

politique étrangère

THE GREAT WAR

1914

2014

DE

AND THE WORLD  
OF TOMORROW

Spring 2014



## The United States and the 'Demilitarization' of Europe: Myth or Reality?

By **Klaus Larres**

**Klaus Larres** is the Richard M Krasno Distinguished Professor in History and International Affairs at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He also is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC.

The criticism leveled by Americans at Europe's neglect of its commitment to defense is not new, though it is often exaggerated. It has reached new levels with Europe's failure to position itself as a strategic actor and after the budget cuts brought about by the financial crisis of 2008. As unavoidable as these cuts may have been, they could nevertheless compromise Europe's capacity to act in international affairs, even for the most powerful of European states.

politique étrangère

Robert Gates, President Obama's first Secretary of Defense and a hold-over from the Bush administration, enjoyed the reputation of being a "safe pair of hands." He was known for his professional demeanor and not for emotional outbursts or controversial public statements. Yet, in June 2011 he created a transatlantic stir with his farewell address delivered to a forum of defense experts in Brussels, Belgium. The speech was given at the height of inserting 33,000 additional troops into Afghanistan as part of Obama's new surge strategy for the stalemated war in the country. Out of the blue Gates referred to the looming demilitarization of the European continent. The respected politician claimed that NATO's European members were "apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources to make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense." "In the final analysis," Gates declared dramatically, "there is no substitute for nations providing the resources necessary to have the military capability the Alliance needs when faced with a security challenge." Toward the end of his lecture he comforted America's European disciples a little by saying that it was "not too late

for Europe to get its defense institutions and security relationships on track," though it was about time that they dealt with these issues.<sup>1</sup>

Already a year before, in February 2010, Gates had begun expressing his concern about "the demilitarization of Europe" when he gave a talk to a gathering of NATO officers meeting in Washington, D.C. "In Europe," he explained, "large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it." While this was a very good thing initially, Gates said, but now it had "gone from a blessing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21<sup>st</sup>."<sup>2</sup> Gates' speeches brought to the surface a long-simmering debate among western security experts about European defense efforts (or lack of thereof) and the purpose and future of NATO and the transatlantic security alliance. In the course of the debate, much American discontent was revealed with Europe's inclination to pursue a "free rider" strategy with its reliance on the U.S. in all major defense matters. A great deal of European resentment about American pushiness and, at times, authoritarian primacy within NATO also came to the forefront.

Since the controversial U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Robert Kagan's booklet, published round about the same time, describing the soft and feminine Europeans as being from Venus and the tough and masculine Americans from Mars, a clear difference of attitudes toward national and international security on both sides of the Atlantic has become apparent.<sup>3</sup> In fact it might not be wrong to talk about the emergence of a post-Cold War value gap in transatlantic relations at the beginning of the new century.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, therefore, I shall explore the cultural and political reasons for the diverging gap in U.S. and European approaches toward security and the military in the contemporary world. I am considering the complex reasons for the – from an American point view – disappointing

---

1. Robert M. Gates, "The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO)," Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>

2. Robert M. Gates, "NATO Strategic Concept Seminar (Future of NATO)," Washington, DC, February 23, 2010: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1423>. The only more recent monograph on this topic is James J. Sheehan, *Where have all the soldiers gone? The transformation of Modern Europe* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008). See also Zaki Laidi, "Europe as a Risk Averse Power: a hypothesis," Garnet Policy Brief, no.11 (February 2010): <http://www.laidi.com/sitedp/default/files/file/GARNET11-COR-WEB.pdf>

3. Robert Kagan, *Of paradise and power: America and Europe in the new world order* (New York: Knopf, 2003). Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe and the Crisis over Iraq* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

4. Klaus Larres, "Mutual Incomprehension: US- German value gaps beyond Iraq," in *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April 2003), pp.23-42.

European military performance in the post-Cold War years and in particular since 9/11. The essay will thus focus on the transatlantic debate about the alleged "demilitarization" of Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But has an actual "demilitarization" taken place as claimed? Do the nations of western, central and eastern Europe that together spend almost one quarter of the world's expenditure on armaments and defense (24 per cent in 2012) and some of whom are among the globe's major arms exporters live on a largely "demilitarized" continent?

While Gates never outlined what he actually meant by "demilitarization", the U.S. Department of Defense and most analysts use the phrase when referring to the European countries' tendency to reduce the size of their armies, navies and air force personnel and delay updating their military hardware. However, European "demilitarization" also includes the cultural reorientation of most EU nations away from militarization and an overly international activism. Thus European "demilitarization" is also a matter of attitude rather than merely a question of expenditure on military forces and hardware.

### **The Transatlantic Dilemma from the Cold War to the Present**

Gates farewell speech in June 2011 received much attention. In the ensuing media uproar most commentators agreed that Gates had a point with his criticism of Europe's lack of military readiness though his blunt delivery caused surprise. Still, Gates' frustration with NATO's European members was nothing new. The political elite in the United States has expressed its deep concern about the defense efforts, or lack thereof, of America's European allies for a significant period of time. Even during the Cold War the U.S. was perennially unhappy with the contributions of the Europeans to the NATO alliance.

In fact, the lack of a sufficient number of European ground forces to halt a potential Soviet invasion of western Europe from across the Elbe river gave rise to pressure from the U.S. Chiefs of Staff for considering German rearmament as early as 1948 (even before the new West German state was created in May 1949). It also led to Washington strong-arming the French to ratify the European Defense Community (EDC). In December 1953, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, explained that if Paris would not get its act together, it would lead to "an agonizing reappraisal" of U.S. foreign policy toward Europe. Although the French soon went ahead and killed the EDC anyway, Washington's strong support of Western Europe remained just the same. American insistence on European rearmament in the face of the perceived Soviet threat led to West German membership of NATO in 1955 and the setting up of the new *Bundeswehr*.

A decade later, in the context of the expensive Vietnam War, American insistence on “burden sharing” dominated and harmed transatlantic security relations for much of the 1960s and 1970s. The allies never could agree on how many ground troops the Europeans ought to provide to the common NATO defense effort or how many resources in terms of GDP percentage points the Europeans should be expected to contribute. Only in the post-Cold War world were NATO members able to accept “the self-obligation to spend at least 2 percent of their GNP on defense.”<sup>5</sup> But very few member states actually meet this obligation at present. Nevertheless, the essential dilemma the transatlantic alliance still faces is not so much military or economic but political.

As early as 1979, a CIA paper put it succinctly when the anonymous author explained that the U.S. itself had created the transatlantic dilemma by helping its allies in the post-1945 years to rise from near-destruction and starvation to prosperity and renewed confidence. “In encouraging the revitalization of its allies,” the CIA analysis declared, “the United States probably never directly confronted the probability that they would eventually want to steer a more independent course.”<sup>6</sup> This indeed is the essential dilemma that the transatlantic alliance has faced ever since. Although the U.S. never wanted to preside over mere European satellite states, allies that were too confident and too independent were not desirable either. Essentially Washington wished to obtain economic and political (and if possible military) support from Europe while still being able to call the shots. In the 1970s and 1980s, the deceptively fair and just phrase “equitable burden-sharing” was employed to overcome the transatlantic dilemma. This did not mean, however, that there was a genuinely equal decision-making role on offer for Western Europe. Ultimately, the Europeans were meant to support and assist Washington in times of need as best as they could without, however, being entitled to a genuine leadership role in the western alliance.<sup>7</sup>

### **The EU as a Failed Military Actor?**

Despite the sudden end of the Cold War, the 1990s proved to be no different. Still, the expected ‘peace dividend’, the enthusiasm about the West’s victory in the Cold War and the aspiration to enlarge both NATO and the EU by

---

5. Karl-Heinz Kamp of the NATO Defense College in Rome quoted in “NATO unity threatened by defense budget and equipment shortfalls,” analysis by *Deutsche Welle*, March 3, 2010: <http://www.dw.de/nato-unity-threatened-by-defense-budget-and-equipment-shortfalls/a-5310375-1>

6. CIA memorandum by its National Foreign Assessment Center, “Changing power relations among OECD countries”, dated 22 October 1979, p.10; available online at: <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/C28E73FAD72D4604BD1BF3A26BDA1E30.pdf>

7. See Klaus Larres, “The United States and European Integration, 1945-1990,” in Klaus Larres (ed.), *A Companion to Europe since 1945* (Wiley Blackwell, 2009, 2014), pp.151-182.

including many of the Soviet Union's former satellite states into the western alliance pre-occupied the western world. It made burden-sharing much less of a primary concern than before, at least initially. Moreover, the EU appeared to embark on a serious effort to improve its defense capabilities.

By means of the Maastricht Treaty (1992-93) and then the Amsterdam Treaty (1997-99), the newly renamed European Union embarked on the development of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Within this framework it also designed a Common European Security and Defense Policy (CESDP, often referred to as ESDP or CSDP) and thus aspired to develop a strong military pillar. The U.S., however, suddenly developed second thoughts about this and remained lukewarm. The Clinton administration became concerned that a genuine European rival to NATO was emerging.<sup>8</sup>

Eventually an uneasy compromise formula was found. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright outlined three conditions for American support of ESDP, the so-called "three D's": i) no discrimination against non-EU NATO members (such as Turkey), ii) no diminution of NATO and thus no decoupling of European and North American security, and iii) no duplication of NATO's operational planning system and the Alliance's command structure. Albright pronounced at a press conference at NATO headquarters in early December 1998 "that we don't need any of those three "D's" to happen. On the other hand," she said somewhat hypocritically, "I think it's very important for the Europeans to carry a fair share and have a sense of their own defense identity."<sup>9</sup> Eventually the complex Berlin Plus agreement of December 2002 was concluded which allowed the EU to use NATO assets (if all NATO members agree) for its own peacekeeping activities.

It took indeed the better part of 10 years, as Francois Heisbourg has argued, for the U.S. "to move from open hostility to overt acceptance of a unified European security policy."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the fact that CSDP had not been able to change transatlantic security relations contributed to this. Nevertheless throughout the 1990s, the U.S. did its best to restrain European military efforts. Of course this made subsequent American complaints about the "demilitarization" tendencies in Europe much less convincing.

8. See Dan Hamilton, "American perspectives on the European Security and Defense Policy," Danish Institute for International Studies (May 2004), Chapter 8, pp.143ff.: [http://transatlantic.sais-jhu.edu/publications/articles/DH\\_Article\\_from\\_Danish\\_Institute.pdf](http://transatlantic.sais-jhu.edu/publications/articles/DH_Article_from_Danish_Institute.pdf)

9. For Albright's press conference, see [http://www.fas.org/man/nato/news/1998/98120904\\_tlt.html](http://www.fas.org/man/nato/news/1998/98120904_tlt.html)

10. Francois Heisbourg, "Chapter One: The European Union and the Major Powers," Adelphi Series, 50:414-415, p.25: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2010.539432>

After all, already in the early 1990s, the outbreak of civil war in the former Yugoslavia had quickly revealed that the Europeans were very weak actors. According to the Luxembourg foreign minister, the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s was to become “the hour of Europe.” The EU was meant to step up to its military responsibility and bring the war to a rapid end. Instead by the mid-1990s the lack of European military and political decisiveness and the severe political-military divisions between more pro-Serb and more pro-Croat EU countries had become all too obvious. Without decisive American air power and delayed but ultimately strong U.S. leadership, the Bosnian war could not have been terminated; neither could the Kosovo war of 1999.

The 1998 Franco-British St-Malo declaration was meant to rectify Europe’s military unpreparedness. French President Jacques Chirac and now even the EU-skeptical British announced that the EU “must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises”.<sup>11</sup> Chirac and Prime Minister Blair had the creation of a single European force in mind. At the December 1999 Helsinki European Council, the formation of a 60,000 strong European Rapid Reaction Force to be ready in 2003 was accepted by all EU states. That way, it was hoped, the EU would be enabled to implement the 1992 Petersberg tasks as agreed at a EU meeting in Bonn (humanitarian, peacekeeping, crisis management tasks, for instance).

Still, despite CFSP/CSDP, St-Malo and Helsinki, a combination of a European lack of will, U.S. reservations and, most recently, the 2008-12 European economic and financial crisis conspired to ensure that the envisaged united European security policy has remained a paper tiger. In fact, the Euro crisis has once again re-focused all attention on the economic and financial arenas. This, after all, was what European integration had been all about in the first instance. The crisis led to the near-bankruptcy of several European countries and at times even seemed to threaten the continued existence of the common European currency if not the EU itself. In view of this existential crisis, the further development of a common European security policy became a secondary concern once again. The attempt to create a Euro zone banking union, for instance, absorbed much more energy than any new thinking about EU defense efforts.

And even before the outbreak of the Euro crisis the EU’s security policy agenda had not made much headway. In fact, the European Security

---

11. “Joint Declaration issued at the British-French Summit, Saint-Malo, France, 3-4 December 1998”: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/French-British%20Summit%20Declaration,%20Saint-Malo,%201998%20-%20EN.pdf>

Strategy (ESS) of 2003 (revised 2008) and the Lisbon Reform Treaty of 2007/09 did not make much of a difference regarding Europe's military effectiveness as far as the U.S. was concerned. Foreign and security policy decision-making remained largely with the respective nation states though Washington regarded this as quite a good thing. But the rather "soft" and vague objectives as outlined in the ESS document of December 2003 entirely failed to impress the U.S.

The ESS, Europe's first comprehensive military strategy, adopted by the EU Council on December 12, 2003, explains that multilateral "conflict prevention and threat prevention" measures are best pursued before a crisis occurs. The document also emphasizes the importance of the spread of democracy and the promotion of "a rule-based international order" which is "based on effective multilateralism." While the paper accepts that European defense capabilities ought to be strengthened, much stronger emphasis is put on the importance of diplomacy and intelligence. As "none of the new threats is purely military," it is pointed out in the paper, "purely military" methods alone do not solve anything. "A mixture of instruments" is required. In fact, as Alyson Bailes has persuasively shown, the ESS downplays "the value of military strength and the use of military means." The paper only discusses them "in the context of crisis management" while clearly "stressing the importance of civilian inputs and "nation building".<sup>12</sup> For some, the EU is thus a "postmodern entity."<sup>13</sup>

By the time the ESS was published, Washington's low opinion of Europe's military capabilities was no secret. Not least the refusal of the George W. Bush administration in September 2001 to accept the European NATO countries' military help as offered by way of the first ever invocation of NATO's Article 5 had made this abundantly clear. Soon, severe transatlantic disputes over the 2003 invasion of Iraq pitted above all France and Germany against Britain and Spain, which sided with the U.S. at the governmental level. At the level of European public opinion across almost all European countries, hardly any support existed for the war in Iraq. Even Bush's "war on terror" in general, including the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan who sheltered Osama bin Laden at the time of 9/11, faced a distinct lack of enthusiasm among most Europeans, including most EU governments.

---

12. Alyson J.K. Bailes, *The European Security Strategy: An Evolutionary History* (SIPRI Policy Paper, No.10, February 2005), pp.16-17. The actual ESS entitled "A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy," (adopted December 12, 2003) is printed at the end of Bailes' paper, pp.29-35: <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI10.pdf>

13. See the brief discussion in Bastian Giegerich, "Introduction," *Adelphi Series*, 50:414-415, pp.12/13: : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2010.5394321>



## Differing Threat Perceptions and Lessons Learned from 9/11

After 9/11, once the severe shock of that day had lessened, transatlantic threat perceptions began to differ profoundly. This has had deep consequences for transatlantic defense efforts. Even the terrorist bombs in Madrid (March 11, 2004) and London (July 7, 2005) that caused widespread death and destruction did not change this fundamentally. Most Europeans simply felt much less vulnerable and exposed to external danger than did those who lived in the United States. For the U.S., 9/11 was a traumatic experience. After all, it was the first successful attack on the American continent since 1814 when the British attacked the White House and set much of Washington, D.C., ablaze. The new Bush administration was quick to exploit this to advance its missionary and neo-conservative foreign policy convictions, as it was cynically seen in Europe. For most Europeans, 9/11 was much less traumatic by contrast. For centuries the European countries had been regularly invaded and militarily attacked. Ideologically-driven foreign policy crusades and frequent talk about the necessity of setting up “new world orders” was nothing new to most Europeans, in particular Germans, at least not to those who remembered the tragic history of the European continent from before the First World War to World War II.<sup>14</sup> Thus distrust toward authority was much more developed in Europe than in the U.S.

In fact one can argue that in the immediate years after 9/11 there not only emerged a transatlantic value gap but there also existed a transatlantic gullibility gap. Europeans were much less trusting of government and the declared reasons for conducting preemptive war against a country that did not have any proven links to 9/11 or Al Qaeda (nor did it have any WMDs) than were a large number of Americans. The latter simply seemed to believe unquestioningly the words coming from the bully pulpit occupied by a chief executive who had won the presidency only under the most controversial of circumstances. To many Europeans it seemed that Bush attempted to overcome this weakness by employing a particular strong appeal to American patriotism.

In view of this it is remarkable that almost all European nations still felt a great sense of loyalty to both the Atlantic alliance and the U.S. and sent troops to Afghanistan in the context of their contribution to ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), albeit not without hesitation and procrastination. Moreover, many countries only sent mere token forces. Austria's and Iceland's contribution of three and four soldiers and Luxembourg's and

---

14. See Konrad H. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995* (Oxford UP, 2006).

Ireland's contribution of nine and seven soldiers respectively naturally was only meant to indicate symbolically that they were supporting the common effort (September 2011 and August 2013 figures).

More important was the fact that some countries with much larger force contributions handicapped the usefulness of their troops by imposing severe restrictions on the rules of engagement and the locations where those forces could be deployed. While by August 2013 the German government still had a sizable number of 4,400 troops in Afghanistan, the third largest NATO troop contingent, they remained in the much more peaceful north of the country and were mainly focused not on combat but on "peace building, reconstruction, and stabilization." The reasons for the limitations of the "German Bundeswehr to nonkinetic peacebuilding operations and force protection," as James Bindenagel expressed it, were due to the fact that the militarization of the German army and its involvement in actual combat missions was unacceptable to German public opinion, "except under specific, narrowly defined parameters mandated by parliament" on a case-by-case basis.<sup>15</sup>

Seen from the point of view of the 60 000 U.S. forces left in Afghanistan by August 2013, who largely focused on dangerous counterinsurgency operations against Taliban and also Al Qaeda forces, this has been a frustrating experience. It was little wonder perhaps that the *New York Times* commented that much of the European contribution to the war in Afghanistan was viewed in Washington largely "as not a problem" for the U.S. "but not much help either."<sup>16</sup> Still, this was a rather unfair assessment. Among the top 10 nations who provided most of the non-American forces for the long common effort in Afghanistan, seven were EU countries. They also all participated in the surge strategy of 2011-12 by increasing their troop strengths in Afghanistan as requested by the U.S. Nevertheless, only the British contingent of still 7,700 forces by August 2013 could be regarded a real fighting force. They were mainly deployed in volatile and highly dangerous Helmand province in the south. Apart from Britain and Germany, France and Italy also made significant troop contributions (almost 4000 each, as of September 2011) though the latter two had started to draw them down by the summer of 2013.<sup>17</sup>

15. James D. Bindenagel, "Afghanistan: The German Factor," in *Prism* 1/4 (c. 2012), p.4: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=134653>

16. *New York Times* quoted in Bindenagel, "Afghanistan: The German Factor," p.4.

17. For the troop numbers of the participating ISAF members as of October 2011, see "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): Key Facts and Figures," (October 2011): [http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/20131014\\_131001-ISAF-Placemat.pdf](http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/20131014_131001-ISAF-Placemat.pdf)

The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in late 2011 and the Obama administration's continuing commitment to withdraw from Afghanistan by late 2014 caused widespread relief in Europe, including London. Although Washington pretended otherwise, most European policy makers have been quietly convinced for some time that in spite of America's overwhelming military power the U.S. had lost both wars and that little could be done to salvage some of the limited western influence that had been established in Afghanistan and Iraq. Developments in early 2014 seemed to confirm European skepticism about the survival of western influence in either country.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century clearly demonstrated that the lessons drawn from 9/11 by the transatlantic allies were very different ones. While the U.S. continued to believe in the efficacy of hard military power and war (combined, however, with some soft power to create what is now trendily called "smart power"), the Europeans did not share this conviction. For them the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and, for instance, the Obama administration's use of widespread drone warfare in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere were largely counterproductive. Neither of these activities made the western world safer or proved effective in eradicating or at least reducing anti-western terrorism. In fact, while a handful of genuinely dangerous terrorists might be killed by a drone attack, the fall-out from the attack, including the frequent loss of life and injury of many innocent people, including children, could be expected to lead to a further increase of anti-western resentment. This in turn, it is argued in most EU countries, would drive dozens of new recruits into the ranks of Al Qaeda and similar groups.

According to the EU and many national European policy-makers, the strategic objective of the West ought to be the use of troops and scarce military resources for supporting nation building and the reconstruction of civil societies rather than their use for old-fashioned and in the last resort, counter-productive combat missions. The EU security objectives as spelled out in the ESS of 2003 as briefly discussed above remain valid. This major difference in thinking and ultimately values has dominated the transatlantic security debate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The value gap is still there. It is thus unlikely that the EU will decide to put a major new emphasis on developing its military capacities and give CDSP a more prominent role any time soon. While Secretary Gates had a point with his analysis of European defense deficiencies, the EU and most of its member states simply have not become persuaded since 9/11 that traditional military hard power will be able to solve any of today's most pressing global problems.

## The European “Big Three” and the Crises in Libya and Syria

When Secretary Gates referred to the dangerous “demilitarization” of Europe, he had above all the military readiness of the individual European militaries in mind, in particular the “Big Three” or “Big Four”. Still, until recently, Germany’s reluctance to rely on military force has somewhat grudgingly been accepted in Washington. Traditionally foreign and security policies have been relegated to a secondary role in German politics for both historical reasons that go back to Hitler’s *Third Reich* and the post-war transformation of the country into a largely pacifist “civilian power” (Hanns Maull) that is overwhelmingly focused on trade, exports and the Euro crisis. Nevertheless, in early 2014 at the Munich Security Conference German federal President Joachim Gauck and new Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen proposed a bigger German role in international affairs and perhaps even a “common European defence [policy].” European “navel gazing” was unacceptable at a time when “the world’s only superpower is reconsidering the scale and form of its global engagement,” Gauck said in his keynote speech opening the conference.<sup>18</sup>

Since the replacement of pacifist Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle by the new Grand Coalition’s formidable Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Chancellor Merkel’s third government has attempted to turn Germany into more of a global player. Instead of being seen as a “shirker in the international community,” Gauck called on his country “to make a more substantial contribution” and “take more resolute steps to uphold and help shape” the global order, including the use of “military means” as a last resort. That way, he explained, the concept of the “responsibility to protect” could be honored in cooperation with the UN and Berlin’s NATO and EU partners.

“A more active role” and “more responsibility” for Germany in international affairs, however, did not mean that the country wanted to “more throwing our weight around,” the German President outlined.<sup>19</sup> After all, German politicians are well aware of the suspicion with which any signs of a new German ‘power politics’ would be viewed in Europe and elsewhere. Perhaps Steinmeier and the Grand Coalition will manage this difficult balancing act and succeed in preventing Berlin from developing an inclination to punch above its weight in world politics as the British and French have

18. For Gauck’s speech, see <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/JoachimGauck/Reden/2014/140131-Munich-Security-Conference.html>

19. For an interesting paper that influenced the new foreign policy thinking of Gauck, Merkel, Steinmeier and Van der Leyen, see Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik/German Marshall Fund, *Neue Macht. Neue Verantwortung. Elemente einer deutschen Aussen- und Sicherheitspolitik für eine Welt im Umbruch* (Berlin/Washington, DC, 2013): [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/projekt\\_papiere/DeutAussenSicherhpol\\_SWP\\_GMF\\_2013.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/projekt_papiere/DeutAussenSicherhpol_SWP_GMF_2013.pdf)

traditionally done. At present these two former colonial empires remain indeed “in a class by themselves,” as an article in the German weekly DIE ZEIT expressed it. “Both pursue a security policy,” the author writes, “that displays a strong military dimension and has the aim to maintain their international influence.”<sup>20</sup>

This is borne out by recent developments. Germany abstained. when the UN Security Council voted on UN Resolution 1973 regarding air strikes against Libya in 2011, and in effect thus sided with China and Russia. The governments in Paris and London, however, were driving the West’s robust support for the attempt of the Libyan opposition to topple Muammar Gaddafi. Western air attacks were aimed at destroying the dictator’s anti-aircraft system in support of the opposition forces. In fact, Britain and France only narrowly succeeded in persuading a reluctant American President to join in the task. Eventually Obama decided to “lead from behind” ; he left the main war effort to the two old European powers. After all “Europe’s vital interest” in its wider neighborhood was at stake as he saw it. Still, the air campaign, which eventually lasted from March to October 2011, was soon turned into a NATO operation under French and British leadership (though a U.S. general ran it from NATO headquarters). The EU’s CSDP was nowhere to be seen; in fact it “went missing in action during the Libya crisis.”<sup>21</sup>

But only 11 weeks into the European air bombardment, Paris and particularly London were close to running out of ammunition and were forced to appeal for help to Washington. Furthermore, only half of the members of NATO joined the Libya operation and less than a third participated in the strike mission. This mostly was not due to a lack of interest but to a lack of military capabilities, as Secretary Gates gloomily pointed out in his farewell speech. Thus NATO’s European members, including France and Britain, were hardly able to successfully conduct “an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country.”<sup>22</sup> Gates was not altogether wrong.

Just over two years later, on August 29, 2013, it was the Westminster parliament that refused to give permission to the UK Prime Minister to offer British support for the Obama administration’s contemplated air strikes against Syria’s dictator Bashar al-Assad. Obama intended to help tilt the

---

20. Gero von Randow, “Aufwachen aus dem Strategischen Koma,” Die Zeit Online, June 8, 2013: <http://www.zeit.de/2013/23/waffenlieferungen-rebellen-syrien>

21. Nick Witney, “How to stop the Demilitarization of Europe,” *Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations (2011)*, p.2: [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR40\\_DEMILITARISATION\\_BRIEF\\_AW.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR40_DEMILITARISATION_BRIEF_AW.pdf)

22. Robert M. Gates, “The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO),” Brussels, Belgium, June 10, 2011: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>

military balance in the vicious Syrian civil war toward the highly disparate and rather ill-equipped rebel groups of mostly Sunni Muslim forces. The British no-vote delayed and ultimately prevented Obama's intended air strikes. The decision of the House of Commons not to support the U.S. deeply shook the British defense establishment and Prime Minister David Cameron's ruling Conservative-Liberal coalition government.

Devious maneuvering and domestic sparring between the leader of the opposition, Labour politician Ed Milliband, and Cameron were mostly responsible for the unambiguous anti-war vote. It was clear, however, that also the Iraq war had cast its long shadow over the parliamentary vote. Parliamentarians were well aware of Prime Minister Blair's deception of the House of Commons when outlining the reasons why an invasion of Iraq in cooperation with the Bush administration in early 2003 allegedly was in Britain's national interest. Ten years later British public opinion overwhelmingly agreed with the decision of parliament not to join the U.S. in air strikes on Syria. In most other EU countries, skepticism about Obama's envisaged air strikes also ran high, despite the general popularity that the U.S. President still enjoyed on the old continent. Once again, Europe's "soft power" approach to war and international power politics determined the anti-war response of most EU countries. And the response now even included the British, once America's most reliable and most militaristic European partner.

It almost goes without saying that when an air attack on Iran was considered in some political and media circles in Washington in the course of 2012/13 to deal with the danger of Iran obtaining a nuclear capacity, there was no support to be found among European governments. In fact Germany, for instance, intensified its efforts to find a negotiated solution as part of its membership of the "P5+1" club of nations negotiating with Tehran.<sup>23</sup>

From the point of view of the Pentagon and the White House, despair with Europe's lack of thinking in military-strategic terms has dominated the transatlantic security debate since before the end of the Cold War. The Europeans, it seems to the U.S., have lost both their will to exercise power and their effective military capacity to do so. But does this rather masculine "John Wayne" interpretation of the necessities of world politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century stand up to closer scrutiny?

---

23. For a discussion with Frank Wisner, former US ambassador to Egypt and Obama's special envoy to Cairo during Mubarak's last days in power, on the Arab Spring and Iran's nuclear ambitions, see [www.youtube.com/KrasnoUNC](http://www.youtube.com/KrasnoUNC)

### Europe's Military Spending Cuts: Less drastic than perceived?

It is indeed correct that European defense budgets have been slashed in the last few years. In view of the global economic and financial crisis one would expect no less. Once the Great Recession had lapped from the U.S. to the other side of the Atlantic in September 2008 with the collapse and filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection of financial services firm Lehman Brothers, the Euro crisis erupted in its wake. It soon required the infusion of massive emergency funds to bail out and avoid the bankruptcies of countries such as Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Latvia, and others. At times the Euro crisis threatened to engulf large countries such as Spain, Italy and even France. As late as 2012 the imminent break-up of the Euro zone, if not the entire EU, was seriously discussed in respected papers such as the *New York Times*.

Still, contrary to the widespread view in the U.S., defense budgets in Europe were in fact only moderately cut. The respected Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) that regularly publishes a plethora of statistics on international military spending, concludes that in 2012 (the last year for which reliable figures are available) "world military expenditure remained at historically high levels." Defense spending "in 2012 was still higher in real terms than the peak near the end of the Cold War." However, compared to 2010 and 2011, global military spending had fallen a little.<sup>24</sup> Europe was no exception to this trend. In general the European "Big Four" (Britain, France, Germany, Italy) have begun to cautiously cut military expenditure. "The decreasing trend since 2010," according to SIPRI, "continued in 2012." Overall defense budgets in all European countries (not just NATO or EU members) fell by 6.9 per cent in 2011-12 compared to 2008, the year when the Euro crisis commenced. The reduction in defense spending of the 26 European NATO members amounted to 7.5 per cent. Not surprisingly, the countries of southern and central Europe, who were most affected by the Euro crisis, cut most deeply. Twenty of the 37 European countries cut military expenditure thus by 10 per cent overall between 2008 and 2012.

The reduction in military spending by the major European powers was much less severe. The UK reduced spending by 5.2 per cent between 2008 and 2012, France by 3.8 per cent, while Germany actually increased its military budget by 2.6 percentage points during these years of crisis. All three countries, however, have announced that there will be additional reductions in 2014 and 2015. When looking at the GDP-defense ratios, Europe

---

24. SIPRI Fact Sheet, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2012" (April 2013), pp.1-5. The following statistics and figures follow the data presented by SIPRI: <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1304.pdf>



does not fare too badly either. In 2003 Germany, for instance, spent 1.4 per cent of its GDP on defense. In 2012 this was still the case. Admittedly this is well below NATO's "self-obligation" of 2 per cent. The UK and France also did relatively well. Britain spent 2.5 per cent on defense matters in 2003 and it spent the same proportion of GDP in 2012. France's contribution fell from 2.6 per cent of GDP in 2003 to 2.3 per cent in 2012 and Italy's from 2.0 per cent to 1.7 per cent. These were not dramatic declines. The U.S., for instance, increased its spending on defense in terms of GDP from 3.7 per cent in 2003 to 4.4 per cent in 2012 – and this despite the "war on terror" and the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While in percentage terms these were relatively moderate increases, it still led to the additional expenditure of billions of dollar on defense. The moderate increase or fall of these GDP ratios can largely be explained by the long economic expansion and financial boom the western world enjoyed prior to 2008.

The statistics become much less impressive, however, when actual spending in real dollar terms is considered, and in the last resort this is what counts. As a point of reference, in real term spending the U.S. defense budget saw a decrease of 6 per cent in 2011-12 as compared to an overall increase of 32 per cent from 2003 to 2012. In real terms, the UK's spending on defense held up well. It only fell by 0.8 per cent in 2011-12 while from 2003 to 2012 the country increased its defense spending by 4.9 per cent overall. For France the figures are much worse, however. The French defense budget fell by 0.3 per cent in 2011-12 but by 3.3 per cent overall since 2003. Germany's defense budget took a cut of 0.9 per cent in 2011-12 and a reduction of 1.9 per cent overall since 2003. And Italy – one of the countries most severely affected by the Euro crisis – saw its defense budget fall by 5.2 per cent in 2011-12 and overall by a significant 19 per cent since 2003.<sup>25</sup>

While these are substantial reductions, they do not come close to anything resembling the "demilitarization" of Europe.

It must be added, however, that it is of course important in which areas of the defense budget the reductions are being made and implemented. And some of the cuts have been very painful, hitting the functionality of the respective armed forces badly. The reductions in military manpower and the downsizing of the individual European armies and navies as well as transport aircraft may augur very badly for the future. This may well further handicap the actual ability to deploy the European militaries in far-away places of conflict. The British tendency to focus much of the country's

---

25. *Ibid.*



military expenditure on equipment (and thus give the defense budget a supporting role for the important British defense industries) rather than on expertise of their military forces is viewed critically in the U.S. and also by the UK service chiefs themselves. In addition, a huge amount of British resources are spent on the country's nuclear arsenal. Quiet suggestions by the U.S. to perhaps terminate the British nuclear deterrent including the Trident nuclear missile system have fallen on deaf ears in London. It is clear, however, as Malcolm Chalmers, author of an important RUSI report, writes, "the UK would not become a nuclear-armed state now if it were not one already." After all, with 70-80 billion British pounds over the next 25 years, "Trident will consume a third of the UK's entire military equipment program for the 2020s and beyond."<sup>26</sup> The situation is not dissimilar regarding France's nuclear programme.

### **The Flawed Perception of European military spending**

The U.S. Pentagon and also the NATO Secretary General have perceived the reduction in European defense budgets as particularly drastic in view of two developments. *First*, since 9/11 a huge remilitarization of U.S. foreign policy and substantial increase of American military spending has occurred. This has dwarfed the defense spending of the Europeans and any other country in the world. After all, while global military spending fell dramatically after the end of the Cold War, once the bottom had been reached by the mid- to late 1990s, military expenditure began to increase once again, in particular in the U.S. The events of 9/11 then "prompted 8 years of rapidly increasing spending." Only with the onset of the global economic and financial crisis in 2008 and American reduction of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan – did global and U.S. military spending begin to slow down.<sup>27</sup> By 2012, the governments in Washington, DC, and elsewhere had started to accelerate their defense cuts however.

Nevertheless, in 2012 the U.S. still spent as much on defense as the military expenditure of the next 10 countries combined. Even in 2012 American military spending was 69 per cent higher than in 2001 as SIPRI points out. (China, by comparison, has increased its military expenditure by 175 per cent since 2003 and by 7.8 per cent in 2011-12). Throughout the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and indeed in the decades before, the U.S. spent at least 40 per cent of all global military expenditure. This fell to 39 per cent in 2012, however, due to the increasing defense spending of above all China, India and Russia.

---

26. Quoted in Richard Norton-Taylor and Ewen MacAskill, "The year to ask, what is the use of military force?," *The Guardian*, January 8, 2014. See also Ewen MacAskill, "Robert Gates's attack on UK military spending is vague and opportunistic," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2014.

27. SIPRI Fact Sheet, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2012" (April 2013), p.2 (quote also on p.2).

Secondly, from the 1990s until 2008 the EU significantly *increased* its defense spending despite the threat from the Soviet Union having disappeared. As German scholar Gunther Hellmann has pointed out, in 2006 the EU member states, 25 at that stage, were only outspent by the U.S. in terms of defense expenditure. During this time-span the EU-25 "spent double the amount on defense compared to what Russia, China, India and Brazil spent *together*," Hellmann writes. He concludes that during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century from outside the western world, the EU-25 looked like "a real military heavyweight."<sup>28</sup> Only this steep increase in defense spending make the reductions in the EU defense budgets after 2008 look radical. But perhaps the slow-down in European defense spending after 2008 was a timely measure. The EU would not have been able to cope with continued high defense spending on a pre-2008 level in view of the onslaught of the Euro crisis and sluggish or even negative economic growth in almost all EU countries except Germany. Tax increases would have been necessary. This in turn would have led to even more angry outcries across the European continent.

Except in times of war the European populace has never been prepared to accept substantial military spending in the middle of a deep recession. Thus one could even argue that the EU was fortunate that defense expenditure had begun to come down after 2008. Otherwise the severe austerity measures implemented in almost all EU countries and the necessary reductions in military spending that would have had to be pushed through after 2008 would have been even more significant.<sup>29</sup>

A comparison with the U.S. is also helpful. The huge outlay in defense spending (including the funds spend on the simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and various other global crisis situations) has significantly added to the U.S. debt burden since 2001. This has had detrimental effects on both the U.S. economy and the U.S. currency and has made the country dependent on much of its debt being held by China. The high debt burden as well as the bailout of the banking system and indeed the election of the first African-American president and a new activism by the federal government in turn has given rise to the right-wing tea party movement (though its disciples tend to favor a strong U.S. military). The latter has brought a strong ideological edge to the political discussion in Washington, D.C., which in turn has led to frequent gridlock in Congress.

---

28. Gunther Hellmann, "Demilitarization of Europe'? If the Atlantic Alliance has a Problem it is that Europe is Transnationalizing Security while the US is Remilitarizing along National Security Lines," (paper, 2010), p.8, see also pp.1-3, 6ff.

29. Ibid.

Government shutdowns, fear of the bankruptcy of the country due to the inability of Congress to agree on raising the debt ceiling in good time and the enforced automatic spending cuts from 2013 to 2021 (sequestration of the federal budget) as required by the Budget Control Act of 2011 have been the unfortunate results, though the recent budget agreement has mitigated some of the sequestration effects. Still, the automatic sequester in dollar terms has slashed spending on defense and non-defense items to more or less equal amounts (though military salaries and a number of social programs have been excluded). On the whole it has been estimated that the military budget is affected by a decrease in spending of progressively between 10 per cent (2013) to 8.5 per cent (2021) annually for the next seven years, amounting to an astounding \$454 billion in total. Thus, even in the U.S. – and despite the parallel increase (albeit from a much lower level) in military spending of countries such as China, India and Russia – the necessity to significantly cut the defense budget has been regarded as unavoidable. The apparent need to slash defense expenditure in such a blunt way found even the support of part of the Republican right. If this is the case in the U.S., the much more pacifistically minded European public would have given EU governments little option but to cut defense spending substantially in the face of the Euro crisis and the sudden era of austerity, if defense spending had not already been coming down.

Thus, American complaints since 2010 about insufficient European spending on defense have been overly dramatic but they have not been altogether wrong when merely looking at the barren statistics in isolation. But U.S. complaints entirely ignore the political and economic context in Europe and indeed even in the U.S. itself. EU governments – including those in London and Paris – have had no option but to reduce defense spending. In the face of widespread unemployment and the severe austerity measures imposed on already hard-pressed populations across the European continent. An increase in the military budget to 2 per cent of GDP as the NATO guidelines suggest would have swept a great number of governments from power. Most EU governments were already under severe political attack and suffered from great unpopularity due to their austerity programs. Since the start of the Euro crisis more than 16 European governments have fallen from power. This included Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi who lost power in 2011 and French President Sarkozy, who was not re-elected in 2012. His successor Francois Hollande has remained equally unpopular.

Angela Merkel in Berlin, however, was one of the few long-term survivors. As always she has been highly attuned to German public opinion and

was clearly not tempted to increase military spending at the expense of social welfare programs and unemployment benefits. She also insisted on strict austerity conditions that accompanied the combined EU/ECB/IMF bail-outs of countries teetering on the brink of bankruptcy such as Greece, Portugal and Ireland. Merkel's huge re-election victory in September 2013 was testimony to the domestic popularity of her tough economic austerity course. Her success also seemed to demonstrate her electoral wisdom for insisting on the stringent conditions that needed to be fulfilled by Greece and other countries for receiving EU bail out funds.

### **New European Military Efforts – a desirable course of action?**

Would the Pentagon and the White House be happy if the Europeans behaved in a much more militarily inclined way globally? Would the revival of European militarization be a wise and forward-looking strategy? As long as the UK and France take over some of the burden of global responsibilities while closely cooperating with and being guided by U.S. leadership, Washington would be more than happy. Any independent non-coordinated global activities, however, would be resented. The 1956 Suez crisis can still serve as a useful reminder of Washington's understanding of what strategic and military "burden-sharing" means in reality. The American political establishment still believes in the validity of what scholars have termed "hegemonic stability theory".

Any global leadership tendencies by Germany might be even more problematic, despite some of the utterances to the contrary coming out of Washington. Even almost 70 years after the end of World War II, a Germany more interested in confronting global military challenges than hitherto would still frighten Germany's neighbors and upset the careful balance of friendship, partnership and cooperation within the EU. Germany's economic dominance within the EU, that has manifested itself since the onset of the Euro crisis even more clearly than until then, has already led to significant resentment and suspicion of Berlin's economic agenda. In Greece, for instance, anti-German protests were a frequent occurrence in 2011-2013. Any perceived German preponderance in the security and military fields would lead to even more suspicion and resentment among the country's EU allies. Any serious attempt to realize German President Gauck's ambition for Germany to play a more prominent role in shaping international affairs would not be unproblematic.

France and Britain already feel demoted to second fiddles in terms of the economic and financial role they are able to play within the EU. Both countries are still the EU's foremost military powers (and Europe's only nuclear

powers), however, and they are justifiably proud of this role. If Germany also began competing with them in this arena, they would deeply resent this and it would cause a great deal of tension within the EU. This clearly cannot be in Washington's interest. Judging by frequent demands coming out of the American capital, a stronger global military role by the EU as such – though in close coordination with Washington – would not be a problem, however. EU peacemaking and nation building activities in, for instance, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Congo, Chad, East Timor and the Central African Republic and more recently in Somalia are more than welcome in the U.S. Franco-European engagement in Mali, for instance, also has Washington's approval.

### Concluding Remarks

Concern about the “demilitarization” of Europe has been much exaggerated in the United States. The 28 EU member states, and in particular the continent's “Big Four” are still very well armed. They continue to be among those governments whose defense expenditure is in the top ten worldwide. The “Big Four” are also among the globe's largest arms exporters, a highly controversial and problematic issue that goes beyond the scope of this essay. Germany, France and the UK are respectively the globe's third, fourth and fifth largest exporters of armaments to both other NATO allies and sometimes dubious third countries.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as former U.S. Secretary of Defense Bob Gates pointed out in 2010 and 2011, it is true that European spending on the military has begun to decrease. Above all, this is due to the deep impact of the Euro crisis and the global financial and economic crisis. Still, also the “value gap” in the transatlantic security mindsets and some degree of European pacifism has contributed to the fact that the slashing of defense budgets and the curtailing of military force levels in most European countries causes few domestic disagreements, except in the ranks of the respective defense establishments. It can safely be predicted that in an age of austerity and as long as there is no economic boom on the horizon, defense expenditure will be reduced further in almost all European countries, including its leading military powers, Britain and France.

For obvious reasons, this cannot continue indefinitely. In particular, the British government has become concerned that its ability to punch above its weight in world politics and continue to be a valuable ally to the United States might be quite compromised by additional drastic cuts to the UK

---

30. Even a former German chancellor has expressed his grave concerns recently. See Helmut Schmidt, “Altkanzler Schmidt fordert Stopp deutscher Rüstungsexporte,” *Die Zeit*, No.50 (December 11, 2013): <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2013-12/helmut-schmidt-fordert-ende-deutscher-waffenexporte>

defense budget. After all, within the next six years the British army is to lose 20,000 troops and will be reduced to a mere 82,000 troops. The navy will lose 5,000 and the air force 6,000 men and women. The UK has not had "full-spectrum capabilities" to fight in tandem with the U.S. on land, sea and air for quite some time. Britain's approximate equality with the U.S. only still exists in matters of intelligence but not in the military realm. At present, for the first time since World War I, the UK also has no operational aircraft carrier. However, two new aircraft carriers are being built as well as other new aircraft and helicopters. Moreover, much closer British cooperation with France than ever before has been agreed.<sup>31</sup>

The crucial problem for the next few years remains whether or not Britain as well as France, Germany and most other EU countries will continue to have a critical and well-trained mass in terms of military forces. Still, it is doubtful in any case that the U.S. will be happy with the European defense efforts any time soon. As long as there is a value gap in terms of threat perception and differences of view regarding the security strategies needed to address the most pressing global challenges, transatlantic security relations will remain challenging. Moreover, the priorities given within the EU to domestic social and economic concerns rather than world politics will further stop Europe from becoming a genuine global player, except in terms of trade and related economic issues. The transatlantic debate about European "demilitarization" is bound to continue. It is unlikely, however, that in the foreseeable future the U.S. will succeed in gently pushing the EU countries into a more military policy direction. Perhaps this is not a bad thing either.

---

31. See the articles from the *Guardian* quoted above (note 26). See also Bob Gates' interview with the BBC's 'Today' morning program in the context of promoting his memoirs. "Military cuts mean 'no US partnership', Robert Gates warns Britain," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25754870>

