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To Secure Peace, Be Ready for Battle

To remain true to its nature, the EU needs the capabilities to protect its values in its neighborhood and beyond.

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Off the coast of Somalia, men and women from across Europe are proving the old adage that no news can be good news. Stories of piracy used to make front pages around the world. Today they don't. That is because attacks over the past year have dropped by 95%.

This is no accident. National frigates are working together under the EU's Operation Atalanta to protect the shipping lanes needed for so much of Europe's trade with the rest of the world, and for vital food aid to Somalia. We are also tackling the underlying problems, not just the symptoms. The EU is training the Somalian army, supporting the rebuilding of its shattered institutions and providing development aid to lay the foundations for long-term prosperity.

Somalia provides an example of a wider truth. An effective and coherent security and defense policy is a necessity, not a luxury, for Europe. Possessing the capacities for crisis prevention and peacekeeping are vital if we are to build a more peaceful world order.

Of course, NATO has been the lynchpin of Europe's security for 60 years. But times are changing. Earlier this year the last American battle tank left our continent. It is necessary, as well as right, for Europe to do more. That is why since 2003, the European Union has successfully kept peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina, trained policemen in Palestine and Afghanistan, and fought piracy in the Indian Ocean.

We must now go further. If Europe is to remain a global player in the 21st century, Europeans will need to cooperate even more closely. The rationale for a stronger European defense policy is threefold: political, ensuring that the EU can live up to its global ambitions; operational, giving Europe the capacity to act on the ground; and economic, securing jobs and driving innovation in times of austerity.

Even if Europe has been at peace since World War II, war and conflict are never far away. Whether it is the civil war in Syria or cyber attacks targeting our airports or energy grids, we face clear and present threats. Poverty and social and ethnic tensions are important drivers of conflict.

This is why we need a comprehensive approach to foreign policy, employing the broad spectrum of tools the EU has at its disposal. It combines our civilian and military missions with diplomacy and dialogue, as well as development policy to address the symptoms and causes of conflict, as in Somalia.

Terrorism, cyber threats and piracy cannot be countered without modern technology and highly professional and well-equipped forces. Closer cooperation on defense will ensure that Europe can act more rapidly. When European fighter jets flew over Libya in 2011, U.S. air tankers had to refuel them in 80% of the cases. We know which capabilities Europe lacks and we know that we need to invest to develop them.

If European armies are equipped with modern air tankers and cyber-defense capabilities, it will make them more reliable NATO partners too. What the EU calls “Pooling and Sharing” and what NATO calls “Smart Defense” are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Defense markets are still too fragmented and decisions are still made in 28 national contexts.

As a result, new capabilities are purchased on a purely national basis, often giving preference to national industries, and often resulting in duplication in some areas and a lack of capacity in others. By successfully “pooling and sharing,” EU countries could better focus the €200 billion they spend every year on defense.

In times of austerity, it would be unreasonable to expect bigger defense budgets. Instead, we need pragmatic solutions: more cooperation between our governments by pooling, sharing and specializing; more convergence of military planning among member states and between EU and NATO; and consolidation of European defense industries.

Cooperating on defense—a field that lies at the very core of national sovereignty—requires trust both between governments and from our citizens. This is why we need to be clear that it is essential to safeguard jobs and increase economic prosperity.

One immediate challenge is to enable our forces to react faster to a crisis. Closer cooperation on defense can achieve just that. Research conducted by the European Defence Agency and the European Commission shows that it could also save up to €130 million per year. European defense companies such as EADS or BAE employ 400,000 people, and twice as many are working throughout the whole value chain, including in countless small and medium-size enterprises.

Europe has come a long way, from being a consumer of security to becoming a provider of security. The meeting of EU leaders in Brussels this week sends a clear signal that defense is now top of the agenda in Europe. Three topics will be at the center of our discussions: first, the priorities for future development of capabilities; second, building a competitive and innovative defence industry; and third, the preparation and availability of our forces.

The new emphasis on defense does not mean that the EU has abandoned its identity as a peace project in favor of more bellicose ambitions. On the contrary: Europe is aware that to remain true to its nature as a peace project, it needs the capabilities to protect and uphold its values in its neighborhood and beyond.

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