What EU citizens think about European defence

by Olivier de France

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the 'end of history' was nigh – and Europe stood squarely on the right side of it. The times have changed, alas. Today policymakers in the EU expend much of their energy on parrying short-term economic shocks, which have rocked the European boat in ways that seemed unthinkable before. There is a lingering sense that a narrative has unravelled, yet to be convincingly replaced.

Countries face a strategic landscape that shifts faster than their perception of it perhaps allows. There are no tangible conventional threats and no enemies at Europe's gates, but an array of risks and threats that are harder to predict and increasingly more complex. The changing environment requires the ability to bring a panoply of instruments to bear on a range of different problems. Europe prides itself on its ability to do this. Since the European Security Strategy called for a 'comprehensive approach' in 2003, the EU has endeavoured to conduct its external action in a flexible, integrated and multilateral way.

Great expectations

This approach to foreign policy has served it well. The added value of the EU's approach is acknowledged on the diplomatic scene, and has allowed it to become a valuable partner on the crisis management front. Such recognition does not come without an extra weight of expectation: when catastrophe strikes in Lampedusa, it is assumed Europe will have the adequate tools and capability to deal with the crisis. When it comes to the hard grind of peace-building, the patient push for security sector reform and the more onerous dimensions of state-building, Europe's partners (the US included) naturally turn to the EU. It is called upon by feuding parties in Bamako or Aleppo as an international actor with less historical baggage and more instruments to bring to bear on civilian and military crises.

Expectations are hardly any lower at home. In 2013, the Transatlantic Trends survey carried out by the German Marshall Fund found that 71% of Europeans want the EU to exert 'strong leadership in world affairs'. The idea of a common foreign policy for Europe has enjoyed support ranging consistently *between 63% and 70%* over the last twenty years, according to Eurobarometer polls.

Remarkably, support for a common European defence and security policy registers even higher. Over the 1992-2013 period, approval rates vary *between 68% and 79%*, with some discrepancy between

member states (a small majority in Ireland, the UK, Finland, Sweden; over 75% in France, Germany, Benelux, Visegrád and Baltic countries).

The most striking feature is perhaps how *constant* the ratings have proved over the years. They have remained consistently high despite continued enlargement (EU-12, EU-15, EU-27, EU-28), 9/11, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the financial crisis, the rise of the 'rest', US strategic rebalancing, and indeed the latest populist and isolationist trends. Such numbers are testimony to the fact that a vast majority of Europeans perceive the notion of a common foreign and security policy in a positive light.

The figures might be interpreted as a sign that Europeans sense that individual EU nations have little chance of competing on the world stage in isolation. They are often quoted by officials to show the level of support that common European endeavours enjoy with EU citizens, and by commentators urging policymakers to take heed of the fact and translate such support into policy.

Such high expectations can of course be perilous. The 'comprehensive approach' that has served the EU well also risks generating frustration and disappointment across the board, if people invest entirely different meanings in it. Shedding the grand old narratives in favour of doing a bit of everything in the security arena is one thing – it is another to turn into a blank canvass for people to paint in their national colours, according to national and cultural preferences, until it becomes a blur.

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In view of this, it might be useful to pin down exactly what these expectations are. What precisely are EU citizens supporting when they voice their support for a 'common foreign policy'? What is 'European defence', and how does it match up with what people think it is? Do poll numbers map perceptions or realities – and how wide is the gap between the two?

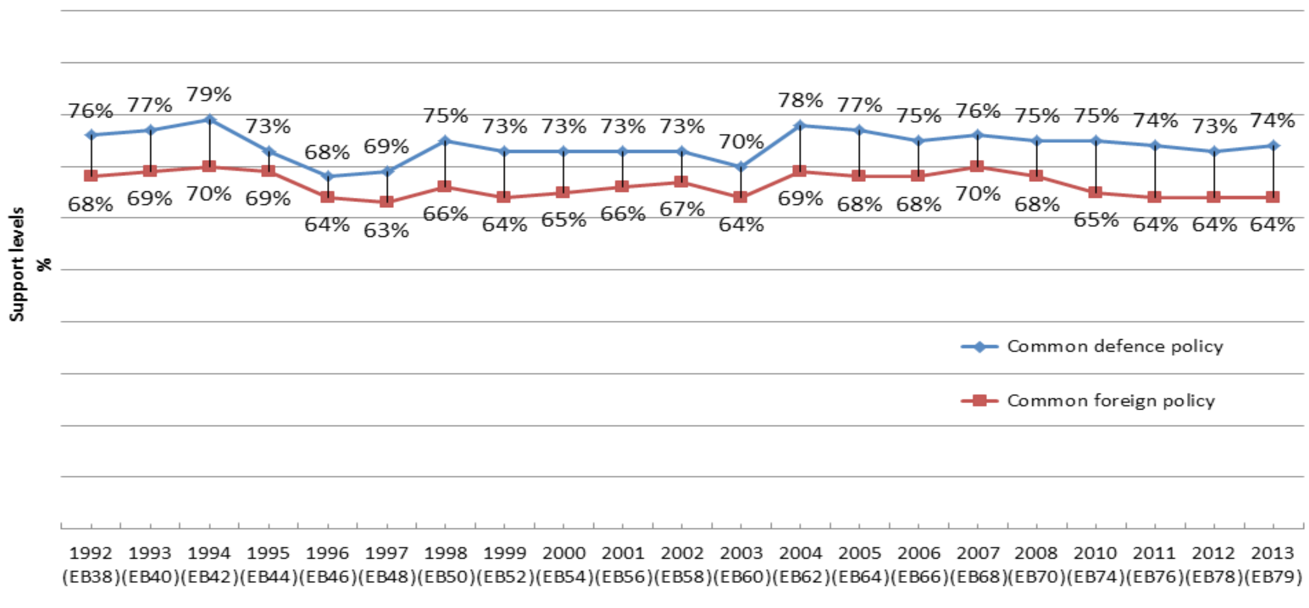
Polls and perceptions

On the face of it, there may seem little to argue about. People want Europe to be prosperous and powerful. They want the EU to exert sufficient influence on the global scene to defend and promote the interests of its citizens. However, cracks begin to show in the consensus when there is actual cause for disagreement – namely what such 'interests' might be, how such power should be exerted in practice, and what costs it might entail.

Eurobarometer data shows that over 70% of EU citizens favour a European foreign policy that is autonomous from the United States. At the same time, 39% would like to see further cuts in defence budgets [Gallup 2010]. In countries like France that are yet to undergo sweeping cuts, the defence budget is considered by the public as the chief candidate for further downsizing [IFOP 2013].

Similarly, most EU citizens (54%) consider that an enhanced European security and defence policy would provide Europe with a greater leadership role in the world [Gallup, 2010]. And yet, even among those who do not consider NATO essential to European security, only 34% are in favour of a 'European defence organisation' [Transantlantic Trends 2013]. Perceptions differ considerably on this count between member states. In France, 46% of these respondents supported a common defence organisation in Europe; likewise for other states with a stake in the industrial game and a chance of weighing on the final outcome like Italy (43%) or Spain (40%); while smaller and/or more Atlanticist countries like Romania (at 17%) and the UK (at 25%) are far less favourable.

Finally, far-reaching support for strong EU leadership in world affairs (71% of Europeans – from 86% of Germans to 60% of Britons) is coupled with widespread aversion to using force. 80% of Europeans oppose the notion of waging 'war for justice' [Transatlantic Trends 2013], and the proportion of Europeans who think it necessary for the EU to develop its global military role is 15% [Gallup 2010]. Active participation in world affairs, however, means unpalatable situations may crop up which do not necessarily fall neatly into polling categories. Negotiations in the Syrian crisis are evidence perhaps that to shift diplomatic lines, a full gamut of options can be required: these include the ability to back up political discourse with substantive means. This in turn requires credibility, and capabilities that are seldom inexpensive.



Source: EUISS. Aggregated Eurobarometer data

The devil is in the detail

The statistics may appear faintly confusing. Basically, the numbers suggest that Europe should pursue increased global leadership and strategic autonomy, *but with fewer common means, less investment, no conceivable recourse to force and no dedicated institutions or structures.*

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There are a number of ways of explaining such conflicting conclusions. First, it is quite conceivable that there exists a degree of confusion over the *means*, and the *meaning*, of security and defence policy in Europe. For instance, recent NATO research [NATO 2013] shows that European citizens estimate their own national defence expenditure ranges between 2% and 15% of their country's GDP. Obviously, the levels of investment involved do not seem immediately apparent to EU citizens.

Nor is the purpose of such investment always self-evident. The greater part of these budgets is devoted to unspectacular but seldom inexpensive tasks: ensuring the bread and butter of national security, guaranteeing a nation's sovereignty, creating the conditions for prosperity. The huge costs associated with maintaining autonomous cyber systems or satellite communication capabilities are perhaps only becoming evident to the wider public in light of recent NSA revelations. This could help explain why greater leadership and autonomy are expected of the EU, although paradoxically the means they mobilise are not deemed necessary.

It may also be easier to support the broader principle than to think through its practical consequences. The notion of a common and competitive defence industry, for example, is less sensitive than the repercussions it has on jobs and industry. If the practical implications of security policy clash with domestic political interests, they are more likely to be left unspecified. This maintains the illusion that Europeans might be allowed to *enjoy the benefits of a common foreign and security without shouldering some of its constraints.*

There is more to it, however. When the implications are set out clearly and the difficult questions put to them, it appears EU citizens *do not in fact see eye-to-eye on the specifics of the matter.* National reflexes play up when it is made clear what common European defence implies by way of equipment, investment and structures, and traditional faultlines emerge: interventionist v. pacifist, northern v. southern, more v. less Atlanticist. Let us take the two extreme cases recently highlighted by the Transatlantic Trends survey. Nearly half of people polled in France who do not consider NATO

essential favour a European defence organisation – what the French understand as *l'Europe de la défense* – whereas support in Romania barely exceeds 15%. It is striking to think that the very idea of *Europe de la défense* has no equivalent in Romania (or elsewhere for that matter), let alone an adequate translation. Even conceptions of a country's 'strategic autonomy' might clash altogether: rather than laying the emphasis on upholding their strategic autonomy (like France), a number of member states (like Romania) may prefer to concentrate on how best to organise their strategic *dependencies*.

Overall, the poll numbers show that support for a common foreign and defence policy is structurally high. And yet consensus on essentials does not appear to imply agreement on specifics – quite the contrary. In effect, European defence is often understood with national interests and values in mind. It seems everyone would indeed favour a common foreign and defence policy, as long as it is 'common' on one's own terms.

What is CSDP?

As one seeks to clarify the assumptions behind the statistics, a fairly different picture emerges. On the one hand, support for the broader principles seems at times largely academic. It is rarely clear how the notions of common defence or common foreign policy translate into means, costs and constraints. As one scratches the surface the consensus tends to fray, and it becomes apparent that the common defence and foreign policy is chiefly seen through national lenses.

As such the polling data tends to confirm what Catherine Ashton suggests in her recent report on European defence: it is not clear that Europeans agree on the meaning or ultimate goal of CSDP. Institutional stakeholders have in fact recently sought to shift the focus away from European defence towards more conventional notions like the 'state of defence in Europe' – because indeed this is how 'Presidents and Prime Ministers look at these issues together' [Herman van Rompuy's speech at the EDA Annual Conference, March 2013]. Overall there appears to be generally less understanding of the role defence plays in ensuring national sovereignty, security and prosperity, and of the costs thereby incurred. It is vital to do a better job at explaining how *national* defence works, what *European* defence is, and how the latter might feed into the former.

Secondly, dissensions tend to crop up precisely when the implications of common defence and security policies are unpacked. They are often thorny issues that touch upon the very definition of CSDP – and how much of a common defence and security policy it actually is.

How much of a 'defensive' alliance is the EU? Clearly, CSDP was never fashioned to guarantee the territorial defence of Europe, which lies squarely within the remit of NATO's article 5. This limiting factor was built into CSDP from the start, which is partly what restricts its ambitions. However, does this preclude all further discussion in the matter? Without putting any article 5 question onto the table, might it not be profitable to discuss some of the tangible, everyday issues that affect EU citizens? CSDP might integrate some territorial security aspects that address European citizens' immediate security needs. Pooling maritime and airspace surveillance capabilities, for instance, might have an immediate impact and help avoid a repeat of tragedies like Lampedusa.

How much of a 'security' policy is CSDP? Missions and operations are in many ways its most visible incarnation, and what people remember it by. Some of the Union's greater successes in the Balkans or the Horn of Africa should not detract from addressing some of the operational shortcomings. Creating 'virtual' operations in Libya or using private transport helicopters in Mali because member states are no longer prepared to furnish enough equipment cannot be said to send out the right signals – however much it might be justified in practical terms. When operations are not attuned to the reality on the ground and are not provided with the proper means to carry out their mandates, the credibility of CSDP is somewhat undermined.

In truth, both of these questions come down to how 'common' EU countries want the common security and defence policy to be. They relate to more deep-seated issues like lack of trust, 'cultural' divergence and absence of shared 'strategic' outlook. How much sovereignty are Europeans prepared to put in the balance to reap the benefits of integration? What practical difficulties does 'mutualisation' pose, and how do we go about honestly working around them? There seems little chance of finding a pragmatic way of doing so unless the questions are put squarely on the table. Ultimately, it comes down to asking how much 'C' Europeans want in CSDP. The December summit may start yielding some answers.

Olivier de France is an Associate Fellow at the EUISS.

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