

Conservative, Comprehensive, Ambitious, or Realistic? EU Defense Strategy Approaches

Conservative – Framework-based

METHOD

- Sticks to existing principles and procedures
- Reaffirms existing capability headline goals with some add-ons from existing policies: cyber, etc.
- Links to ongoing projects within the EU
- Improves existing tools like EU battlegroups, the Capability Development Plan, and the Athena mechanism

SCOPE

- Classical CSDP: i.e., crisis management

OUTCOME PROS

- High political feasibility, as all elements remain within the existing acquis
- Smooth political process to agree on new implementation strategy
- Political flexibility and room for follow-up initiatives by member states

OUTCOME CONS

- Does not offer new political options
- No signal of political innovation or adaption to current security challenges
- Can be seen as a theoretical exercise by Brussels institutions or rubber-stamping by member states

Comprehensive – Threat-/Risk-based

METHOD

- Deduces necessary means from a broad assessment of risks and threats
- Suggests reshaping the EU toolbox, as well as institutional responsibilities and interactions

SCOPE

- Geographically very broad
- Beyond defense: considers risks to EU functionality
- Instruments and means focus on the immediate protection not only of EU citizens and political institutions, but also of universal norms and the global commons

OUTCOME PROS

- Reloads the EU's comprehensive approach
- Increases pressure on the EU to better use and organize its instruments
- Comprehensiveness links internal and external security

OUTCOME CONS

- Almost impossible to implement without significant changes in institutional setup
- Defense marginalized
- Procedural approach too abstract without indicating visions to solve concrete contemporary problems like Syria

Ambitious – Interest-/Impact-based

METHOD

- Sticks with the institutions, but increases existing quantitative and qualitative headline goals and capability targets in key areas
- Adds a defense spending target

SCOPE

- Extends the EU's role in protecting citizens by integrating new areas like cyber
- Defines roles of the military in resilience
- Indicates potential EU contribution to NATO deterrence alongside ambitious autonomous external action

OUTCOME PROS

- Signals that Europe engages with its own challenges
- Sketches out a wider EU defense policy as a strategic option parallel to US commitment, engaging with the broadened bandwidth of risks and threats
- Positions the EU as a comprehensive protector

OUTCOME CONS

- Looming Brexit makes immediate quantitative increase unrealistic
- Capabilities gap will damage EU's credibility in defense policy
- Implementation requires consensus from all geographical corners of the EU, which face divergent challenges

Realistic – Capability-based

METHOD

- Matches political ambitions with those military capabilities available now and in the future

SCOPE

- Based on the EU's capacity to act, defines where and how defense can act as an enabling tool for EU security
- Defines the type of defense missions to which the EU is capable of contributing
- Goes beyond CSDP proper: factors in Brexit effects

OUTCOME PROS

- Realistic political and military levels of ambition
- Solid defense policy options based on real-world capabilities
- Enables sustainable commitments to policies
- Underlines the EU as a credible actor

OUTCOME CONS

- Presumably lower levels of ambition
- Will lead initially to discussions of an EU retreat from world politics

EU will not dissipate anytime soon; indeed, they may intensify over the coming years. Further, although the drop in defense spending has stopped, military credibility is still at risk given resource shortages. Perhaps most importantly, regardless of who next occupies the White House in Washington, DC, it seems clear that the United States will remain selective about its military involvement in European security (including across Europe's broad neighborhood).

Greater ambition can be best expressed by building on existing benchmarks and enhancing them. A simple but highly symbolic step could be to raise the Helsinki Headline Goal from 60,000 to 100,000 soldiers, providing for a minimal deterrent of two corps, deployable in two theatres, with or without NATO cooperation. From there, one could both redefine the need for spending goals – setting a target of 2 percent of GDP for defense spending for the EU (complementing NATO's existing target) – and also develop a revived approach to closing well-known capability gaps. This could legitimize the long-proposed idea of a joint military headquarters, both to manage a multinational force and army of that size and to start implementing enhanced cooperation between smaller groups of countries (via the permanent structured cooperation mechanism in the treaties) to achieve the needed efficiencies.

In terms of tasks, an ambitious approach could also address the protection roles the EU could play in European security, including operationalizing the meaning of the mutual assistance (article 42.7) and solidarity (article 222) clauses in the EU treaties or assessing member state resilience to hybrid threats.

An ambitious strategy could also take on an ambitious scope and include industrial, cyber, counterterrorism, and intelligence aspects of defense. Further, it could opt for strategic autonomy of the defense industrial base, a cyber unit in the EU Military Staff, and an information fusion center run jointly with NATO and national intelligence services.

The advantage of this approach is that it has some real strategic merit. Europeans have increasingly needed to cope with certain security challenges without much U.S. assistance and may need to cope with much more in the future. In this narrative, EU defense policy is a useful strategic option for when NATO and/or coalitions cannot or do not act. However, this approach also requires a stronger geopolitical consensus among member states. The danger is that such a consensus is too difficult to achieve, and this vision may never be properly backed up, which would (further) damage the credibility of EU defense policy.

Realistic

A realistic approach starts not with interests, but rather with the means to pursue interests. Such a strategy would focus on what means are and will be available for European defense, while being guided by a comprehensive security assessment. Its strategic rationale that could be derived from the EUGS. This defense strategy would explain the role defense plays as an enabling instrument for other policies and outline how the EU can be a defense actor. It would necessarily reach beyond CSDP proper, because risks and threats do not respect institutional boundaries.

Second, a realistic approach would center on what the EU member states and institutions are capable of delivering. Hence this approach would define European ambitions based on what is available today and what will be available in the coming years. It would thus aim to ensure the capacity to implement the strategy. Moreover, such an approach would factor in the political and military gap a Brexit creates.

This approach would also focus on updating and transforming the 1999 and 2010 Headline Goals with quantitative and qualitative capability targets. These could be based on scenarios covering the whole bandwidth of missions. To focus discussions on realistic political and military levels of ambition, these headline goals and capability targets would be complemented with a baseline assessment of available inventories

and capabilities, both current and those planned to be available by 2030. This would more fully reveal which type of operations the EU would be able to launch and sustain. Mismatches of aims and means would require discussing either increasing committed capabilities or lowering ambitions.

For the defense industry it would identify areas where strategic autonomy is possible and sustainable, areas where this could still be achieved but needs investment and political support, and areas in which autonomy does not and will not exist – and thus needs to be supplemented by cooperation outside the EU, preferably with the United States.

Following this realistic approach, the strategy document would be a rather straightforward document that would show the political choices available to EU governments in terms of ends and means: laying out

Risks and threats do not respect institutional boundaries.

the types of operations they would be able to conduct, based on the means (i.e. the capabilities) they are willing and able to commit. It would also seek to clarify how they aim to fill existing and future gaps to allow for an increase in the level of ambition.

To illustrate political will toward implementation, flagship projects for capabilities would build on current initiatives and aim to take them to the next level to deliver capabilities. It could also propose bolder projects that make EU contributions more relevant to current and future challenges, such as a redesign of the

EU battlegroups into larger rapid response brigades. Modelling this along NATO's Framework Nations Concept would make an immediate, palpable contribution to EU-NATO cooperation.

The advantage of this approach is the clarity it would establish with regard to what the EU is capable of doing and which choices are realistically available, both politically and militarily. The disadvantage of the approach is that some actors may not be in favor of such clarity, which would likely lead to a lower level of ambition. This would in turn spur discussions whether the EU has retreated from world politics and its aim to become a global actor.

The Strategy Matters

Drafting an EU defense strategy will not be an easy task, not only because of the variety of security challenges facing the EU, but also considering the existing Brussels-based institutional cultures, procedures, and plans, not to mention the varied interest in national capitals. The basic conceptual approaches outlined above vary greatly in their methods and outcomes, only touching on some of these challenges. An ideal strategy would include aspects of each of these approaches, but that in turn may simply prove too ambitious either to be politically manageable with member states or to implement effectively in practice. Even if its ambitions need to be modest, an EU defense strategy would still be worthwhile. The EU cannot have an effective set of foreign policies without a more useful military option, and given today's complex security challenges the EU should play a greater role in contributing to international security and in protecting the union and its citizens.

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