

## **Transatlantic Security, Defence and Strategy: Badly Needed Reforms\***

Peter M. E. Volten

*University of Groningen, the Netherlands*

---

This year we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the downfall of communism in Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Students who started their post-secondary education this year were born about seven years after this anniversary, in 1996. And the freshmen of 1990 are now in their early forties. In Europe, the latter generation is about to take on political leadership and may still be aware of the ‘Idea of Europe’ as advocated by one of the fathers of the European Union, Jean Monnet: “No more war on this continent; we will build institutions and peace instead.” Today’s enrolling students probably do not remember this forceful idea; nor do they realise the significance of this inspiring idea in overcoming great difficulties to achieve a peaceful, democratic and prosperous EU. The freshmen of today may take this for granted while being rather more disturbed by the confusing world of globalisation, populist slogans such as ‘The War on Terror’, multilevel governance and a rippled sense of direction and political effectiveness in the EU or, for that matter, NATO; in other words, throughout the transatlantic world.

For my generation, security, defence and strategy were relatively easy to understand. Realism and Cold War logic prevailed *vis-à-vis* a pacifist and rather weak opposition. But then all of a sudden we had to adapt ourselves to post-Cold War circumstances. We tried, but with mixed results. What about our experiences in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, not to mention Iraq or today, Ukraine? However, the next generation at the political helm will face an even more demanding job because of the sheer *complexity* of security and strategy and because of the need for some radical changes in our approaches to both of these concepts.

Today, I deal with this complexity throughout my presentation, while addressing two questions in particular: “What has been done in the face of the new challenges?” and “What is still being neglected?” In trying to understand some of the reasons for and causes of the mixed results – some might say failures – I attempt to explain why things happened as they did. Furthermore, I try to answer some questions raised by the analysis and make some suggestions about what could or should have been done to remedy the failures and improve the outcomes. In the end, we may offer suggestions on what the next generation of political and security leaders in the West should try to do.

I am not here to criticise past decisions. Security policy is difficult to begin with, and developing a sound strategy towards it is very difficult. Strategy presents guidance to achieve certain objectives. It represents the realm between the political and military dimensions of

---

Peter M.E. Volten, Professor (emeritus), International Relations and International Organization Department, University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Email: p.m.e.volten@rug.nl.

\* Note: This text was originally in the form of a presentation, and has been lightly edited for publication.

security. By definition, strategy entails conflict; political and military considerations are of a different order and cannot always be reconciled. Moreover, political-strategic and military-strategic considerations do not always remain in the distinct spheres of political leadership on the one hand or military leadership on the other. History shows countless examples where political leaders have been inclined to follow a military-strategic approach, relying on military force for problem solving. For example, Saddam Hussein was a problem for most neo-cons in the US and was simply defeated by the vastly superior US armed forces. But US political objectives in Iraq have always been troublesome, if not absent. Therefore, a political defeat of the US in that case was practically unavoidable. In fact, the political complexities of Iraq ruled out the popular, albeit short-sighted, military problem-solving approach in favour of tempting but ineffective quick fixes by military means.

Military-strategic thinking is of course a European legacy. While Western Europe was trying to make the principally *political* Idea of Europe work, relations with Eastern Europe were rigorously dominated by military-strategic concerns. Actually, there hardly were *relations* in, for example, the economic field; there was military confrontation between East and West. Security and defence were practically synonyms, something that was never the case conceptually. Everybody spoke about defence policy. NATO itself was a defence organisation wary of security politics. Arms control was about all we did in our diplomatic efforts. Negotiations were suspiciously monitored by the military, such as at Checkpoint Charlie on the West German side of the border.

It does not come as a surprise then that a defence organisation with a prevailing military-strategic culture is not well-prepared for taking up new missions such as those in the former Yugoslavia. Those missions, soon called “peace-keeping missions”, were useful for legitimising sizable armed forces and the ongoing existence of the Alliance. “Out of area or out of business” was how NATO’s Secretary-General Manfred Wörner aptly formulated the danger of doing nothing. Indeed, troops for peace-keeping were sent to Bosnia with 100 per cent backing by, for example, the Dutch Parliament and the Dutch Army, who, in turn, were eager to show their indispensable contribution to restoring stability in that troubled European backyard. Some countries were somewhat more reluctant, but with the support of the UN Security Council, peace-keeping was legitimate and seen as the right thing to do. The intentions were good. The cause for human rights and humanitarian assistance was a moral and rightful duty, as it was widely perceived in the West.

Yet preparations for the mission were poor. Commanders, both in country capitals and in the field, had limited knowledge about the region and the nature of the raging conflict. The role of diplomat-soldier was unknown and unforeseen, as was the fact that peace-keeping runs the risk of mission-creep; the mission can turn into dangerous peace-enforcing. Indeed, mistakes did take place. The drama of Srebrenica in 1995 was not the fault of any person or institution in particular. Nonetheless, Milosovic and other bad guys were seen as a problem that could be handled by traditional military forces. A military fix of an essentially political problem. One should add, though, that the Western powers were pretty much divided on what to do, and that, for example, the EU Commissioner for External Affairs, Hans van den Broek, was negotiating with his hands bound behind his back. Four years after Srebrenica, NATO was still not willing to deploy forces on the ground and bombed Serbia out of business after more than 70 days of an intense air campaign. “Winning ugly”, as the scholar-strategist Ivo Daalder (who later became the US Ambassador to NATO) described the campaign. Bombing

as a tactic of attrition is not exactly a strategy deserving that qualification. The use of military force, however powerful it may be, cannot be the exclusive answer in a post-Westphalian, post-Cold War world order. A Cold War defence policy no longer equals a security policy. Defence forces deployed in traditional formations with an array of conventional weaponry such as tanks, artillery and APCs, are much less relevant than in the past. In the broader understanding of security, they have in a number of cases become irrelevant altogether.

Colonial wars in Africa and Asia are a case in point, as is the war in Vietnam. The superior armed forces of the colonial power did not bring victory. Among the factors working against the traditional type of warfare, we should list the greater determination of indigenous forces and their hit-and-run tactics (which prevent them from becoming vulnerable targets for massive firepower) and, perhaps above all, the support of the people, the nationalists or freedom fighters. You cannot get at the enemy and you cannot get him down. Fighting terrorists is even more difficult, since they are not territory-bound. Moreover, they do not seek a victory on the ground as the anti-colonial freedom fighters did. Conventional battle groups are not the right answer against the actions of insurgent fighters, globally dispersed. They may be necessary, but they are never sufficient for a successful campaign. The centre of gravity that must be attacked for a decisive victory against guerrilla fighters and insurgents is not defined by a concentration of military power, as in classical warfare.

Maoist guerrilla warfare and today's insurgent and global terrorist actions are first and foremost *political*. Guerrillas and insurgents seek to undermine their enemy in the long run, in particular by creating popular support for their case. The shocking effects of the so-called propaganda of the deed – *action directe* – is meant to mobilise more people who are willing to sacrifice their lives and to communicate the impact of the violence to a wider audience sensitive to the cause of insurgents. The use of media is thereby an essential tool. Besides the use of modern means of communication, purposeful violence is meant to create a genuine security problem. The political issue at stake must be securitised for the target audience. At the same time, terrorist violence seeks counter-action by the attacked, if possible, a violent overreaction. The war against Iraq was such a military-operational overreaction, which unintentionally, albeit effectively, played into the hands of political Islam and its crusaders. Violent counter-insurgency furthers the case of the insurgents. In Iraq itself, the tragic number of deaths and wounded among the population and the impossibility for the Americans to ally themselves with one or the other representative of the Islamist belief, were bound to undermine the position of the US regionally and globally. Retreat was sooner or later inevitable.

Obviously, a security problem that is essentially political must be addressed as such in the first place. This is not to say that the utility of military force has completely vanished. Of course not. But the military-strategic view should not be the primary or sole response, but one embedded in the political context. The fact is that no military action should be undertaken without political and/or military support on the ground. Even with such support, the decision remains difficult and the outcome always uncertain, as we have seen in the case of Western support for the Libyan rebels against Gaddafi. Moreover, the battle cannot be left to foreign troops. Sooner or later, they are likely to be seen as occupiers.

Respect some golden rules. One, if you cannot do it, don't start military assistance and do have at least a good exit strategy. Two, if you do not have clear political objectives, don't even think about it, as Clausewitz taught us. The greatest philosopher of war would never

have agreed with the war in Iraq; nor would he have been a likely supporter of the war in Afghanistan. A real strategist would have listened to Clausewitz and should have said “No,” as, indeed, some states did in the case of Iraq. No matter how strong we appear in military terms (at least in our own eyes), political-strategic considerations should prevail. These considerations should include a thorough knowledge and solid analysis of the forces one is going to engage. Make sure that you have a good understanding of their culture and their political motives as well as a clear view on the warring parties. All these elements were insufficiently known in Bosnia, totally lacking in Iraq, and painfully forgotten in Afghanistan, with ominous neglect of the colonial as well as the Soviet-era history of that country.

Let me be fair and say that in hindsight it is easier to come to these conclusions than it was at the time of action. Sometimes you have to do something. Bosnia is an example of the need to do *something*, which was generally felt by the so-called international community. And in the end, a reasonable stability has been established in the region with the prospect of Western assistance and EU integration. And look at Mali today. The French government decided in January 2013 that the advance of Muslim groups and Jihad terror had to be stopped. Also, the danger of a terrorist base from which European countries could be or would be attacked was seen as a valid reason to do something. The French moved swiftly and took advantage of military-strategic surprise. They had forces in the region and combat capabilities ready for deployment in Mali. From the very beginning they enlisted the Malian army. No matter its deplorable state, it meant indigenous support. In addition, the armed forces from neighbouring countries in the African Union were asked to assist, as was the UN, by contributing a military unit. Eventually, the EU was engaged in training the security forces of Mali. Some individual countries, such as the Netherlands, are supporting the French combat units in ways such as gathering intelligence and delivering transport – of course under the flag of the United Nations. In other words, the mission was welcomed on the ground and supported by regional forces and international organisations. Of course, it remains to be seen how successful Mali’s defence organisation will be and when external powers will be able to leave security policy to the proper national authorities.

So, the utility of military force cannot be disregarded that easily. But the use of the armed forces alone cannot bring a decisive victory, as happened in some historic battles as an essential means for the goals of *warfare*. Today, military force is much more explicit in shaping the right conditions for *politics*’ objectives. You cannot eliminate the Jihadists, but you can complicate their mission with the help of force.

There is a caveat to this post-modernist logic of strategy, though. What about the fact that Jihadists, active in Western Europe, are often not recruited in Mali or Afghanistan, but at home? They are often well-educated citizens in the West. Clearly, the utility of military force is seriously in doubt in this case. Here, we need intelligence services and police and law enforcement authorities, not the armed forces and their battle groups. By and large, counter-insurgency is not terribly well served by regular armed forces. Intelligence services are the logical choice to go after an invisible or hiding threat. Indeed, the utility of military force has dwindled in both international security policy and safety at home. The security problems have changed and the security institutions should follow this reality.

To change institutions and the way of thinking proves to be a daunting task. If one looks at the changes since the end of the Cold War as regards force structures in NATO, for example, one is struck by the slow pace of genuine reform. Please take note: reform is not the same

as downsizing. Reform needs a concept; downsizing is merely a struggle between vested interests. Looking at military inventories or forces, it seems that the state of the national economy and the temper or personality of a finance minister are more important than anything in the realm of strategy. The peace dividend was quickly cashed and today, a balanced budget is overruling the sparse protest of a weakened security community, not to mention the apathy of the public at large. That is what we saw in Eastern and Central Europe in a dramatic way after 1989, and since 2008 in Western and Southern Europe as well. Just a few examples: Czechoslovakia had no fewer than 4000 main battle tanks in 1989 (the Netherlands 900). Twenty years later the Czech Republic and Slovakia had 245 and 180 tanks, respectively. Still a lot. (The Netherlands had 60 by then.) In 2013 these numbers were cut back to 30 tanks in each country, thanks to the economic crisis, we must assume. (Today the Netherlands has zero tanks because of the conviction that we cannot do anything useful with them.) In France and Germany we counted 1340 and 5000 main battle tanks in 1989. Twenty years later there are still 640 tanks in France and no fewer than 2000 in Germany. Today, after the six years of financial and economic troubles, these numbers are down to 250 in France and 322 tanks in Germany.

The situation as regards combat aircraft – a very expensive weapons system – is also radical. The numbers have been by and large cut in half in Western Europe, but in the Eastern part of Europe been reduced to 20 to 25 per cent of the inventory of 1989. Defence-spending levels also decreased significantly over the first 20 years since 1989, but drastically over the past three years. Overall spending in Europe decreased by 7.4 per cent, but varied significantly among the individual member states of NATO. Of course, the absolute levels are very different. France and the UK are big spenders, relatively speaking, with some \$52 billion and \$57 billion in 2013. Romania spends barely \$2.5 billion; Poland some \$9 billion.

But what kind of combat power do the countries get for their defence money? They spent between at least 50 and 60 per cent on personnel; in Romania even up to 80 per cent. Acquisition is troublesome and modernisation is very expensive, for everybody. The rich Netherlands will spend almost a full year's defence budget for less than half the originally planned Joint Strike Fighters – 39 instead of 80, which it could no longer afford. Others are struggling with their budgets even more and thus get stuck with old equipment. In Romania there is still an impressive number of main battle tanks (437). Yet, 250 of them are T-55s, a model produced in the 1960s and 1970s, and some 130 are TR-580s and TR-85s, models from the 1980s and 1990s. There were a meagre 54 TR M1 tanks produced in this century. I am not going to bother you with fighter aircraft in Europe. This is simply an example among many others and true for many member states.

This is not to say that the West does not spend enough money on defence. The US spends around \$700 billion and deploys over 8000 tanks, 25,000 armoured vehicles and over 13,000 aircraft. The EU spends almost \$200 billion and fields 6500 main battle tanks, 46,000 armoured vehicles and some 2000 combat aircraft. One must ask: What are armed forces for? There is no question that the West as a whole does spend enough, say *vis-à-vis* the Russian Federation, with her modest \$70 billion defence spending. We drastically outspend Russia, while there is no doubt about her dated inventory. Moreover, this dubious inventory is significantly outnumbered by NATO's. Therefore, the Pavlov reaction of NATO officials and member states to increase national defence efforts in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and aggression towards Ukraine is not really justified. The point is that we do

not spend our money “wisely”, as Lord Robertson put it when he was Secretary-General of NATO. The real problem is that Western defence organisations and member-states pay too much for a number of disputed capabilities of *defence* and too little for some other and less-disputed issues of *security*. Let me dwell a little on both views.

First, we do not get much value for defence money after years of unguided, haphazard downsizing across the board. The bedrock success of NATO, namely integrated planning, has been disregarded, if not given up. Instead we are witnessing uncoordinated, national decisions – not even strict planning – and this has led to fragmentation of the common output. Individual capabilities have become very costly in maintenance and overhead and too small for robust and sustainable combat power. With the exceptions of France and the UK, no European ally can field an independent, sizable battle group for a long period of time. It should be noted that France and the UK also need support from the US as to capacities such as intelligence, target acquisition, airlift and in-flight refuelling. Individual, national capabilities impede the deployment of coherent and balanced international forces. The EU was not capable of putting together the Rapid Reaction Force of 60,000 men as envisaged years ago, in spite of the fact the member states have more than a million men altogether. By the same token, the EU has never offered one of its Battle Groups of 2500 men to any mission, Mali included, where the much-acclaimed units would have been more than welcome.

Communiqués of both NATO and EU meetings call time and again for more cooperation and smart planning, but to no avail. Ministers return home and are more inclined to comply with domestic politics. Even the EU summit in December 2013 ridiculed the much-heralded agenda on defence by addressing the issue for less than an hour, notwithstanding the fact that was the first discussion on the subject in five years. The communiqué is dull reading; many old wishes, good intentions, but no commitments to genuine action and reform. Back home, very few people asked for an explanation. In general, defence issues are already years down the list of priorities, both for parliamentarians and the public at large. The Ukraine crisis is unlikely to be a real wake-up call for the same reason.

As regards issues that are not so important in a strictly military sense and yet are put on the agenda of defence issues, particularly in NATO, cyber security stands out as an example. Recently, the Alliance even applied Article 5 to the case of a cyber attack – as if an attack would stand on its own and nothing else would happen in a political-strategic sense. Moreover, there is no compelling reason why NATO as a defence organisation should take on such tasks.

This is not to say that the subject is not important. Far from it. But it makes much more sense to have a civilian body, as the EU does, to oversee a given problem and only then to address the specific military aspects of cyber warfare. But NATO has not evolved as a more political organisation – on purpose for some allies – and a civilian and comprehensive approach to security is underdeveloped. Therefore, NATO has made itself much less relevant in the post-Cold War environment than it should be, as, for example, her very modest role during the Maidan crisis has shown. Bringing up issues such as a cyber attack is not going to give the Alliance more relevance; rather, it makes NATO look silly.

When we turn to some issues that are not disputed but insufficiently discussed, we should first mention the priority of the political-strategic approach. Again, NATO as an outspoken defence organisation puts too many restraints on herself. Interdependence has grown immensely – financially, economically – but also in terms of employment and education,

migration and humanitarian concerns and the like. The military-strategic approach is certainly not absent and should not be ignored. As said before, the European countries should do more as regards the combat power of their armed forces. They must strengthen the output of defence expenditures for expeditionary missions and redress the by-now-serious neglect of a common European defence force. The two go hand in hand; without robust defence forces, expeditionary missions are wishful thinking.

All the same, even the nineteenth-century behaviour of Putin in his campaign to grab land in Crimea was not primarily a military-strategic threat. With tens of thousands Russian soldiers on the ground and huge indigenous support, Putin posed everybody for a political *fait accompli*. He did not need to send regular combat units and infiltrated the peninsula with so-called self-defence forces without Russian insignia. In the Eastern part of Ukraine, fear of Russian domination was not created by the threat of a military invasion, but by pro-Russian demonstrators and self-proclaimed regional and local administrators and, indeed, sneaky Special Forces. Military exercises near the border increased pressure on Ukraine leadership to eventually consider more regional autonomy or federalisation. Putin's objectives were political-strategic. His calculations of costs and benefits were part of an interdependent world and, rightly or wrongly, he seemed to accept the likely setbacks in his international position, perhaps putting his bet on the temporary nature of Western sanctions and feeble Western cohesion. For Putin, the stakes are high as regards the loss of the Soviet empire. Indeed, the significance of Ukraine's choice as to its place in Europe is incomparably higher for Putin than for the West. Interdependence of interests does not mean symmetry of interests, however. Ukraine as part of Russia's sphere of influence is an essential political-strategic goal for Putin. The military capabilities of the West are unlikely to bring this asymmetry of interest back into balance. However, the Western preponderance of military power showed the usefulness of defence against conventional aggression. Ultimately, deterring a large-scale conventional incursion in Ukraine worked, in this case by the possibility of air superiority and denying entry of Russian fighter aircraft into Ukrainian airspace.

All the same, most security concerns depend on things other than defence forces, including in the transatlantic world. Security involves disputed political, economic, social and other issues that can lead to violent behaviour and the threat of using violence. That is how the former Yugoslavia exploded. The differences between regions, ethnic groups and economic circumstances had grown too big. The outcry "Enough is enough!" was the popular response to the problems in Ukraine. Anti-democratic measures, concessions favouring Russia and the decision against EU association, all imposed by Yanoukovich, were too much for the people. All together, the autocratic and corrupt regime brought insecurity for large parts of the population, particularly for that essential part of a vibrant state, the civil society. Rampant corruption, despicable inequalities, poverty, powerlessness, betrayal, etc. justified Maidan and the demise of the president, if necessary with violent resistance against the interior forces of public order. Ukraine does not stand alone in this kind of experience of what security is. Indeed, future security issues are likely to mirror such concerns, and we may add some others, such as water shortage, environmental threats, climate change, land degradation and unrelenting suppression and violence by domestic rulers.

Security is not a matter of 'normal' political conflict, but of conflict that runs out of arguments and eventually out of control. You no longer want to argue since there is no reasonable response and, therefore, the threat of using violent means and violence itself

are legitimised, at least in the eyes of the desperate actors in conflict. These matters have little to do with military-strategic considerations. Unstable and failed states are looking for a political-strategic approach, for economic or social security as a precondition for individual and national development. Of course, police and armed forces are effective means against political insurgents, as we have seen after the so-called Arab Springs. But such intra-national ‘solutions’ based on domestic politics are not suitable for international military interventions *vide* Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan and many other horrible examples. By and large, countries that have seen political and economic development have first of all succeeded in achieving security at home themselves. Brazil, Argentina, China or India come to mind.

External military force may contribute to establishing or restoring domestic security, but only if the external player is really knowledgeable about the political situation and the cultural-societal motives and reasons for insurgency. These motives and reasons never have an ephemeral nature and cannot be fixed by short, quick action. A political-strategic approach requires deep understanding, patience and long-term vision. The future of Georgia, Moldavia or Ukraine depends not so much on the military strengths of the EU, but on diplomatic perseverance and loyalty to the advocated moral values of the Union, in particular the soft power of democracy and the rule of law, the original Idea of Europe. Self-confidence should then be backed up by military-strategic strength – in that order, which should also be understood in NATO. *Sans stratégie, pas de régie.*

Hopefully, the present generation of students that will make up the political leadership in Europe in some 20 years will be aware of this vision, and I am happy and honoured today to be their teacher.