

# Into politics and wrestling with the EU

By **Geoffrey Van Orden**, Conservative MEP for the East of England and Conservative Defence Spokesman.

After a long and fulfilling career as an Intelligence Corps officer, I took the plunge almost 20 years ago to follow my other long-standing ambition – to enter politics. I was writing letters to newspapers in my teens – CND was the problem in those days – and read Politics at university. Much of my military life was overseas and focused on tasks with a political dimension. Then I was in my late forties and thinking I had already left it too late to enter politics. I had not intended to end up in Brussels, but that is how things worked out. I must confess that I have no affection for the EU institutions in which I spend four days each week, but I enjoy enormously what I do. Occasionally I can have some impact, at least on the margins, on both UK and EU policy.

As Conservative Defence Spokesman with a wide foreign affairs brief, I have fortunately been able to keep up my involvement in military matters, to continue the fight against terrorism, and to engage with countries where we have a strong national interest. In early September I had the opportunity to visit some of our military units still in Germany, where I was particularly interested to learn of our continued efforts, in a reduced army, to sustain a range of military capabilities that include high-intensity warfare.

If you think Britain no longer has any external interests or responsibilities – and there is a regrettable growth in such an attitude among the public – or if you are content to see British interests dissolved into some imaginary ‘European’ interest, then you won’t have any difficulty with a

European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP for short). I take a contrary view. I deplore any moves that bolster the EU’s defence ambitions, which inevitably detract from what should be our main focus – the revitalisation of NATO and the maintenance of highly capable, well-resourced and flexible British armed forces. This stance requires political will and the backing of the general public.

The new President of the European Commission, Mr Juncker – whose appointment was rightly opposed by David Cameron – places creation of



an integrated EU defence capability (‘permanent structured cooperation’ in the EU vernacular) high on his list of foreign policy priorities. He will need to be disabused of this idea.

In late 2010, William Hague warned British diplomatic missions against ‘competence creep’ by the EU’s newly created diplomatic service, the External Action Service. And Conservative Ministers twigged that there was some significance to the EU’s defence pretensions when they applied the brakes at last December’s European Council, which had been heralded as the great leap



forward in EU military endeavours. They realised that we could not, in one breath, seek to distance ourselves from ‘ever closer union’ and call for repatriation of powers from Brussels, and in another acquiesce in a flagship EU policy designed to deepen political integration and extend the range of EU competence.

The idea that the EU might deliver more military capability among European allies, or that it will shoulder more of the defence burden long carried by the United States, is illusory. And there is no advantage to Britain – the

largest European defence manufacturer and exporter – in encouraging the EU to interfere in its defence industrial sector. Collaborative international defence programmes are best arranged between the small number of companies and nations involved, without an expensive EU spanner in the works.

The UK brake on EU involvement in defence had been removed by Mr Blair at St Malo in 1998 when he agreed with France that the EU should develop an ‘autonomous’ military capability. Much flowed from that declaration. Mr Blair wanted to raise his game in Europe and defence was his strongest card. It also played to long-standing French desires to separate European security from United States influence through NATO.

While contributing little of practical value, the EU placed its institutional footprint on an increasing range of defence-related activities, wastefully duplicating staff and structures already

very well established at NATO. These included an EU Military Committee, an EU Military Staff, an intelligence assessment staff, and a European Defence College to promote an 'EU defence culture'. For the power-point presentations, there was also an impressive narrative of activity, including some 30 operational 'CSDP missions'. Most, however, were self-generated. Few stand up to scrutiny. And, as it happens, those that weren't mainly French operations were largely civilian.

As one American top general put it, "the EU installed the plumbing but there wasn't any water." It provided no additional military capabilities – not one additional warship, combat aircraft or soldier. Its lofty aim of 60,000 troops standing ready for dispatch on some imaginary EU-flagged military operation came to nothing. The successor concept of smaller and clearly misnamed 'EU battle groups' has yet to meet reality and identify a useful role.

Aware that naked pursuit of a European Army for political purposes might upset key powers such as Britain, the EU has busily sought alternative justifications for its ambitions. The latest is the 'comprehensive approach', which enables it to claim some 'unique' amalgam of civil and military capabilities. But there is nothing original or exclusive about this concept – NATO ISAF in Afghanistan oversaw a wide range of capabilities.

While the EU has tried to press on regardless, we can now see that the high point of EU military ambition was reached with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. This established a 'High Representative' as the putative EU Foreign and Defence Minister, gave formal blessing to a European Defence Agency, and enshrined a dangerous 'mutual defence' clause, which the EU has no capacity to fulfil and which was just a pale imitation of NATO's robust Article 5.

But for the Eurocrats, military effectiveness was always secondary. The

current High Representative, Baroness Ashton, let this slip when she stated that the "First (priority for CSDP) is political, and it concerns fulfilling Europe's ambitions on the world stage ... The EU needs to remain a credible security and defence player on the world stage." Not surprisingly then, more attention is paid to EU military 'visibility' than its relevance.

The central fact is that the EU regards its defence policy as a political instrument – to intensify European integration in the most nationally sensitive sector and to enable the EU to become a global actor.



As we have seen at its recent Summit in Wales, in NATO we already have a well-tryed organisation for international consultation and military engagement by the Western democracies. The NATO alliance has the great advantage of ensuring that the United States and European allies are joined in response to crisis. NATO is inter-governmental and does not seek to take power from its members, and there is no reason why European allies should not take a lead when appropriate.

Most EU countries are also NATO members – yet another reason why

it is ridiculous to create a duplicate organisation in Brussels. However, as the enveloping crises show, the European allies must improve their military capabilities, and be willing to use them. If, for some reason, it is not appropriate for NATO to be involved, then we have the option of our bilateral relationships or coalitions of the willing. The EU should focus on civil and financial instruments and get these right.

There needs to be an urgent review of Britain's entanglement in EU defence and diplomatic policy. We cannot sleepwalk into a situation where Britain's overseas profile is further diminished, NATO is split, and we have become an even less effective ally in a dangerous world where we need strong friends. I have led the opposition to EU meddling in defence. I continue to do all that I can to encourage the revitalisation of NATO and the strengthening of Britain's armed forces and defence industries – and to explain their multiple value to a wider audience.

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**Editor's note:**

Geoffrey has given us a lively, provocative article with his forthright views on European defence. We are fortunate to have it. But we know that there are many sides to any question. As we get closer to more intense political activity in the forthcoming new parliament, whichever

constellation of parties has the lead, we will commission articles which take in all views and weigh them. The FPS is both apolitical in its party adherence and highly political in its campaigning and we hope that that is exactly what members expect.

