



European Military Capabilities

Since the Balkan crises of the 1990s, the European Union has attempted to strengthen its capacity for independent military action. One consequence has been the creation of a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) and of the associated institutional infrastructure that now allows the EU to take charge of its own military operations. Indeed, since 2003, the EU has engaged in an impressive variety of peacekeeping and crisis management operations and an increasing number of European forces have been diverted to overseas deployments. However, European armies have been slow to acquire some of the military equipment necessary to engage in high end war-fighting and force projection that the EU would need in order to shoulder wider global responsibilities. European countries have only reluctantly accepted a growing role in Afghanistan, Congo and Lebanon, and in all three cases they have encountered great difficulties in cobbling together the necessary troops and resources to fulfill the task at hand. What does this tell us about the progress of Europe's developing security and defense policy? Have European countries, in fact, already reached the limit of their military capacities? In light of current developments, this brief aims to assess the European Union's emerging capacity for independent military action.

The Capabilities Gap: Fiction or Reality

For some time now, US commentators have pointed towards a widening military gap between the two sides of the Atlantic. Transatlantic disputes about military burden sharing are, of course, no novelty. During the Cold War, American policy-makers and analysts, time and again, called on Europeans to shoulder a greater responsibility for the defense of the Alliance; calls that largely went unheeded – in no small part, due to the reluctance of the United States to engage in a more equitable power-sharing agreement within NATO. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO member states, including the US, were keen to cash in on their perceived “peace dividends”. However, while in the US this initial slide in defense expenditure was soon arrested and reversed, European defense spending continued to tumble. As a consequence, European defense spending has gradually dropped from a Cold War height of 3.5% of GDP to just 1.9%, while US defense expenditure has recently increased to 4% of GDP. The result has been a deepening gap in military capabilities between Europe and the United States that, some have warned, might soon make it impossible for the two partners to operate together.

The recent widening of this “capabilities gap” can, of course, be explained by the diverging strategic visions that have characterized the transatlantic relationship in the post-Cold War era, as well as related developments in US force planning and technology. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the strategic focus of the United States

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gradually shifted away from Europe, concentrating instead on global security problems such as terrorism and WMD proliferation. In order to deal with these problems more effectively, the US military began to focus on the development of expeditionary forces, concentrated on high intensity war-fighting, while de-emphasizing the use of American soldiers for casualty-prone peacekeeping missions. These developments were further expedited by advancements in communications and information technology at the end of the 1990s, which allowed for rapid improvements in military technology and became known as the “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA). Nurturing these technological developments, the US military set out on an ongoing process of force transformation, which has focused American forces on the high-end war fighting and power projection capabilities that few other military establishments possess.

European forces, for the most part, have undergone a very different development in the post-Cold war era. Geared towards an all out confrontation with the Warsaw Pact, at the beginning of the 1990s, most European armories were packed with heavy military equipment that was not suited for expeditionary warfare. Moreover, Europe’s large draftee armies had difficulties developing the specialized skills that were needed in the new international environment. New investment was slow to come forward, and it was only by the end of the 1990s that European militaries began to part with most of their Cold War concepts¹. Since then, several European countries have adopted ambitious modernization strategies, such as the “New Chapter” of the UK’s *Strategic Defense Review*, France’s *loi de programmation militaire*, and Germany’s *Transformation der Bundeswehr*. Most of these reform programs now stress the need to develop some forces able to participate in high-intensity operations and power projection, while large parts of European militaries continue to focus on peacekeeping and force multiplication activities.

All the same, Europe’s military feebleness remains, to a certain extent, a matter of perspective. While European forces are said to possess only 10% of US capabilities for 60% of the US budget, NATO Europe, collectively, still commands the second largest defense budget in the world. Indeed, Europe’s current defense expenditure of approximately US \$240 billion is the equivalent of the next six largest defense spenders put together (China, Russia, Japan, Saudi Arabia, India, South Korea). Moreover, Europe’s defense industry maintains considerable capabilities and European armies are gradually acquiring many of the same types of high-tech equipment and munitions that are employed by the US. Does that mean that European military capabilities have been falsely underestimated?

Defense Expenditure in Comparison (2004 figures)²

	Expenditure (US\$ billions)	Expenditure (% of GDP)	Percent of world total	Armed forces (thousands)
United States	455.91	3.9%	41%	1,546
NATO Europe	240.11	1.9%	21%	2,352
China	84.30	1.5%	7%	2,255
Russia	61.50	4.4%	5%	1,027
Japan	45.15	1.0%	4%	260

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Developing a Common Military Force?

Europe's inability to muster an autonomous military response became apparent for the first time during the Balkan crises of the early 1990s. While the Bosnian crisis (1991-95) was supposed to demonstrate Europe's ability to deal with its own problems – the “hour of Europe” – Europe failed miserably. European policy-makers could neither muster the political will nor the necessary military forces to prevent the region from sliding into chaos. The small contingent of European forces that was eventually deployed was ill-equipped, lacked a clear mandate, and had little impact on the final outcome of the war. Similarly, NATO's Kosovo campaign in 1999 turned out to be a largely American-run campaign, with European aircraft making only a limited contribution – approximately 30% of all sorties. By the end of the 1990s, Europe, therefore, appeared embarrassingly feeble and incapable of independent military action. Determined to overcome these weaknesses, Britain and France, Europe's principle military powers, pledged to reconcile their political differences and to develop military capabilities that would enable them to act more effectively in the changed international environment.

The Franco-British reconciliation at Saint Malo in 1998 laid the foundation for the creation of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) at the 1999 Cologne European Summit. At the core of this policy was the development of a 60,000 strong European Rapid Reaction Force, deployable within a period of 60 days and sustainable in its theater of operation for up to one year. Given the need for regular troop rotations, this force required a pool of some 180,000 troops together with the associated combat planes, naval vessel, logistics, and other military equipment necessary to make their deployment effective. At the Helsinki European Summit in 1999, EU member states set themselves the target to develop these forces until 2003 – the so-called Helsinki Headline Goal (HHG) – and national contributions were registered. The kind of military operations the European Rapid Reaction Force is supposed to undertake was codified in the so-called Petersberg Tasks, defined as: “joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peacekeeping tasks, tasks of combat forces undertaken for crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilization”.

The objective of the HHG, of course, was not the creation of a common European army, but the formation a pool of national units on which the EU, in principle, could draw in response to international crisis. Many of these forces are simultaneously earmarked for UN and NATO operations, limiting their availability for EU operations. In addition, European pledges at Helsinki revealed important shortfalls in military capabilities that had to be overcome in order to allow for an effective deployment. Accordingly, a European Capabilities Action Plan (ECAP) was adopted, under which specific European countries took on the responsibility to develop solutions for particular recognized shortfalls. While progress on ECAP was painfully slow, in 2003 the European Union, nevertheless, declared that “the EU now has operational capability across the full range of Petersberg Tasks, limited and constrained by recognized shortfalls”. While quantitatively a more or less adequate pool of forces has been assembled, important shortfalls remain in

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terms of the quality of the troops and their equipment. What does this imply for the present operational capabilities of the EU?

Currently, given the willingness of EU member states to provide the necessary forces, it has been recognized that the EU is fully capable of undertaking a variety of operations independently, including the following:

- *Military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention, as well as peacekeeping tasks* that involve low and medium intensity operations. In these areas, European forces are fully operational, and the EU is able to deploy large numbers of troops for an extended period of time. Potential shortfalls that remain are limitations in strategic transport and logistics that could affect the reaction time of European forces and the size and length of their deployment.
- *Humanitarian and rescue tasks* that involve high-intensity operations over short-periods of time and involve a limited number of specialized troops involved. Again, EU forces are fully capable of fulfilling these tasks, with the same recognized shortfalls in strategic transport and sustainability.
- *Crisis management and combat tasks* of small and medium scale. Here capabilities shortfalls continue to be the most significant. Due to the limited number of troops available for the execution of these tasks, no full operational capability has been attained. Moreover, shortfalls in command and control, intelligence and precision guided munitions increase the risk of casualties and collateral damage.

In order to advise operations, as well as monitor continuing capability developments, the EU has also created a number of new bodies: at the decision-making level, the Military Committee (EUMC); within the Council Secretariat-General, the Situation Centre and the Military Staff (EUMS), which includes the Civilian-Military Cell, the core of an operational headquarters; and, directly responsible to the High Representative, the European Defence Agency (EDA). These new bodies have provided the European Union with some degree of operational independence, and EU military operations can now be run not only from NATO HQ in Brussels, but also from designated national headquarters³.

Since the partial attainment of the HHG, and the successful creation of the associated institutions, the European Union has been engaged in number of successful operations, starting with Operation Concordia in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in spring 2003. At the time of writing, the EU was engaged in 11 simultaneous missions, involving some 8,000 troops and 500 civilians. If other national and multinational deployments are taken into consideration, European member states are currently deploying some 60,000 troops abroad and have, in fact, done so since 2003. Recently, European forces have made significant contributions to crisis operations in the Balkans, Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East, and Europe remains an important contributor to

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UN operations around the world. At the same time, the present deployment of some 60,000 troops seems to represent the upper limit of current European military capacities.

Ongoing Efforts: Towards a Global European Role?

When European member states first conceived of ESDP, their planning was geared towards developing the military forces necessary to deal with a “typical” Balkan scenario – the initial purpose of the European Rapid Reaction Force. At the time of writing, it seems that the European Union, by and large, has attained this goal. In the meantime, however, European ambitions have grown to exceed their initial objectives. In this regard, the adoption of the European Security Strategy in 2003 signified a considerable shift in European strategic focus towards a greater global role. However, in order to attain a larger global profile, European forces will have to acquire the capabilities necessary to overcome their recognized, current shortfalls, including: strategic lift (air and sea); aerial refueling; intelligence; surveillance; target acquisition and reconnaissance (ISTAR); command, control, communications and information (C3I); and force projection. By way of addressing these shortfalls, EU member states have adopted a new Headline Goal – the HG 2010 – that promises qualitative improvement in European forces, but does not set any additional quantitative targets.

Building on the ECAP process, the HG 2010 has identified several specific objectives to be fulfilled within the set time horizon:

- The establishment of a civil-military cell within the EUMS, with the capacity to rapidly set-up an operation centre for a particular operation (completed);
- The establishment of an Agency in the field of defense capability development, research, acquisition and armaments (European Defence Agency) in the course of 2004 (completed);
- The implementation by 2005 of EU Strategic lift joint coordination (completed), with a view to achieving by 2010 necessary capacity and full efficiency in strategic lift (air, land and sea) in support of anticipated operations;
- The complete development by 2007 of rapidly deployable battlegroups including the identification of appropriate strategic lift, sustainability and debarkation assets (initial operational capability);
- The availability of an aircraft carrier with its associated air wing and escort for EU deployments by 2008;
- To improve the performance of all levels of EU operations by developing appropriate compatibility and network linkage of all communications equipment and assets both terrestrial and space based by 2010;
- To develop quantitative benchmarks and criteria that national forces declared to the Headline Goal have to meet in the field of deployability and in the field of multinational training.

The creation of the EU “battlegroups”, on the basis of a Franco-British proposal, especially represents a qualitative improvement on existing European capacities. These battlegroups will represent battalion sized forces of up to 1,500 soldiers together with their strategic lift and combat support elements that are able to be deployed within ten days, and sustainable in the field for a period of up to 120 days. The purpose of these forces will be to act as a rapid reaction capability, able to prepare the ground for longer deployments and to undertake high-intensity mission. So far, European countries have given their approval for the creation of a total of 18 battlegroups, of which two will be on stand-by at any single time. Initial operational capability, (having one battlegroup at a time on stand-by) has been reached in 2005 and full operational capability will be obtained in early 2007.

Since the adoption of the HG 2010 in 2004, progress has also been made in several other fields. For example, an EU Gendarmerie Force (EGF) was established in 2005. Drawn from existing paramilitary forces, the EGF comprises a pool of some 3,000 personnel, available to be deployed worldwide within a period of 30 days. The EU also adopted a Civilian Headline Goal 2008, the purpose of which is to develop a package of police, law enforcement, and crisis management personnel that can be deployed at relatively short notice to take over post-conflict tasks. Concerning military capabilities, several stop-gap measures have been found, including an agreement making several AnatoV heavy-lift aircraft available for leasing by European countries in order to overcome current shortfalls in strategic lift, as well as similar agreements for sea-lift and air-to-air refueling capabilities. While the ECAP process continues to progress at a snail’s pace, European militaries are scheduled to make some significant acquisitions within the period until 2010, including: significant amounts of new fighter and transport aircraft and helicopters; air-refueling and naval transport capacities; launching of the Galileo satellite navigation system⁴; introduction of new French and German satellite observation systems; lighter and more easily deployable fighting vehicles; and the acquisition of new aircraft carriers by the French and British navies.

Selected European Armaments Programs

Program	Description	Number of Units	Deliveries
A400 M	Transport aircraft	180	2009-2020
Eurofighter	Combat aircraft	620	2003-2015
Tiger	Battle helicopter	180	2003-2008
NH-90	Transport helicopter	300	From 2006
Helios/Sar-Lupe	Satellite observation system (FR/GER)	n/a	2007-2008
Galileo	Satellite navigation system	n/a	2006-2010
Future Carrier	Aircraft carriers (UK/FR)	3	2012-2014

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An Uncertain Future for Europe's Military Forces

The last few years have witnessed increased efforts by European countries to overhaul and modernize their defense establishments and to cooperate ever more closely on the development of common military capacities. As a result, an incipient structure of European institutions has been created that can draw on a pool of approximately 200,000 European troops and their equipment to conduct low and mid-level crisis management operations in Europe and its near-abroad, involving some 60,000 soldiers at a time. Beyond these achievements, however, progress with the acquisition of modern military capabilities remains slow. Currently, no more than 10% of European soldiers are ready for rapid deployment, and approximately a quarter of Europe's two million troops remain conscripts unavailable for overseas assignment. Thus, while the EU has acquired the ability to act as a regional military actor, it is still far away from taking on wider global responsibilities. In the meantime, the EU will continue to play second fiddle to the United States, concentrating on peacekeeping and peace-support missions and, in rare cases, engaging in ad-hoc coalitions led by the United States.

Whether Europe will be able to assume a more prominent global military role in the medium-term depends greatly on its ability to fulfill its commitments under HG 2010 and to follow through with its planned acquisitions of military hardware. Another failure to attain the goals it has set for itself will be seen by many states outside the EU, and some inside, as a fundamental lack of the political will to make the necessary financial sacrifices. Indeed, given the fact that most European countries will face a looming budgetary crisis in their pensions and health systems within the near future, it remains questionable, whether they will be able to make the necessary financial resources available. In addition, in some quarters, considerable doubts remain over whether Europe should be trying to take on global military responsibilities in the first place. For instance, some European countries continue to field large Pacifist Movements, which have adamantly opposed some of Europe's recent military "adventures". Nevertheless, if Europe should show itself willing to muster the financial and political will to follow through with its current plans, substantial improvements in European forces and equipment could be achieved by the end of this decade. These improvements would provide European forces with the ability to engage in high-intensity war-fighting and power projection operations on a larger scale, while maintaining Europe's ability to conduct large peacekeeping and post-conflict tasks.

¹ One of the earliest reforms of defense doctrine came with the UK's Strategic Defense Review of 1998

² The Military Balance 2006, Institute of International Strategic Studies

³ National HQs available for this purpose are located in the UK, France, Germany and Italy

⁴ Galileo is often seen by the US as a competitor to its own GPS system, and US policy-makers have warned of this program's potential to damage transatlantic relations.