Strategic Insights: An EU Military Headquarters:
A Cure in Search of an Illness?

November 14, 2016 | Dr. John R. Deni

In mid-September, European Union (EU) Commission President Jean Claude Juncker delivered the Commision's annual State of the Union address.[1] Coming on the heels of the British vote to leave the EU, the address provided a roadmap for overcoming the challenges brought about by what Juncker termed an "existential crisis."

Among the key components of the roadmap were several initiatives related to defense and security. For example, Juncker noted rather bluntly that Europe could not rely on soft power alone and that it therefore needed to "toughen up."

This was music to Washington's ears, particularly when Juncker went on to argue for Europe to stop "piggy-backing" on the military might of others (read: Washington). European countries already appear to be heeding his call. After years of flat budgets and defense austerity, there is a growing body of evidence that European states have in fact begun to increase defense spending over the last couple of years.[2] Although some European states, such as Poland, have been increasing defense spending—if only slightly—for many years, evidence now indicates that such increases are broad-based, if perhaps uneven. For example, recent defense spending increases in Eastern Europe are greater than what is occurring in Northern or Western Europe. Regardless, Juncker was right to promote and encourage this emerging trend.

However, Juncker then struck a rather discordant tone when he called for a permanent EU military headquarters. He argued that without a permanent structure, Europe could not act as effectively as it might. While Juncker is certainly correct in noting that the EU could be more effective in how it fulfills its missions, the lack of a permanent military headquarters as a significant causal variable appears largely unsubstantiated by the available evidence.

Since 2003, the EU has conducted nearly three dozen security and defense-related missions in Europe, Asia, and Africa, under the auspices of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).[3] The vast majority of these—21 out of 34—have been civilian missions, which have focused largely on policing, the rule of law, border management, or political monitoring. Whether civilian or military, all of these missions have generated lessons learned, including through scholarly study and analysis, as well as official governmental inquiry. Among the most important factors[4] affecting EU effectiveness in

the field were a lack of cohesion and consensus[5] at the political level, insufficient coordination among a variety of European efforts,[6] and a lack of appropriate funding,[7] civilian experts,[8] or relevant military equipment.[9]

Given these lessons learned, it seems something of a non sequitur to propose a permanent EU military headquarters—something akin to a cure in search of an illness. In fairness, it is possible such a headquarters **might** improve effectiveness of some aspects of EU military missions—for example,[10] by potentially improving the speed with which an EU-led military operation might get off the ground. However, an EU military headquarters would appear to do little to address the **most** significant problems confronting **all** CSDP missions. No amount of headquarters or headquarters personnel can overcome political-level disagreements in Brussels or resource shortfalls among EU member states.

In addition to his call for a permanent CSDP headquarters, Juncker used his State of the Union address to argue for common military assets. In this era of exquisitely expensive military platforms, common acquisition programs can be an effective means for a number of smaller countries to pool assets and acquire needed capabilities both for their own purposes as well as for collective pursuits. Several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, for instance, have pooled their resources to acquire C-17 transport aircraft.[11]

However, pooling and sharing of resources has been too often viewed as a substitute for investment in defense capabilities. This is particularly so among the "big four" European NATO members—France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom—who together account for roughly two thirds of all European NATO military spending. These leading military powers of both NATO and the EU have struggled to maintain sufficient capacity across the range of military capability. In some instances—such as the UK's maritime surveillance aircraft—capabilities have in fact been eliminated.[12] In other instances—such as the cap on Germany's end strength—operational requirements have outstripped capacity.[13] At some point—and, as noted above, it seems European leaders now realize their militaries have perhaps reached this point—no amount of "efficiencies" can make up for capabilities and capacities cut too deeply.

Taken to its natural extension, Juncker's call for common "assets" could lead to a common EU military. The idea of a "European" military force actually has roots far deeper than Juncker's September 2016 address. In the early 1950s, the Pleven Plan for Franco-German reconciliation in the military and security sphere centered on a proposal for a European army. Although this did not come to fruition, the Élysée Treaty of 1963 sought to build on this initial step, and ultimately it led to the establishment of a Franco-German brigade in 1987. Since then, the Franco-German brigade has been deployed to Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Mali.

The Franco-German brigade—as well as the Strasbourg-based Eurocorps headquarters that also stems from Franco-German cooperation—would seem to prove that a European military could work. At a minimum, a common EU military might allow the "boutique" militaries of many smaller European countries to become part of a larger, more effective whole.

In practice though, the challenges of truly operationalizing the military integration of personnel and units from over two dozen sovereign states are insurmountable, at least at present. Even for the Franco-German brigade, its constituent French and German units have been subject to caveats resulting in a strange mix of operational capabilities that have frustrated truly combined military

operations. Although the Eurocorps has arguably seen more operational "success," this has occurred largely at the level of headquarters staff. When it comes to committing the lives of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, 28 sovereign EU member states can, and often do, have 28 perspectives on whether and how their combat and supporting units should be utilized.

What is missing that might make a European military work is a true political union—without it, any effort to create a European military force is likely to flounder on the shoals of political reality. Members of the EU have indeed pooled sovereignty in several issue areas, most famously in their currencies and monetary policy. When it comes to defense and security though, member states still retain a great deal of sovereignty.

Instead of real, combined military capability that a true political union might bring, what is likely to result from premature efforts to build a European military will not be too far removed from what we see today in some cases. That is, EU battlegroups that rarely, if ever, deploy; and a NATO Response Force that sees action only in the wake of natural disasters.

European integration in defense and security makes great sense on a variety of levels and from many perspectives. However, it is naïve, and probably dangerous, to think that an "ever closer union" in defense and security affairs can precede a political union. As such, Washington would do well to advise its European allies to pursue reasoned, limited integration, and cooperation when it comes to defense matters, and as well as to accelerate the emerging trends in defense spending.

ENDNOTES

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