

Together In The Same Boat: Shared Platforms For An Effective Defence

By Etienne de Durand*

The debate over European security has been raging for the past 15 years, yet it has too often been focused on Europe's security architecture, while paying scant attention to military capabilities. Though this has been corrected in recent years, with NATO's DCI and the flurry of European agreements since Saint-Malo, the security debate still remains fixated on grand questions such as the future of transatlantic relations or the emergence of Europe as an international power. Meanwhile, the increased pace of military interventions abroad magnifies Europe's collective military shortcomings, despite worthy attempts to keep up, mostly conducted at the national level.

In the following text, the opposite approach is proposed: starting with European forces' current shortcomings, this article tries to examine how *sharing* military platforms and systems could address these shortcomings, provided certain military and political issues likely to arise are solved beforehand.

Capabilities First

Much has been said about the inadequacies of the military forces collectively fielded by Europe and the widening transatlantic gap – whether it be in terms of advanced weaponry, key enabling systems, or deployable troops compared with numbers on paper, European forces are lagging behind their American counterparts. It is a generally accepted proposition that European countries together spend 40 per cent of what the US currently spends, while getting roughly ten per cent of US fighting power.¹ As some are quick to point out, however, US forces are not necessarily the right yardstick: the interests, foreign policies, and defence postures of European countries are vastly different, more limited in scope, and need not be compared to the US, which stands in a category of its own. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, European forces should be evaluated on a different basis, namely probable contingencies and areas of common European interest. Proponents of these views, most of them from continental Europe, also assert that interoperability and commonality should be sought at the European level, lest European armies end up as specialised segments of the US armed forces, incapable of autonomous action if the need ever arose. Finally, intra-European specialisation would also mean spending better, which may very well prove more realistic than spending more.

On the opposite side, Atlanticists remain convinced that interoperability with US forces is the

* Etienne de Durand is a research fellow within IFRI's Security Studies Department (French Institute for International Relations, Paris) and teaches international security at the Military Academy of Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan. He works mainly on French and US defence policy, military transformation, and ongoing interventions, and has published articles and monographs on these subjects.

The author would like to thank Jolyon Howorth and Dominique David for their helpful comments.

¹ Cf. Jolyon Howorth, "The Capacities at Europe's Disposal", *Proceedings of the IRRI-KIIB Symposium*, 2004, Brussels, who estimated that EU countries together could at best muster 50,000 troops capable of high-intensity operations.

linchpin both of political influence in Washington and of continued military relevance in general. Whatever the range of scenarios and the geographical scope that are deemed to fall within the purview of Europe, it nevertheless remains true that European nations do not possess by themselves the means to conduct significant high-intensity operations at an acceptable cost. Unless such operations are altogether dropped as implausible in the short to mid-term – a dangerous proposition to say the least – there is probably more to gain, especially for the best European militaries, in working with the most advanced fighting forces in the world than in helping lesser military establishments to improve themselves.² Finally, intra-European specialisation, in a way, puts the cart before the horse, as it takes for granted a common or unified European international position – a rather dubious assumption after the 2003 crisis over Iraq – and in the process could leave individual European nations powerless to act in case of a major disagreement inside the EU.

Both points of view contain more than a grain of truth, yet each of them also brings back a host of seemingly intractable political issues. Meanwhile, major European nations – even Britain – are unable to buy on a national basis the full range of capabilities they need, making it a hopeless endeavour to try and catch up with the US-driven military transformation. Even lesser standards are not met: there probably is not a single European military that can claim today not to have critical “holes” in its force structures and weapon systems.³ To cap it all, European countries are also bound in an acquisition cycle inherited from the Cold War, and are, therefore, struggling to finish paying for major platforms, the usefulness of which is sometimes questionable, while being unable to afford much-needed PGMs, C4ISR systems, or transportation assets. At this stage, and given the current and foreseeable budgetary constraints, pragmatic cooperation and short-term acquisitions on a collective basis, *whatever the institutional frameworks*, look like the only promising and, in fact, realistic options.

Procurement: For A Clean Break With The Past

The Cold War revolved around staying the technological-military course, namely keeping up with Soviet capabilities over time. In that respect, in-being military power (military reserves, nuclear deterrence, the full potential of nations) and projected capabilities mattered relatively more than up-front, usable forces. In terms of defence acquisitions, Cold War procurement was focused on major programs, developed on a national or multinational basis. In cooperative projects, apportioning technological and industrial benefits more often than not took precedence over the actual fielding date of the platform, the procurement of an adequate number of systems, or the overall coherence of force structures. Traditionally, each participating nation would order a certain number of systems and make sure its defence firms got a share of the work in line with its investment. In short, a techno-industrial logic dominated operational requirements.

With the end of the Cold War, a new strategic landscape emerged, made up of frequent crises calling for “hot” interventions in distant places. Forces that are operational, deployable, and politically usable have become key. Western militaries have adapted to the latter demand by

² Ideally, major European militaries should be able to do both, the whole point being to avoid sacrificing one to get the other – hence the need for a pragmatic, capabilities-oriented approach.

³ Britain and France have consistently elected to plug the “gaps and holes” along the way, while trying to keep up; Germany however has just settled for the opposite route, namely accepting a drastic downsizing of the combat-ready part of its forces (35,000 “Response Forces” out of a 250,000 total in a three-tier structure – Cf. “Country Briefing: Germany”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, No. 33, Vol. 41, August 2004.)

emphasising professional forces or dropping the draft altogether, and have tried to rely on their qualitative advantage to effect decisive operations while minimising losses and collateral damage, as the limited nature of the stakes generally requires. For the resource-constrained militaries of Europe, the number of ongoing crises as well as the pace of technological developments initiated by civilian industry, have made this second adaptation particularly difficult to maintain. In this context, time-honoured solutions, such as common programs developed over 15 years, even under the aegis of coordinating agencies (OCCAR, EARMCA), might well prove not fully up to the task of force modernisation: as the difficulties surrounding several ongoing international programs (Typhoon, JSF) attest, this model may have become too complex and too long term.⁴ It might then be worth exploring a new, complementary solution: *sharing scarce platforms and assets*, whatever their origin. To quickly make up for their deficiencies, European nations have to move away from Cold War habits and resist the temptation to prioritise economic return on investments over actual military capabilities.

Asset-Sharing: More Bang, Same Buck, Little Sweat

NATO's DCI, or more recently Helsinki Headline Goal and associated initiatives, have identified the most pressing needs of European forces.⁵ Several solutions have been offered, such as the development and procurement in common of a new platform (the A-400M), the designation of "lead countries" in essential procurement projects, or the pooling together of national tanker fleets. The latter deserves closer scrutiny, as it probably represents the best and quickest way to improve European capabilities, however, it can be pushed further towards "sharing", that is to say, the fielding of major platforms and systems owned in common and manned alternatively or jointly. As promising as "asset-sharing" may appear, however, several military and political issues must first be addressed.

From a military point of view, asset-sharing makes the most sense for specialised systems that have a high military added-value but are few in number and, therefore, have a very high per-unit cost – the so-called *High-Demand/Low-Density*, or HD/LD platforms. For obvious practical reasons, armies would barely be affected by sharing, while air forces and navies would be acutely and doubly concerned: they operate few but onerous platforms, and European shortcomings are especially acute in these areas. To take but one telling example, given the prominent role played by air campaigns in modern wars, Britain, France and Germany do not possess, even together, systems numerous or advanced enough to fulfil core functions such as electronic warfare operations, SEAD (suppression of enemy air defences) or ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance) – even though SEAD operations have proved indispensable to establish early command of the air. The same holds true for strategic transport or precision strike capabilities.

European nations could not only insure commonality between their PGMs and aircraft, but also fund common stockpiles of them, so as to reduce maintenance costs and hedge against a potential high-intensity crisis causing an unexpected surge in demand. In a similar vein, a whole range of HD/LD platforms could be procured and operated in common: *AWACS* and

⁴ Burkard Schmitt, *The European Union and Armaments: Getting a Bigger Bang for the Euro*, Chaillot Paper No. 63, EU-ISS, Paris, 2003, explores the long-term implications of EARMCA for the defence market.

⁵ The Capabilities Conferences have identified 10 areas of strategic deficiency: missile defences, NBC defences, Space Systems, Headquarters, Special Forces, CSAR operations, UAVs and ISTAR systems, Air Refuelling, Strategic Air Transport, Interoperability.

JSTARS (or some tactical equivalent like the French *Horizon* system); refuelling aircrafts; carriers and/or their fighter wings; HALE drones or C4 systems and structures for example. For major weapon systems, this would require the training and fielding of redundant crews for each single platform or, in some cases, multinational crews, as is the case with NATO's AWACS.⁶ In turn, this kind of sharing would require that platforms be designed and configured with enough commonalities so that national crews could operate them. For naval platforms in particular, this would necessitate some traditional peculiarities be dropped; however, the net increase in capabilities would surely be worth the sacrifice in military culture demanded from the *Royal Navy* or *la Royale*. In time, national navies and air forces would gain a better understanding of each other and be able to tap a pool of common systems that would significantly augment their reach and decisiveness. In short, sharing has the potential to augment jointness, combinedness, and fighting power. By avoiding useless redundancy, sharing would also free up defence funds badly needed to acquire new systems like bombers (or at least multi-mission "bomb-trucks") or gunships for CAS.

It almost goes without saying that the main hurdles to be overcome are at core political, and revolve around the issue of control, which risks bringing back the whole institutional conundrum with its associated debates (NATO vs ESDP, structured cooperation vs integrated, EU-wide approach, etc). What would be the point of Britain committing herself to a major programme, only to find its decision to participate in an American-led campaign blocked, say by a French veto? In a similar fashion, French policymakers would not want to be paralysed in Africa because of other nations' reservations. Therefore, any kind of veto power should be regarded as a non-starter. Quite to the contrary, European nations should agree on a *laissez-faire* attitude, whereby participating nations would be able to use shared platforms in a way proportionate to their financial contribution – a little along the line of the IMF's Special Drawing Rights. There remains the problematic, yet unlikely, possibility that participating nations are simultaneously engaged in diverging high-intensity operations; but surely arrangements for such a worst-case scenario could be worked out in advance?⁷

The debate on Euro-American relations and the ultimate goals of European construction should not detract from the pressing need to improve capabilities across the board. Solving the NATO-ESDP *imbroglio* is not a prerequisite to effective action. Quite the opposite is true: tackling the capabilities issue will do much to clear the path both for a renewed transatlantic partnership and a significant European foreign and defence policy. Europeanists and Atlanticists should, therefore, join forces on this particular issue, in keeping both with American demands and the preferred methods of Europe's Founding Fathers: favouring *de facto* solidarities over grand political agreements.

Asset-sharing offers the prospect of quick and tangible improvements, while circumventing and deferring tough political issues: it does not rush in to intra-European specialisation but leaves the door open for further integration when the right political conditions are met.

⁶ Two or more crews for a single platform might be needed so as to allay different political sensitivities *vis-à-vis* a given operation.

⁷ It should be remembered that the two nearly simultaneous MRCs-scenarios developed in the US had more to do with force-sizing than with genuine prospective thinking.