

European Defence: responding to new challenges

By Catherine Ashton

This year is a crucial one for European Defence. In a rapidly changing world, the EU is faced with security challenges both in its immediate neighbourhood and further afield. We are also confronted with new types of security threats: terrorist attacks, pirates targeting vital trade routes, or cyber attacks against crucial technological infrastructure. As our societies have become more sophisticated, complex and interconnected, so have the threats they face.

Complex threats call for complex answers. Thanks to the transformation of EU foreign and security policy following the Lisbon Treaty, the EU is increasingly able to respond to these new challenges. It can now marshal the whole spectrum of tools at its disposal: diplomacy, military action as well as development and humanitarian aid, to address not only the symptoms but also the root causes of these threats to our security. This is what we call the Comprehensive Approach.

The ability to address all dimensions of a conflict, long term and short term, development and security, is the EU's unique strength. Our engagement in Mali and Somalia are good examples to showcase this approach. In both countries, we embedded our Common Security and Defence Policy missions in a comprehensive roadmap for the entire region, all the while providing crucial humanitarian and development aid, to form a basis for future stability and prosperity.

To act in the face of major crises, Europe also needs the capacities to meet the challenges we face. In times of austerity, this is no small feat. Defence budgets have been severely cut in most EU member states. Meanwhile, new defence systems are becoming ever more costly to develop. This means that we have to make smart investments. In times of austerity, we need to do better with less. And the best way to do so is through cooperation.

We also need to change the current mind-set on defence. We must realise that if we fail to pool our resources to build a potent defence capacity, we risk becoming a consumer rather than a provider of security. I believe that the European Defence Agency is already pointing the way towards a new way of thinking about defence in Europe.

One way to look at defence in a fresh way is to stop seeing it as an isolated sector. Today, many military technologies also have civilian uses. Just think of the Internet: a technology without which daily life has become unthinkable, yet also a crucial element of developing up-to-date defence capabilities. This means that, just as we are already doing in the context of conflict resolution, we must take a comprehensive approach to the development of new military capabilities.

To develop the capabilities of tomorrow, we need to invest in Research & Technology today. Smart and targeted investment will be the basis for acquiring cutting-edge technologies. Boosting R&T will also secure the future competitiveness of European industry.

The case for security and defence is clear. It has three dimensions: political, operational and economic. First, working more closely together on security and defence is a fundamental prerequisite for fulfilling Europe's ambitions on the world stage. Second, we need to coordinate more closely to ensure that Europe has the right military capabilities to act rapidly and effectively. Third, our cooperation is the basis for future jobs, innovation and growth.

In order to forge a security and defence policy fit to meet new challenges, we need to bring all these three strands together and put our full commitment behind an effective CSDP. It is the only way to secure Europe's continued relevance in a rapidly changing world and, above all, a safe and prosperous future for all of us.

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