



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009
A Hard-Hitting European Defense? (December 28, 1999)

The wars in the former Yugoslavia called European defense capability into question. In the following article, Lothar Rühl, former undersecretary of state in the Federal Ministry of Defense, analyzes the weaknesses of European defense and security policy. He calls for the modernization of the European armed forces, with the goal being to create a European defense force capable of undertaking strategic military operations in the future – both in cooperation with the United States and independently.

The Forces Must Be Concentrated

A “NATO-light”-type Eurocorps or relief for America in international crises through European strike capability?

The most recent EU resolutions and the rough plans for setting up a European action force of 50,000 to 60,000 troops have been officially acknowledged as a “step in the right direction” in the military capability of Europe. This is also happening at NATO in Brussels and in Washington. But does the course initiated in 1999 correspond with the realities within the alliance and on Europe’s high-risk peripheries? Will the future European Rapid Reaction Force suffice when it comes to controlling major crises and, in the event of an escalation, ending higher-intensity armed conflicts? How should this force work together with American armed forces on an operative level if European actions within the limits of the Western European Union’s 1992 “Petersberg Tasks,” which, according to the EU resolutions of 1999, set the framework for such missions and set the standards for the capabilities of EU armed forces, prove insufficient – in other words, if NATO operations with U.S. forces were to become necessary, like in Bosnia and Kosovo?

The EU partners will have to answer these sorts of questions about the utility of their plans as NATO allies. For their armed forces must be deployable within the alliance and operationally compatible with US armed forces, not only within Europe, but also outside of Europe at greater distances from their home bases, so they can be used effectively and capable of shouldering a share of the burden commensurate with Europe’s significance within NATO.

Shortly after the EU summit conference in Helsinki, American worries, doubts, and reservations became apparent once again: What path is Europe really pursuing? And where will it lead the

EU in the course of its future enlargements? Will the EU muster the strength and military means necessary to cover the expanded Eastern European economic region, which still needs to be organized politically? This question must be of concern to Washington because in an emergency American strength will have to compensate for European deficits. Deputy Secretary of State [Strobe] Talbott reminded the European NATO partners of this fact in mid-December in Brussels. The American side pushed all the more strongly to ensure that the scarce resources for building up EU military capabilities will not be taken from NATO allotments. The NATO authorities in Brussels are also worried because the Baltic states of northeastern Europe lie outside of NATO but are striving to join the alliance, as are, thus far, seven Balkan countries, three of which were directly affected by the Kosovo war as neighboring countries. Northern Europe remains a transitional zone of passage into the Russian sphere of influence; and in the southeast, Turkey, a strategic ally of America on the border between Europe and Asia, will not become an EU member in the foreseeable future. The Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, in any case, will expand the EU's political sphere of responsibility toward Ukraine and the Black Sea, whereby the Caucasus, too, will creep into the horizon of Western Europe, broadening the friction zone with Russia from the North Sea to the Black Sea. But how could an effective "European defense" or even just military crisis-management in the southeast or the eastern Mediterranean towards the Levant become a reality without the active participation of Turkey? Will Europe call on the US for more military support for its security in the future, because its own forces are becoming increasingly incapable of supporting European ambitions, or can the EU ease the United States' military burden within NATO?

An Auxiliary Force for Peripheral Incidents Is Not What Is Needed

Above all, America is looking for relief in the near future in the form of significant military participation by European partners in operations in support of international security, also outside of Europe. Washington wants a European force at its side in crisis situations, not a marginal auxiliary force for peripheral incidents and lighter tasks. As long as the European NATO partners, who have sixty percent of the American defense budget at their disposal and more troops than the United States has serving under its flag worldwide, can only muster about ten to twenty percent of the operative capability of the US armed forces in combat operations; as long as American combat planes have to fly eighty-five to ninety percent of all air attacks, as they did over Serbia/Kosovo in 1999; as long as the United States has to supply NATO with ninety percent of its technical systems for strategic reconnaissance, airspace control, satellite communication, ground detection and data processing (as it did for IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia in 1995-98); as long as none of that changes, an approximate "balance" of military engagement will not be possible either inside or outside NATO.

But when French Minister of Defense [Alain] Richard speaks of a "long-term balance" in the NATO alliance as a result of the military strengthening of the EU in its role as "independent actor on the international stage," then it is important to elaborate with a sentence of this sort: it is a matter of concentrating forces on the hard tasks, not the easy ones. Here is the key to European response capability in serious crises, ones with great potential for escalation and a

high risk of conflict, like the crisis in Yugoslavia in 1991-92, when both Europe and the United States shied away from military confrontation, allowing the escalating conflict to take its own course until 1995.

Many European countries, including almost all of the EU states (including Germany starting in 1994), and above all France and Britain (each of which had a contingent of around 10,000 troops), participated in the virtually defenseless UN protection force in Bosnia, which was mostly under the command of European generals. Most of the European contingents – the French one, for example – did not even have armored transport helicopters for troop movements across the battlefield. Therefore, they could not reach Srebrenica, Tuzla, or Gorazde because they could not stand up against Serbia's ground-based anti-aircraft operations. As long as the UN failed to permit air attacks, Western air supremacy and strike fighters could not be used to advantage. Light European ground troops would not have been capable of helping here, to say nothing of the offensives in which the Croats and Bosnians dealt the Bosnian Serbs their first serious defeats in the summer of 1995 and brought about the strategic turning point in the Bosnian war, which paved the way for the later NATO intervention. Even the NATO air force could not have accomplished this on its own in the eleven days of air raids on Serbian targets in Bosnia.

Fifty to sixty thousand soldiers in active crisis management operations require just as many reserve troops to relieve them after four to six months, thus a deployment force of at least 120,000 troops is necessary. Additionally, the appropriate means of transportation are also needed, as well as flexible logistics for sustained support by air and sea. For its planned Rapid Reaction Force, the EU partners would have to build up joint supply depots and a central logistics command, joint budget resources, and transport capacities with a technical division of labor. It would be necessary to standardize equipment and munitions for unrestricted interoperability, especially since 300 to 500 combat planes are planned. Without NATO standardization, no interoperability will be possible. Technological and logistical interfaces with the US armed forces have to be created and maintained, if only to prevent the previously attained NATO standardization in Europe from deteriorating further. This is where action is demanded especially from France, which still remains outside of NATO military cooperation. If Sweden, Finland, Austria, and Ireland want to participate militarily in the EU, then they have to align themselves and adapt to a broader NATO framework for operational procedures, standardization of equipment, interoperability of troops, and compatible command structures, as is already being attempted in the SFOR in Bosnia and the KFOR in Kosovo to some extent.

The EU needs intervention forces that can take action in a conflict situation, without American participation and without the use of the large NATO apparatus, if need be. Less critical military missions could then be carried out with fewer military means as long as the deterring force remains in reserve, visibly ready for deployment. The French proverb applies here: "He who can do more, can do less." That is the only way for Europeans to really satisfy the demand placed upon them by NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson in December 1999 in Brussels, namely the demand that they "correct the military imbalance vis-à-vis the United States." But Washington's pressing demands in Brussels for the installation of a NATO missile-defense

system for Europe, in order to shield against the growing threat of missile attacks (from the Middle East, for example, which the North Atlantic already identified as a new risk back in November 1991) must finally be taken seriously by the European members of NATO, that is from the EU partners. This is not happening, even after the foreign ministers' conference in Brussels.

Far Short of the Necessary [Level of] Modernization

The preliminary joint plans of the chief EU and NATO partners are still far short of the necessary [level of] modernization and adjustment. It is not even certain that the planning is really moving in the "right direction." The current budget and program plans in Germany, France, Italy, and Spain – to name only the major continental countries in the EU – still show no signs of a strengthening in terms of materials and weapons technology and thus show no signs of a qualitative strengthening. The French allocations for battle tanks and combat helicopters in recent budget years were roughly half of what had originally been planned for the period 1997 to 2002. The project for a German-French or European battle tank was just shelved in Paris. The costs of transitioning to a volunteer army have proven far higher than estimated. The obstacles to a lasting European capacity for satellite reconnaissance, and the evaluation thereof, have remained unchanged despite the French "Helios" satellites.

The implementation of the most recent EU agreements on "strategic reconnaissance" and "strategic air transportation" (which is also lacking) would require tens of billions of Euros, if the goal is to acquire new, modern systems, instead of leasing older, existing systems or sharing them with EU partners. Modern information and communications technology would need to be acquired jointly. The same applies for modern homing munitions and standoff weapons, which European warplanes urgently lacked in the Kosovo war, not to mention cruise missiles. Which munitions and weapons reserves should be jointly stockpiled for Europe in the future? Which European manufacturers should produce them? What sort of spare-parts management is being undertaken in Europe in the EU framework within NATO? What practical division of labor should be established between EU and NATO partners?

It must also be possible to deploy an EU Rapid Reaction Force, whether 50,000 or 60,000 strong, as an operative unit, should that ever become necessary. Two months' preparation time is actually already too long, since crises can escalate more quickly and conflicts could already have ended within that time. In May 1999, it was estimated that it would take two to three months to ready larger units of American troops for offensive deployment in the Kosovo war; European troops were still not available in sufficient numbers (more than 40 percent of the British army had already been moved out for deployment). General [Wesley] Clark allotted "at least fifty percent of American ground troops" for a NATO land war to ensure the necessary operative capability.

That is Europe's Achilles heel, which Washington has recognized: The development of weapons and information technology has already affected the equipment of individual soldiers (such as

for night fighting), the structure of the combat groups, and reconnaissance and site detection in the field. In America, small and very small troop units are being conceived for extended-range engagement and operative autonomy (which really is a “military revolution” for the Pentagon). If the Europeans, with their meager funds and plethoric troop numbers, do not focus on this core issue, they will fall behind and lose their point of orientation and, with it, their chances for military relevance in future crises and conflicts. This is the true ante in the game, the real military challenge, less in a politically contrived “balance” with the United States within NATO or in an artificial “European autonomy” in crises. It can only become “strategic” if Western Europe upgrades its technology and curbs the size of its excessively large armed forces, with their outdated equipment, and finds new structures for military service and the troops for powerful armies and air forces that can only be European. Are France and Britain, Spain, Italy, and Germany prepared to do that?

Source: Lothar Rühl, “Die Kräfte müssen konzentriert werden. Ein Eurokorps Machart ‘Nato light’ oder Entlastung für Amerika in internationalen Krisen durch europäische Schlagkraft?” [“The Forces Must Be Concentrated. A ‘NATO-light’-type Eurocorps or relief for America in international crises through European strike capability?”], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 28, 1999, p. 9.

Translation: Allison Brown