

Relaunching European Integration in High Politics: New Threats and Joint Responses

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In this very crucial moment for the future of Europe, as an entity with an integral future, in political, economic, social terms, with the impending Brexit and the connected difficult negotiation about to start, it seems that some countries have identified 'security and defence' as a low hanging fruit or at least an area where some progress can be made, in order to give new momentum to an 'ever closer Union', if not at 27, at least with a number of countries 'willing and able', including the largest ones.

A new strategic document has been published and a few others, descending from this have already been issued or are in the pipeline: for sure the High Representative Federica Mogherini has spared no effort to drag the nations in this direction and expectations are growing.

As one of the four co-authors of the Helsinki Headline Goal, and as a truly and faithful federalist, I should welcome wholeheartedly these developments, after so many years of frustration and no real progress whatsoever, but we must be realistic, therefore a degree of scepticism is inevitable.

In my career in the military, as an operator and later as a leader, I have consistently understood the role of the armed forces as one of the main instrument of my country's foreign policy, in the defensive as well as in the force projection attitude.

The consequence is that if no common foreign policy exists, having a common military instrument is a pure nonsense. Surely cooperations are possible and welcome and may entail significant savings, in particular in logistics and in education and training, but integration is another issue.

Even NATO, which undoubtedly was created with a firm common political objective, the defence against Soviet Union expansionism, never tried to create a single multinational army, and we still have a common Command Structure, but the Forces remain strictly national: they train together, operate together and fight together, but remain the property of the individual member states who can in any moment, and without justification, recall them under the national authority.

A clear example of this rational has been the fate of the EUROFOR, a quadronational land headquarters, at divisional level, created in the late '90s by France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, with significant investment in manpower and technical and financial resources. It was planned to be employed in the regular rotation of commands within KFOR, in Kosovo, but a few weeks before Pristina declared unilaterally its independence and immediately Spain, due to understandable internal political reasons, vetoed its employment. The lack of a comprehensive and fully shared policy made EUROFOR unusable and the consequence was the decision to disband it.

Should we therefore abandon any attempt unless a decisive step forward is made towards a federalist objective? Should we wait indefinitely until our governments agree an overall comprehensive common foreign policy. My answer is 'NO', and is based on an approach which is at the same time pragmatic and visionary.

On the pragmatic side we should continue pursuing the objective of integrating what is possible to integrate without renouncing any slice of national sovereignty. This can be done, as already in the fields of education and training (for instance in helicopter and fixed wing pilot training, in a jointly managed centralised facility) and in support and operational logistics, as it already being done with the European Airlift Transport Command. And more can be done with the consolidation of the industrial sector or, more humbly, imposing common, equal requirements for joint development programs, denying any possibility for national variants, thus making it possible a unified logistic support.

On the visionary side, given for granted that in the present and foreseeable circumstances it is not possible to aim at a common foreign policy, even between a subset of the EU member states, let's try and find a less ambitious approach. A detailed analysis of the existing dossier may show that in some cases the difference between some countries on specific regional issues is not insurmountable and I make the African case. In the Subsaharan and Sahel regions France has a historical presence, with interests deeply rooted, calling for a continual presence, often including a military component,, as in the present period; although Germany's memories in Africa date back to the First World War, in the last few years Berlin has not been reluctant to support militarily the French effort in the region, therefore we may infer that there exist a solid acknowledgment of the importance of stability in countries like Mali. Italy is mostly concerned about about the uncontrolled migration originating from or crossing those areas.

Is it therefore unthinkable a formal agreement between these three countries defining a perimeter of common interest, harmonised through a proper intergovernmental institution, creating a trinational military force to be employed in those regions?

It could be a formation with a dedicated budget, common equipment jointly procured and maintained, with a clear and well defined mission, in support of a common regional policy, elaborated in good faith by three partners which have the capabilities to be the game changer.

It could also be the initial kernel around which the three nations, may decide to widen the scope of their cooperation, acting also as a magnet for other willing and capable partners.

Too much fantasy in this idea? Maybe, but unless we practice a proper amount of fantasy little progress can be maid in the implementation of the dream of an "ever closer union".