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# A Tragic Lack of Ambition: Why EU Security Policy is no Strategy

OLIVIER SCHMITT

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Tools of classical strategic analysis support distinctive explanations for the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union. Looking at the articulation between ends, ways, and means offers a perspective on the CSDP that is different from the approaches usually favoured by European Union specialists or even security studies scholars. In particular, it is argued here that the CSDP is no strategy, and little more than an institutional make-up for the lack of strategic thinking within the European Union. First, I show that the CSDP is not European security, and that the EU security policy is astonishingly absent from the security challenges facing Europe. Second, I argue that this situation stems from a lack of a political project within the European Union. I refer to the classical distinction made by Hans Morgenthau between *pouvoir* and *puissance* to show that, short of a political project, we will not see a strategic CSDP any time soon.

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The two articles at the heart of this symposium attempt to explain the emergence of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union, and they provide different answers.<sup>1</sup> To Cladi and Locatelli, the CSDP is explained by a bandwagoning mechanism. They argue that structural realists have been much too concerned about balancing as a causal mechanism, and have lost sight of this other potential behaviour, which is better suited to explain the emergence of the CSDP. Pohl takes issue with this interpretation and instead argues that, far from bandwagoning, the CSDP is at heart a liberal project aiming to show Europe's contribution to the security of its environment, and that domestic politics explains the selectivity and apparent inconsistencies in the way this objective is pursued.

Unsurprisingly, considering the differences in theoretical approaches, the two contributions focus on different empirical evidences to support their arguments. Cladi and Locatelli look at the institutional developments and the declared capabilities (such as the battlegroups), while Pohl focuses on the diplomatic history of the EU missions. While both articles must be praised for their successful blend of theoretical considerations and empirical evidences, I am more convinced by Pohl's argument, which I will try to locate within a broader strategic perspective on the EU's security policy. My own contribution tries to go beyond the issue of the emergence of the CSDP and to interrogate its strategic meaning. I argue that because of the doubts on the nature of the EU project itself, the CSDP suffers from a critical lack of ambition which, combined with dramatic defence budget cuts in Europe, is akin to strategic suicide. As a consequence, the CSDP operations and missions are to the

strategic stakes facing the EU what playing kitchenette is to a meal prepared by a starred chef: small, cute, and lacking all the critical capabilities. This brief piece is voluntarily provocative in tone and must be read as an essay, short of the space to present a fully fledged and empirically demonstrated academic argument. I first discuss the idea that the CSDP is by no means European security, before discussing the lack of European strategic thinking.

Considering the limited size of a journal article, it is probably normal that neither Cladi and Locatelli nor Pohl fully discuss the complex web of institutions and practices concerned with European security, the first and foremost being obviously NATO. The relations between NATO and the EU have been the subject of countless articles, conferences, and reports. After a decade of debates on the proper scope and focus of both institutions, the hard truth remains: NATO means the United States, which means military capabilities and reassurances incommensurate with what any aggregation of European states could generate. If security means territorial defence, then NATO is European security. This hard fact is the only reason why the emergence of the CSDP is such a puzzle: the European initiative seems redundant, and has more to do with party ideologies than with a real strategic rationale.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the nuclear and conventional capability furnished by the United States in order to defend Europe, the British and French nuclear deterrents, *de facto* extended to the rest of the EU,<sup>3</sup> are a cheap way for many countries to benefit from another layer of reassurance while officially criticizing nuclear energy for electoral purposes.

As such, European security is not assured by the EU security policy. Even the French have become disillusioned by the CSDP as the report written by Hubert Védrine about the French reintegration to NATO shows.<sup>4</sup> European security must be thought of as a case of embedded organizations, furnishing different capabilities fit for different needs. In that sense, Pohl is entirely right: the CSDP is an inconsistent application of a liberal principle vaguely aiming at showing the EU's interest for the security of its neighbourhood. I would go further and argue that it is a make-up for a lack of strategic thinking. In a sense, I wish that Cladi and Locatelli were right, because this would mean that the EU had a strategy, which would consist of bandwagoning with the United States. The strategy would be debatable, but at least it would be something. I am afraid this is not even the case, as the EU blindness to some of the main contemporary security challenges shows. Where do the discussions on missile defence – a challenge that will dimension Western armed forces and have strong industrial consequences – take place? NATO, not the EU. Where was the EU when the French and the British mounted an operation to protect the Libyan populations? Where was the EU when the French had to intervene in Mali to prevent the apparition of a collapsed state hosting radical Islamists on Europe's doorstep? Considering the current cuts in military capabilities, how will the EU be able to evacuate the hundreds of thousands of European citizens living and working in South-East Asia or in the Gulf if a conflict erupted there?

The European Union does act (for example, sending a training mission to Mali) but, very often, one is tempted to say 'too little, too late'. It is possible to lament about the causes of this dire state of affairs and try to assess the relative importance

of NATO's existence, the US reluctance to grant Europe a real autonomy, the impact of declining military budgets, and the member states' unwillingness to relinquish their sovereignty on defence issues. Instead, I argue that these factors are revelatory of a much more fundamental problem: the lack of strategic thinking within the EU.

In its simplest forms, grand strategy is 'the direction and use made of any or all among the total assets of a security community in support of its policy goals as decided by politics'.<sup>5</sup> In essence, there can be no strategy without a political project. Arguably, this is where the problem lies for European security policy: it is a policy without politics. Therefore, there can be no strategy.

That the European Union is facing an existential crisis leaves little doubt. Since the beginning of the financial crisis each new summit is supposed to be critical, but none seems to be able to create a fiction of European unity. But even before economic issues arrived at the top of the agenda, the European Union was in a state of institutional crisis due to the negative results of the French and Dutch referenda on the European constitution in 2005. Since then, and despite a Lisbon treaty that tried to save the substance of the 'constitution', the EU has suffered from a deep legitimacy crisis, only aggravated by the economic stalemate.

The interesting observation is that almost all of the main institutional initiatives that are now showcased by optimists as proof of European successes were in fact launched before 2005, when there seemed to be a political dynamic at play in the European Union: the military committee, the European Defence Agency, the battle-groups, and so on were all created or conceptualized before the 2005 political crisis. After that, nothing really important happened. There have been a lot of policies (including missions), but nothing substantially political at the EU level, which confirms Pohl's findings that the relevant level for political competition in Europe is the nation state.

Short of political project, the EU has no strategy for its CSDP, which ends up being limited to easy, low-intensity missions and financial aid without even making an effort to articulate military, economic, and diplomatic resources into a broader political effort. If one wants to look at IR theories to explain this weakness, the reference should not be structural realists but classical realists instead. When he wrote *The Concept of the Political*, in French, while being in Geneva, Hans Morgenthau distinguished between two notions of power.<sup>6</sup> *Pouvoir* was the traditional Weberian understanding of power as relation, the stronger actor (in terms of material resources and/or 'authority') imposing its will. But he also used the term *puissance*, which referred to a normative aspect of power, based on a political project. Right now, the EU may have some *pouvoir*, but clearly lacks *puissance*, short of a political project that would serve as a micro-foundation of strategic behaviour. As long as the EU will not learn how to articulate political ends, ways to achieve them, and available means (in short: learn to think strategically), the CSDP will remain a policy occupying a few hundred policymakers and think-tanks in Brussels and the capitals, having little impact on the broader European security concerns. If Pohl is right, as I believe he is, and the domestic stage is what matters when member states discuss security policies, it is not any time soon that we will see a truly strategic CSDP.

## NOTES

1. Lorenzo Cladi and Andrea Locatelli, 'Bandwagoning, Not Balancing: Why Europe Confounds Realism', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (August 2012), p. 270; and Benjamin Pohl, 'Neither Bandwagoning nor Balancing: Explaining Europe's Security Policy', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2013), pp. 353–73.
2. Stephanie C. Hofmann, *European Security in NATO's Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
3. André Dumoulin, *Histoire de la Dissuasion Nucléaire* (Bordeaux: Argos, 2013).
4. Hubert Védrine, 'Report for the President of the French Republic on the Consequences of France's Return to NATO's Integrated Military Command, on the Future of Transatlantic Relations, and the Outlook for the Europe of Defence', 14 November 2012, available at [www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/190042/2094793/file/Rapport%20V%C3%A9drine\\_GBR\\_DEU.pdf](http://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/190042/2094793/file/Rapport%20V%C3%A9drine_GBR_DEU.pdf) (accessed 29 April 2013).
5. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 18.
6. Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Concept of the Political* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).