Conservative Group for Europe

Factsheet 5: The European Union's role in Promoting Peace and Security

- Leading figures in the Leave campaign have denied the EU's pivotal role in building peace and stability in Europe, asserting that all the credit belongs with NATO. In fact, both organisations play important and complementary roles. As President Obama and other leading Americans have said, NATO would be weakened if European political solidarity were to be damaged by a British exit from the EU.

- Russia's President Putin, discomforted by the EU's cohesion (with Britain in the vanguard) in applying tough sanctions against Russian meddling in Ukraine, is keen to see a British exit.

- Britain has been at the forefront of developing an EU Defence and Security Policy.

- Defence remains a national competence. EU actions are adopted after a unanimous vote, under the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty.

- NATO and the EU complement each other. The EU uses 'soft power' to seek to prevent conflict in fragile states and to promote reconciliation and the rule of law in areas like the Balkans. It encourages reform through allowing access to the Single Market and its development and humanitarian aid programmes.

Context and History

The European Communities were explicitly founded – and this is clearly recognised throughout Western Europe – with the objective of building such close political, economic and cultural ties that another major European war would become unthinkable. It has been a highly successful attempt to learn the lessons of history. This is why in 2012 it was the unanimous decision of the Prize Committee to award the European Union the Nobel Peace Prize.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU (with Britain prominent in realising this objective) has played a critical role in promoting democracy, stability and reform in Central and Eastern Europe. The prospect of EU membership has promoted reform, pluralism and a greater willingness to seek peaceful outcomes to deep-seated conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. This is not, however, to deny the central role played by NATO in ensuring security from Soviet, and more recently Russian, aggression.

Since the end of the Cold-War, the US and its European Allies have been exploring the best way to address changing defence and security threats by using the complementary capabilities of both NATO and the EU; particularly as the two organisations have 22 member states in common. Both organisations have under gone significant change since the days of Cold War confrontation. The 9/11 terrorist attacks of September 2001 and those on Madrid (2004) and London (2005) added impetus to the EU's efforts to increase its role and effectiveness as an actor in the defence and security field.

1992: Common Foreign and Security Policy: Under the Treaty of Maastricht the EU established a 'second pillar' which embraced its external affairs activities. This paved the way for the subsequent establishment of a security and defence dimension, through the Western European Union (WEU).

1994: European Security and Defence Identity: Berlin-plus: The ESDI first emerged in 1994 during discussions about how to build a stronger 'European Pillar' to the Atlantic Alliance. In June 1996 at a ministerial meeting in Berlin, NATO affirmed that one of its objectives should be the ability of European Member States to undertake operations (without the US) and to 'borrow' NATO military assets to support the mission. This arrangement is called 'Berlin-plus'. The 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam developed this concept

further with the articulation of the 'Petersberg Tasks' which the EU would undertake. These are: humanitarian intervention, crisis management and peacekeeping.

1999: NATO – EU Relations: NATO's 50th Anniversary Summit, Washington; Helsinki European Council. In April 1999 NATO launched its 'New Strategic Concept' which set out the organisation's post-Cold War priorities, and which enabled the Alliance to operate 'out of area' to further peacekeeping missions. It also saw a new round of enlargement, to admit members from Eastern Europe. This Summit also saw the end of the arm's length relationship between NATO and the EU; foreseeing the end of the WEU. The Helsinki European Council in 1999 established the EU's defence capability. In each case these developments were done with full British participation and consent.

A European Army?

The establishment of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in 1999 gave the EU the capability to act outside its borders in order to fulfil 'Petersberg Task' missions. The first such mission undertaken by EU forces was in Macedonia (2003) followed by Bosnia, where the NATO mission (SFOR) handed over to EUFOR in December 2004. It continues to provide a policing mission in Kosovo.

As part of the ESDP mechanism, an EU Military Staff (EUMS) was established within the European Council. Co-ordination and co-operation mechanisms with NATO are intended to work through the 'Berlin-plus' arrangements. A dispute between Turkey (a NATO member) and Cyprus (a member of the EU) has, however, stalled this process.

Efforts to establish an ESDP have not always been smooth. EU Member States were encouraged to pledge commitments to a 'Force Catalogue' in 2000. This was in part an attempt to get countries to modernise their forces to fit a post-Cold War role. The aim was to provide a reservoir of 100,000 troops. The political difficulty of the idea was that many countries operated a conscription model which made it very unpopular.

Efforts by President Chirac of France to establish a separate Operational Headquarters (OHQ) for the EUMS alongside the NATO HQ (SHAPE) was an unnecessary distraction since a key principle of NATO-EU co-operation is the avoidance of duplication. In 2009 President Sarkozy brought France back into full membership of NATO for the first time since President De Gaulle took France out in 1966.

The Lisbon Treaty reflects EU Member States' reluctance to cede sovereignty on defence policy. This can only be changed by a unanimous vote by all Member States. Some politicians occasionally advocate the creation of a European army – but such ideas do not command much support. The UK retains a veto over any such development – at least for as long as we remain a member of the EU.

NATO and the EU

NATO and the EU are complementary. The Atlantic Alliance retains a capability in 'high end' State vs State warfighting; this is being seen, for example, in the air policing mission in the Baltic to deter Russia. The EU has more 'soft power' instruments at its disposal via policy strands such as aid and development. These policies help to promote political reform, capacity building, conflict resolution and stability in fragile states.

The EU has recently provided peacekeeping and stabilisation missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali, as well as a naval mission to combat Somali pirates off the coast of East Africa. The current (May 2016) commander of the EU NAVFOR anti-piracy mission is a British Royal Marine. A permanent presence in the region has enabled maritime traffic to flow freely and caused the level of piracy to diminish significantly.

Soft Power

The EU makes a real contribution to security by preventing the outbreak of conflicts or by promoting stability in its own neighbourhood. The EU's policy instruments assist conflict prevention through the provision of resources or expertise to strengthen government institutions in fragile states. The EU and its Member States, for example, are the world's largest donors of development aid with over 2.5 billion Euros due to be spent on development co-operation in 2016, and 1.1 bn Euros spent on humanitarian aid. Additionally the European Development Fund has a 3 bn Euro budget for long term technical assistance and development aid. Moreover, the EU promotes political and economic co-operation including through providing access to the European Single Market, with the objective of increasing prosperity and incentivising reform.