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A European Army: Delusion or Necessity?

Richard Bassett



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1. The Debate

In the discussion surrounding the issue of European integration the question of a European Army has historically been a recurring one. Unsurprisingly, the idea of a European Army continues to provide ammunition for polemicists on both sides of the integration debate and in this often emotionally charged exchange the fundamental practical questions linked to the creation of a genuine European Army tend to be distorted and overshadowed by more general controversy.

For Euro-sceptics, notably in the UK the concept of a European Army has become an inescapable plank of their argument based on "national sovereignty". William Hague tried to articulate this argument in 2000 when he said, "it would be completely wrong to give up British troops to a standing European army controlled by other governments".¹

A few years earlier, Malcom Rifkind, although usually perceived as generally in favour of Britain's continuing membership of the EU, nevertheless showed how "mainstream" his colleague's thinking was. Speaking to the BBC he said, "Western European countries can improve their common defence organisations but they should not contemplate creating structures separate to that of the United States."²

Nor was this hostility confined just to the Euro-sceptic ranks of the Conservative party. Even the Labour Party during the Blair years, when in theory it was in a more philo-European phase than currently, felt compelled to reject the notion of a European Army. Its defence spokesman told a strategy conference in Bath, "Labour does not support the establishment of a European Army or proposals to give the European Union a military competence."³

The British defence establishment is implacably opposed to the idea of a European Army and has demonstrated again and again its opposition to the concept at a formal and informal level. "We look forward to it sometime during the reign of King Charles 27th" is perhaps the politest of judgements to be passed on it by a senior officer.⁴ Senior British defence figures have a cultural antipathy to multi-national forces and remain firmly rooted in the century old tradition of a National Army. As the British military experience in Bosnia during the 1990s underlined, cooperation with other European forces does not fit easily into the mentality of our armed services.⁵

¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 November 2000.

² *PA News*, 3 November 1995.

³ David Clarke, Labour Defence Spokesman, 3 November 1995.

⁴ Quoted in *RUSI Journal*, May 2012.

⁵ See Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour*, London 2001.

On the other side of the ideological divide, for pro-Europeans in continental Europe the idea of a European Army is a part of the armoury of arguments which can be deployed against a rising tide of cynicism and scepticism towards the entire European project. Sigmar Gabriel, the SPD leader and former German chairman of the NATO Military Committee articulated this in a discussion with the retired NATO German General Klaus Naumann: "We need a new momentum, a new European acceleration. Also we need concrete ideas and visions to release the potential.....instead of orchestrating summit after summit, ratifying treaty after treaty, whose contents can barely be understood, we should advance a concrete project which would finally link the people with Europe again: a common European Army."⁶

Gabriel's arguments have gained traction in recent months in wider German political circles and received renewed inspiration from the Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, who earlier this year in a widely reported speech called for the "EU to have its own military."⁷

Juncker's comments were quickly supported by Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. "The Chancellor agrees that it is generally good that there is and should be deeper military cooperation in Europe...Concentrated challenges require a common response."⁸

Germany has often said in the past that it was in favour of a Common Security and Defence Policy but has shied away from supporting any initiative with more robust political support. Gabriel's stance appears to imply that a new political consensus has been arrived at, not least as a result of the financial and economic crisis.

The response elsewhere across Europe towards Juncker's comments has been more mixed. Predictably the UK has been in the vanguard of those countries rejecting Juncker's comments. The British Prime Minister David Cameron's office issued a conventionally negative response to the initiative, "Our position is crystal clear that defence is a national not an EU responsibility and that there is no prospect of that position changing and no prospect of a European Army."⁹

Italy and Spain were more supportive. Both Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his newly appointed Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti have traditionally supported the idea. "The European Union needs a common military and aerial capability", Renzi said. France, perhaps equally predictably

⁶ Sigmar Gabriel, *Sicherheitspolitik für das 21. Jahrhundert*, Lecture, Hamburg, 12 July 2011.

⁷ *Reuters Brussels*, 8 March 2015.

⁸ Christiane Wirtz, Kanzleramt spokeswoman, 25 March 2015.

⁹ Quoted in *Eurasia Review*, 25 March 2015.

was quick to support Juncker although a spokesman for the French President dryly noted that as far as Paris was concerned: "the European Army already exists."¹⁰

The UK's sceptical position gleaned however some support from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Facing the renewal of Russian military activity on their frontiers, the countries of "New Europe" inevitably are wary of any defence initiative which could be perceived as working against or which might dilute Atlanticist structures. "We already have NATO!" was the Czech government's response to the Juncker proposal.

Martin Stropnický, the Czech Defence Minister underlined, "The Czech Republic perceives the NATO as a primary tool of European collective Defence and deterrence of eventual aggressors."¹¹

His comments were echoed in neighbouring Slovakia where the Ministry of Defence described Juncker's plans as "premature" and repeated "NATO remains the main security guarantor for Slovakia". In Poland, the position of the Defence Ministry was even more outspoken. "Poland neither believes in nor wants a European Army", a representative of the Ministry told Eurasia Review. "A European Army is currently neither possible nor needed and a weakening of NATO's cohesion in such a difficult moment of history is undesired". In Romania, Juncker's comments were dismissed as "opening Pandora's Box".

Ironically, these comments were paradoxically also echoed in Moscow where the idea of a European Army is apparently taken seriously enough to be perceived as threat to Russian security interests and as marking a potentially more aggressive European stance. Russian deputy, Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the Russian State Duma Defence Committee asked "Where will it operate? Its function should be purely defensive."¹²

Thus at first glance the issue of a European Army in 2015 appears incapable of generating a consensus within the European Union. It is moreover worth recalling that the continental European political mainstream is not greatly interested in military matters and in certain countries, most notably Germany, labours under historical burdens which inhibit practical discussion at a broader level over how such an army might operate. At the same time, the country, with arguably the highest degree of practical experience in the field, the UK, is inhibited by ideological imperatives from engaging with the project in a practical or constructive way.

¹⁰ Ibid. A reference perhaps to the joint Franco-German, Polish-German-Dutch formations and also the recent French led mission to Mali which included other European elements. See below.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See *ITAR Tass*, 11 March 2015.

2. Beyond the ideological battle: Financial imperatives

2.1. National defence budgets

While the ideological arguments continue to dominate the political debate, a number of urgent factors are nevertheless combining to make, in this author's view, a move towards some form of a European Army inevitable within the not too distant future. These factors are already forcing the pace of military cooperation in Europe to an unprecedented level and will pave the way for pragmatic steps to be taken towards a "Defensible Europe."¹³

The first of these is cost. The European banking crisis of 2009-14 has for a few years distracted the political elites from the European Defence crisis which has been quietly gathering momentum since the end of the Cold War. The core components of this crisis can be summed up as: inadequate military capacities, inadequate financial resources, inefficient use of defence expenditure, inadequate integration of European planning and operational activity; limited defence industrial capabilities, inefficient duplication and inadequate technological cooperation.¹⁴

This crisis has not impinged on the wider European consciousness for a number of reasons. Despite the Russian annexation of Crimea, Europe does not at present believe that it faces a direct existential threat to its territorial integrity or the survival of its population. Some of the Eastern European states such as Poland and the Baltic states might well quibble with this assessment but their fears are not shared by the majority of Europeans to their west.

Thus the actual value of the European defence effort is unclear precisely because the public benefit is difficult to estimate. The effect of military deterrence is difficult and elusive to quantify. As Joseph Nye has pointed out, "Security is like oxygen: you tend not to notice it until you lose it."¹⁵

Moreover, the financial crisis has not only distracted people from the defence crisis, it has also sharpened the pressure on military budgets across Europe, making them legitimate targets in an era of austerity. This has particularly been the case in the UK where currently one billion pounds is being lopped off the defence budget and the sale of such prestigious military facilities as the Hyde Park Barracks, the home of the Mounted Household Cavalry Regiment is only the latest piece of valuable military real-estate to be earmarked to be put onto London's frothy property market.¹⁶

¹³ See Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, *Die Europäische Armee kommt*, in the *NZZ*, 14 May 2015.

¹⁴ See Henrik Heidenkamp and Ferdi Akaltin, *Confronting the European defence crisis*, *RUSI*, May 2015.

¹⁵ Joseph Nye, *East Asian Security: The case for deep engagement*, *Foreign Affairs* Vol 74. Nr 4.

¹⁶ Following the unhappy sale of the Foot Guards Chelsea Barracks in 2009 (still derelict in 2015) and the sale in 2012 of the Royal Horse Artillery stables and barracks in St John's Wood. See *Architects Journal*, 7 January 2015.

As even Gerald Howarth, the UK Minister for International Security Strategy stated in January 2012, “Defence and Security in Europe is at a critical juncture - European countries will have to take more responsibility for collective security whether the challenges are within Europe’s borders, on the periphery, or at a distance. Furthermore the fiscal position of many countries in the North Atlantic region is driving a reduction in public spending, including in defence budgets”.¹⁷ Thus the necessity to continue to cut national defence budgets will inevitably push policy makers towards a pooling of military resources.

The form such a pooling might take remains a complex focus for discussion, although within the EU certain mixed multi-national formations have been created in recent years, notably the Franco-German brigade of the 1990s but also, more recently the so-called Weimar “Battle-group” which is Polish led and consists of German military logistical support and French military medical facilities.¹⁸

The imperative of cost in national defence budgets in the Europe of the twenty-first century is also felt even more keenly in the European defence industry where a modest and varying degree of cooperation has been the norm for many decades. These industries have come out of the financial crisis notably weakened and the rationale towards establishing single European platforms for the production of equipment has been powerfully increased.

2.2. National defence industries

For the still highly fragmented European defence industry the implications of financial restraints on national defence budgets are striking. In 2008 the EU as a whole spent more than 200 billion euros on defence. By 2013 this sum had dwindled to 170 billion euros and most analysts predict this will soon shrink to 150 billion euros.¹⁹

The consequences of such reductions will be especially keenly felt in research and development. At present around 80% to 85% of defence research and development budgets are spent purely at the national level.

The reduction of demand in Europe can only be partly offset by demand in the export markets of the Middle East and Asia. These rising economies demand technology transfer and all the indications are that such markets

¹⁷ Gerald Howarth, *European Defence and Security* 2012, Chatham House lecture, 23 January 2012.

¹⁸ “Battle-group” is a misleading and deliberately vague term, the unit consists of barely 2,000 men.

¹⁹ See Dick Zandee, *The Future of the European defence industry*, Clingendael Institute, 2013.

will throw money increasingly at their own industries to improve further their technology, leading in due course to in-house production rather than outsourcing demand to Europe.²⁰

As a consequence of these developments, new European armament programmes are simply not on the horizon. A new programme on a European unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) is uppermost in the minds of several European manufacturers but even they have conceded that such a platform cannot be developed by the present fragmented national defence industries.²¹ In 2013 Finmeccanica of Italy, Dassault of France and EADS all proposed to European governments that a joint programme be initiated to avoid the current wasteful and expensive duplication involved in developing a next generation European(MALE) UAV.²²

The failure of the EADS-BAE merger proposals in 2013 illustrated vividly that a new round of consolidation which could give Europe a stronger defence industrial base while ending duplication is still elusive. No-one, even in the UK can deny however that such consolidation is urgently needed.

Cross-border cooperation, coordination and even integration are already taking effect in several significant new areas. Some of these even involve the UK. The new anti-ship missile programme currently being prepared for the Royal Navy is a case in point and is a joint procurement programme with France. MBDA in this case will use the programme to scrap duplications in the companies' structures and create cross-channel industrial dependencies.²³

A similar cross-border tie-up is also underway in another naval procurement project involving French and German naval shipyards. Here the effort is directed at arriving at a solution which will harness the benefits of coordinated development and construction. The construction of submarines is another area which several countries have expressed an interest in cooperating over so as to reap the benefits of integrating acquisition and construction processes to reduce costs.

The European Commission is keen to encourage synergies through these "industrial clusters" and the European Defence Agency's programmes for Research and Development could potentially also support these ventures.

²⁰ See Jane's *The Balance of Trade 2014*, which notes that China has become the world's 8th largest arms exporter as its own domestic production increases.

²¹ UAVs are now increasingly referred to as RPAS (Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems).

²² MALE: Medium Altitude Long-range Endurance. See *BAE systems, Dassault, revives UAV Wars*, *Janes Defence Weekly*, 7 January 2013.

²³ MBDA is a European missile manufacturer, the result of the merger in 2001 of Aersopatielle of France with Marconi of Italy and Matra-BAe of the UK.

However, “industrial clusters”, welcome though they are, cannot ultimately replace a pan-European policy at both the industrial and security level. The operational difficulties encountered by the next generation of UAV drones is a perfect example of the limitations of even joint venture defence projects in the new European defence environment of the 21st century.

UAVs have the ability to monitor borders helping the EU to police and control crossings, a need the events of the last few months have highlighted more vividly than ever before. Yet to do this effectively, they must have the right to fly through all European airspace to reach the Eastern Mediterranean and the Adriatic and also the Balkans which are the logical areas for this capability to be deployed.

The “single EU sky” is indispensable for the effective deployment of UAVs. Yet they will only be able to operate effectively if they are part of a pan-European structure capable of handling the insertion of unmanned aircraft across all of Europe’s skies.

The construction of such a new generation vehicle should be encouraged as a pan-European project, to be developed in several European countries and capable of deployment in all of them. It would be the type of project which could stimulate defence cooperation across Europe and even lead to the new round of European defence industry consolidation which is so desperately needed.

It would also have a positive effect on the debate for a European defence capability, pointing to the advantages of pan-European structures and moving the debate on from the silos of ideological thinking which so far inform the debate.

3. Beyond the ideological battle: Strategic imperatives

3.1. Russia

In addition to the costing dimension, this author believes that there are other factors in addition to the need for cost-efficiency and capability enhancement which are pushing inevitably towards the creation of a common European military platform.

The first and most important of these is without doubt the reassessment of the strategic environment with regard to recent strategic developments on Europe's doorstep. Principal among these is the long expected re-emergence of Russia as a formidable military neighbour for the European Union.

Observers of the international political scene have long predicted Moscow's return to the "Game". It was of course inevitable given the resources and traditions which have underpinned Russia throughout its modern history. Unlike in 1945, the "victorious" powers of the Cold War did not occupy the territory of the "vanquished" and impose their structures on the defeated enemy. Instead the US was seduced by the rhetoric of the "American Century" and the "End of History" narrative which lulled them into a hubris which dwelt on a "single-polar" environment and as a result spawned a false sense of security.²⁴

The West's recent failure to understand Moscow's traditional strategic and security concerns was compounded by a naive EU and US sponsored attempt to detach the Ukraine from the Russian orbit. As a consequence Central Europe's Eastern frontier has become again a focus for European security concerns. This is, as noted earlier, especially so in the case of Poland and the three Baltic States.

As the tension over the Ukraine has continued, Moscow has lost no opportunity to demonstrate the robust state of readiness of its military infrastructure, aggressively patrolling its own airspace and even on occasion penetrating European (and therefore NATO) airspace. As events in the Middle East have shown all too recently, Russia's military capabilities have the ability to challenge security assumptions in the West. Attempts by the US to seal Bulgarian airspace to Russian transport aircraft have not inhibited Moscow's air-force playing a dominant role in Syria and the construction of a new formal grouping in the Middle East. At the heart of this new Russian-led coalition, which includes Iraq and Iran as well as Syria, is Russian intelligence and military capability.

This multi-polar strategic landscape which is now emerging as the twenty-first century develops, will place increasing demands on all European nations to contribute more to their defence capability.

The assumption – often articulated by Euro-sceptics that such an increased and enhanced European capability would inevitably take place outside the

²⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History*, New York, 1992.

framework of NATO is unpersuasive.²⁵ The relationship between NATO and a European Army would require political definition but it is hard to imagine circumstances where NATO would not regard an enhanced European capability which a European Army would deliver as actually also strengthening NATO. This is especially the case given that the United States has in recent times become enthusiastic about the Europeans increasing their own defence capability. This attitude has been reinforced by a marked strategic shift in US military thinking encouraged by the rise of China.

3.2. The US

When in late 2012, President Obama announced with the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard that US marines would be stationed in Darwin on Australian territory, the strategic deployment was largely seen in terms of its negative impact on Sino-Australian relations. Few realised that it was the beginning of a significant and unprecedented roll-out of a US military presence in Australia. As the fourth rotation of US marines begins this month, the development of US infrastructure has had a profound effect on the area around Darwin. With plans for a significant US naval and air presence in Australia under development, there could be no more vivid example of the US's new strategic tilt towards the Pacific and therefore, inevitably, at a time of diminishing resources, away from Europe.

The Central European states and indeed the UK have of course noticed this trend but have chosen so far to ignore its wider implications. Nevertheless, it is as clear as night follows day that the US is reducing materially its commitment to Europe and that its relationship with Europe is not what it was during the Cold War.

Even in the UK the US is pulling out of airbases and other parts of its more expensive infrastructure, although with regard to important elements of its military and intelligence presence it remains committed to the key foundations of the so-called "Special Relationship."²⁶

Far from seeing the establishment of a European Army as a rival to NATO, many senior US policy makers now see the concept of a European Army in the same glowing terms with which they viewed the project in the 1950s when they attempted in January 1952 to persuade Churchill to support the

²⁵ See *Germany, Europe and the rise of new global players in a multi-polar landscape*, Business Report, May 20 2014.

²⁶ See NSA pays 100m in funding for GCHQ, in *The Guardian*, 1 Aug 2014. Also *Pentagon to pull out of European bases*, in *The Guardian*, 7 January 2015. Also see *Why Europeans should be happy to see US troops leaving*, in *The Atlantic*, 23 January 2012.

idea.²⁷ Then the idea had foundered on French objections.

Today some parts of the US political establishment must find the position of the UK increasingly frustrating especially as, despite joint initiatives with the French, the mindset of senior British policy-makers rejects even the most basic proposals of the European Army debate.

There is no evidence that US pressure on the UK is being exercised to alter this stand-point at the moment. The commitments of the "Five Eyes" intelligence sharing relationship, highlighted in recent years by the widely publicised documents leaked by Edward Snowden, have acted as a significant brake on any US pressure in this direction. The sensitivities concerning Britain's so-called independent nuclear deterrent, Trident, which is wholly dependent on US GPS satellite technology, also inhibit fundamental debate on what are seen as "theoretical issues" which might cast a shadow over what both sides currently perceive to be a valuable strategic relationship offering many practical benefits.

It is nevertheless difficult to believe that this conjunction of circumstances will continue indefinitely, as the US inevitably finds itself having to fund more and more of the British intelligence and defence infrastructure at a time when its own strategic priorities are moving away from Europe.

3.3. Germany

Germany's emergence from the global banking crisis has been marked by two inescapable trends. First, she has flourished as the least damaged of all the European economies. Second, (partly as a result of this) she has been increasingly pushed into a leadership role within Europe.

As an expression of these two trends, German politicians have recently begun to acknowledge the existence of the "European defence crisis" and have come increasingly to a consensus that only a Europe-wide solution is practicable.

The German political will towards a common European army is grounded in two considerations. First there is a conviction that without a common European Army there cannot be a defence or security role for Europe. Europe's abdication of a mature international security and defence role profoundly reduces its overall capabilities and influence in the international

²⁷ With not much luck initially. Churchill saw the idea at first as "a sludgy amalgam" although he came round to it thanks to Julian Amery and Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi. See *Churchill and Europe* by Max Beloff, in *Churchill* (ed. Robert Blake and Wm Louis) Oxford 1993. Also see Julian Amery, *Memories of Churchill*, Crosby Kemper lecture, Fulton 1994.

system. Second, for historical reasons, German military capability has to be firmly anchored within the framework of pan-European structures.

Although traditionally Germany's support for a Common Security and Defence Policy has often been ventilated by politicians who have then shown themselves signally reluctant to push for practical and meaningful steps to achieve it, the mood appears to be changing now in Berlin.

As the SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel noted as early as at the 8th Petersberg Talks, the issue of European marginalisation is gaining traction: "If our main concern is to prevent the impending marginalisation of European states on the global stage ... first and foremost politics must provide a credible political impulse for a Common European Security and Defence policy. This is the challenge of the hour which politicians in all European capitals have to confront, including those in Berlin."²⁸

Unsurprisingly, these considerations have moved the debate on a common European Army forwards in recent months. Gabriel highlighted a willingness to integrate the Bundeswehr into a common European Army over the long term: "If in the year 2050 we want to find ourselves in a Common European Security and Defence Policy, we must be ready to align our security and defence policy goals. Even if it is difficult, we must be ready to step-by-step hand over sovereignty in the field of security and defence as we have done in other policy areas. We are willing to give a strong signal to our European partners: Germany is prepared to advocate the realisation of a capable Common European Security and Defence policy and the associated long term goal of a European Army."²⁹

Gabriel's comments, coming as they do from the traditionally pacific SPD in Germany, suggest that a strong political consensus has been constructed to establish and encourage debate on a European army.

As Heidenkamp and Akaltin point out in their RUSI paper; "The Common European Army in Germany's political debate", a new consensus is gaining hold. As a part of that debate the old "sovereignty" arguments of the Euro-sceptics are being confronted by new sets of realities. The financial and economic crisis has clearly shown the limited individual power of European states. "Sovereignty in a post-modern sense that secures the capability to act internally as well as externally can only be conceptualised and take political effect within a multilateral framework."³⁰

²⁸ Sigmar Gabriel, *Eine historische Chance zum Handeln*, 8th Petersberger Gespräch, Bonn 10 March 2012.

²⁹ Sigmar Gabriel, *Eine historische Chance zum Handeln*, op. cit., Bonn 2012.

If Germany, as seems increasingly likely, chooses to advance this policy, its allies and partners will find it difficult to avoid at least joining in a dialogue on the common European army project. Already Belgium and the Netherlands have indicated their willingness to pool military resources and therefore it is unlikely that Germany's eventual moves will be open to the critique of unilateralism.

4. Building a Political Consensus: The UK challenge

While Germany moves slowly towards embracing the idea of a European Army, Britain continues to reject any modification of its traditional stance, despite the tension between this policy and the UK's underlying financial realities.

As the defence minister Julian Brazier recently reiterated: "Although we welcome closer cooperation between the armed forces of EU and NATO members states, this needs to be based on improving defence capabilities across Europe, not new institutions. We will not support measures which would undermine member states' competence for their own military forces, or lead to competitions and duplication with NATO."³¹

This view echoed the classic Foreign Office formulation stated earlier this year by Baroness Anelay of St Johns: "We have always been clear that defence is a national not an EU responsibility, and that there is no prospect of that position changing and therefore no prospect of a European Army. The Prime Minister made clear NATO's primacy in European defence at the December 2013 European Council and we will continue to underline this with EU partners and institutions."³²

Another Foreign Office minister drove the same points home with an added twist, in this case dwelling on Britain's seniority in size among the European nations: "A small European country would see an obvious benefit to its national interest from that sort of greater European action. The British government do (sic) not share the view that a European Army would be helpful or necessary. We believe that NATO is and should remain the centrepiece of our collective defence and security arrangements.

Were there to be any move towards establishing greater European military integration, it would first require consensus among member states, because such matters cannot be determined by a qualified majority vote under the

³⁰ Claudia Major, *Legitimation und Umriss einer Europa-Armee*, in *Reader Sicherheitspolitik*, Berlin September 2011, quoted in Heidenkamp and Alkatin, *op.cit.*, p24.

³¹ PQ 10201, 14 September 2015.

³² HL 5754, 16 March 2015.

treaty. Moreover.... in passing the European Act 2011 this House required that there would have to be both an Act of Parliament and a referendum of the British people before any British Prime Minister could give consent to a proposal for the establishment of an EU Army or armed forces in some hypothetical future."³³

The ideas expressed here reflect powerful ideological arguments but cannot be accepted without closer scrutiny.

Germany and France (and Italy and Spain) are all as large if not larger than Britain and favour the establishment of a common European Army. The deployment of a British contribution to such a force would not necessarily trigger the need for a referendum under the 2011 European Act. Such a deployment could be an extended operational matter and therefore hardly requiring "a referendum of the British people". Much would depend on the precise nature of the "European Army" which emerged and the challenge it was required to meet. To imagine a European Army could only come into being at the behest of the British people as expressed through a referendum may well be wishful thinking.

As for the argument that "closer cooperation needs to be based on improved defence capabilities", it is hard to see how the avoidance of duplication and the saving of costs would not ipso facto lead to "improved defence capabilities". Above all, the idea that the deployment of such a unit would constitute "measures which would undermine members' states competence for their own military forces" fails to address the fact that any British troops deployed to a European Army would be subject to civilian control exercised by European institutions in which the British government plays a full part.

The idea that there is no "obvious benefit to the national interest" in European military integration is equally contestable. The UK has "an obvious national interest" in the improved security of for example European airspace and the security of Europe's frontiers. As the European power, along with France, that has the most military experience, it has a great deal to contribute to European defence planning and by its absence it inevitably runs the risk that new European military structures when they are created will be less effective than they might be. Above all, the structures created would certainly without initial British participation be less open to influence from London in the long-term.

³³ *Hansard*, 9 March 2015, c80.

As Italian former Foreign Minister, Franco Frattini said in 2009, “A European Army, like Schengen and like the Euro are examples where by pooling our sovereignty we are in fact strengthening it”. Duplication of defence capabilities undermines sovereignty rather than strengthens it. “It is a necessary objective to have a European Army so that when President Obama asks Poland or Italy or Great Britain for more troops he would have a ‘tool-box’ to draw from. He might need 30 planes or tanks and should be able to ask the European Army if they can provide them. Italy could send the planes, France the tanks and the UK armoured cars. In this way we would optimise the use of our resources.”³⁴

Given that the UK would always have a political key as to whether its capabilities could be deployed it is hard to envision how the UK’s sovereignty could be undermined by its commitment to a European Army under these circumstances.

As Claudia Major has pointed out in her perceptive essay: “Sovereignty in terms of the capability to act can ultimately be sustained through a controlled discharge or sharing of sovereignty. States can secure their sovereignty by merging and collectively using their individually constrained capabilities to act. This is the idea of “pooling of sovereignty through pooling of capability.”³⁵

Drawing on the experience of Afghanistan, Frattini further insisted, “We work well together in Afghanistan. In the province of Herat we Italians work with the Spanish. Why not form a common force? This would bring economic benefits because the countries involved would share the costs of military engagement overseas”. Far from weakening NATO in this case, it would have proved an indisputable instrument of strengthening it.

Once stripped of its ideological arguments, the British reluctance to engage with the idea of a European Army can be seen in an unflattering light. It is not a contribution to the debate on a European common defence strategy but a platform aimed at reinforcing the UK’s existing general semi-detached status from the continental European mainstream.

This supposed British “exceptionalism” sometimes finds expression in claims that a fundamental discrepancy exists between British military capability

³⁴ See *Italy calls for a European Army*, Interview with Frattini in *The Australian*, 17 November 2009.

³⁵ Claudia Major, *Legitimation und Umriss einer Europa-Armee*, op.cit.

and that of its European allies, the so-called “professional deficit”. This argument carries much less weight than before. A sharp reduction in large-scale training exercises in recent years has changed the British Army markedly. British units still make up some of the finest military forces anywhere in the world but the conventional capability which existed at the height of the Cold War is simply no longer there. The mounting of the Task Force expedition which recovered the Falkland Islands would be impossible today for a Royal Navy which in 2015 numbers barely 20 capital ships.

Contrast this rather parochial approach of the UK to the French operation in Mali which has shown just how effectively the Europeans, including the British, can cooperate at a military level.³⁶ There an insurgency orchestrated by Al-Qaeda has been successfully crushed, largely as a result of a French led operation involving several units from other European countries.

The European military experience in Mali in the recent two years has proved it is possible for European units of widely differing formation and professional training to cooperate with success. Both the British and Italians have supported the ground operation of the French with logistical air support, as have also Dutch, Danish, Belgian and Spanish military. The success of this French-led operation suggests that were the political will forthcoming, the Europeans could make a reasonable fist of constructing a single platform for a common European defence.

As Mali demonstrates, if Britain chooses to abdicate a leading position in European defence, it will be left to the French to gather the Europeans under their own distinctive European umbrella and the European Army will become de-facto a reality whether entrenched interests in this country wish it or not.

5. Conclusion

As this paper has sought to show, the creation of a European army is a project driven by important financial and strategic considerations, however unthinkable the idea would appear to be for current British politicians. If Britain is not to be cut out of the entire process by dint of its own reluctance to engage even in discussion of the subject, British political elites will need at a minimum to rethink their policy of rejecting the concept out of hand.

³⁶ See *Belgien stellt Flugzeuge und Hubschrauber für Mali*, *Europe Online*, 20 November 2012.

A European army will not be built overnight, although as the European experience in Mali has shown, some of the structures already exist in embryo at an operational level. It may be, as Germany's Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen has cautiously said that "our future as Europeans will be a European Army although not in the short term".³⁷ But it may also equally be that the crises on Europe's frontiers accelerate the process of establishing a European Army.

In such a case the absence of any significant British participation would be seriously damaging to the British interest. As Julian Amery said in his maiden speech in the House of Lords in 1994, "I am old enough to remember that a Europe united without us can quickly become a Europe united against us."³⁸

Recent Euro-sceptic comments by British politicians tend to give us the impression that Britain has been viscerally opposed to the creation of a European Army for many decades. In fact in the 1950s, both Churchill and Julian Amery, to name only two stalwart defenders of the British military interest, spoke in favour of a "genuine European Army."³⁹

Churchill indeed criticised the American proposals for such an army in the early 1950s largely because he feared the resulting force would be a "sludgy amalgam" rather than an effective fighting force.⁴⁰ The Conservative party then as now was divided on Europe. The Suez Group which criticised Eden so vociferously during the entire Suez debacle was partly motivated by the consideration that Eden's weakness would be seen by France as further evidence of Albion perfide and undermine Anglo-French military cooperation. Amery in particular saw Eden's weakness during Suez as not only inflicting incalculable damage to Britain's standing in the world but also weakening the foundations of future Anglo-French strategic thinking over Europe.⁴¹

The reluctance of modern British politicians to countenance the idea of a European Army is all the more surprising given that the inflexibility of such a position sits ill with the pragmatism which in earlier generations might well have encouraged the British political establishment into adopting a very different and far more flexible position.

Such a position would be predicated on the fact that in the construction of any European Army the two countries with the greatest military operational

³⁷ *EU Observer*, 9 March 2015.

³⁸ Hansard House of Lords, 27 March 1994.

³⁹ See Hansard House of Commons, 2 March 1950, Julian Amery maiden speech.

⁴⁰ See John Colville: *The Fringes of Power* Vol 1 pp 349-50 London 1985

⁴¹ See I.Troen and M.Shemesh *The Suez-Sinai crisis* Tel-Aviv 1990

experience and professionalism – in this case Britain and France – would be in a very strong position to influence not only the organisation of such a force but also the questions of political control, legitimacy, shared command structure and indeed the very legal and cultural foundations of the entire corps.

By demonstrating its reluctance to participate in Europe-wide structures, which our European partners regard as being of strategic importance, the British government reinforces its commitment to semi-detached status within the European Union.

The growing momentum towards what will in all probability be a very close vote on the United Kingdom's continued participation in the European Union makes it difficult for European issues to be considered in a calm and considered way. Until the vote is held, the UK debate on a European Army is unlikely to enjoy the considered and balanced arguments it merits.

At the same time it is increasingly probable that our principal European neighbours will continue the debate and move, under German guidance, towards a policy of exploring practical steps aimed at translating an abstract concept into reality. In fact a core European Army without the U.K. but involving Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium has been slowly drifting onto the military discussion table for some months.

The absence of any constructive input from the nation with arguably the greatest military tradition in Europe is to be much regretted. At a time of crisis a serious and informed discussion about the realities of the strategic environment and the prospects of further European military integration is essential. Such a discussion needs a significantly increased level of trust among the European states with regard to defence and security. Both the United Kingdom and its neighbours will be the losers if the United Kingdom absents itself entirely from this European process.

6. Appendix - A European Army scenario

6.1. The British contribution

A British contribution to a European Army could be organised in such a way that it neither undermined NATO nor resulted in unnecessary duplication of existing structures. The rotating deployment for a year of a single "crack" regiment battalion (say for example the 4th Highland Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland (The Seaforths, Gordons and Camerons)), to join a multi-national European brigade would demonstrate that the UK was prepared at least to dip its toe into the inevitable future.

It would send an undeniable signal of friendship towards our increasingly chagrined European allies, demonstrate at a stroke that we were not turning our back on Europe and no doubt generate some significant concessions from our European friends ahead of the Prime Minister's long-awaited and otherwise rather loosely-defined renegotiation of our position in Europe.

At the same time because the professionalism of the British units would be immediately apparent to military men throughout the European brigade, it would no doubt impress upon other European units the need to match the highest of standards if a European brigade was to be taken seriously at an operational level. This would in turn generate a constructive competitive spirit between the different regiments who would all compete to be "the best of the brigade".

6.2. Command and control

The thorny issue of command and control would have to be resolved by being exercised along the normal military chain of command. The colonel of the regiment would be answerable to the brigade commander who would be rotated at intervals between the four or five countries, (for example, France, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands and the UK) providing the component units.

The brigade commander's staff would be multi-national with representatives of all the units deployed. The highly charged and emotive question of "foreign command of our troops" would be neutralised by the sanction of ultimate political control. At any time the Prime Minister of any country

supplying a battalion could in theory order “his” regiment to disengage from the brigade.

6.3. Deployment

Operational deployment would also be subject to civilian control exercised through the politicians of each country represented. As stated above, the existence of a “dual lock” system of military and civilian control would mean in practice that the civilian authorities had the power of veto over any initial deployment although in practice, as is currently the case in most European countries, once the civilian authority had approved the deployment, the day to day operations would be directed by the military, in this case the brigade H.Q.

6.4. Future development

Like all military formations such a European unit would be forged, improved and welded together in the heat of engagements. It would quickly become apparent whether its cohesiveness was potentially capable of being further strengthened by reinforcement and greater commitment at a political level. What might initially be seen as a sophisticated form of Grenzschutz force, a kind of border force could be quickly expanded into something more ambitious if it proved successful. Multi-national forces have dynamics of their own but the battlefields of Europe have shown over 300 years that such units can often acquit themselves with distinction and that they can remain loyal to a single command.⁴²

Most of these ideas would need to be hammered out by military men together with essential and vigorous political support. The European Army idea is unlikely to dissipate without the break-up of Europe. Until that dream of the Euro-sceptics takes place, we can safely assume there will one day be a force built upon the outlines illustrated here.

⁴² See Richard Bassett, *For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Austrian Army, 1619-1918*, London 2015.

Further Reading

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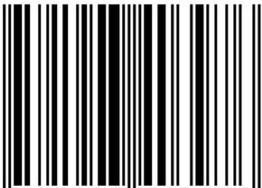
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In this thought-provoking pamphlet Richard Bassett, a former Times journalist and military historian, argues persuasively that economic and political factors are putting the question of European military integration firmly back on the agenda of the European Union. The pamphlet takes particular issue with those in the United Kingdom who claim that such military integration is both impossible and undesirable. The author believes on the contrary that the United Kingdom now has an important opportunity to increase its power and influence in the world by leading and shaping the emerging military integration of the European Union.

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