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What Level of Ambition?

The global proliferation of precision-strike systems and the concomitant emergence of anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities challenges the foundations of Western global military-technological supremacy. What does this mean for current EU debates on military ambition? This Policy Brief argues that the assumption of the freedom of (military) access and movement, which has guided European strategic thinking since the end of the Cold War, is no longer valid. Europeans should get to grips with the new military-strategic paradigm and translate this into an updated ambition level and related capabilities.

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) level of military ambition is currently under review. Any discussions on a new level of ambition should take into account the geographical and functional parameters informing EU foreign policy. As far as geography is concerned, the 2016 European Union Global Strategy identifies the immediate neighbourhood as the main area of strategic priority.¹ Admittedly, the EU acknowledges that the security context in Europe and its surroundings is inextricably tied to happenings further afield, and the Global Strategy states that 'the EU will contribute to global maritime security, building on its experience in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, and exploring possibilities in the Gulf of Guinea, the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca'.² However, and notwithstanding some exceptions, when the

EU and (most of) its member states look into faraway regions they tend to do so through an economic or diplomatic prism, and not so much through a security one – or at least not an operational one.³ Most of the current discussions on European security policy proper revolve around two main questions: a) how to ensure deterrence and counter hybrid warfare in the so-called eastern flank, and b) how to tackle the different security challenges emanating from the southern European neighbourhood, i.e. North Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East. Thus, any debate on Europe's appropriate level of military ambition should arguably take the continent and its immediate neighbourhood as its point of departure.⁴

1 European Council, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe* (Brussels, June 2016).

2 Ibid, p. 41.

3 See, e.g., Christian Mölling and Daniel Keohane, 'Conservative, Comprehensive, Ambitious or Realistic? Assessing EU Defense Strategy Approaches', *Carnegie Europe*, 2 October 2016.

4 For a dissenting view see Luis Simón, 'Europe, the Rise of Asia and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship', *International Affairs* 91:5 (2016): 260-289

In functional terms, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been generally associated with 'low-intensity' operations 'out of area' – although more recently it has also been pegged to those security challenges that present internal-external crossover, like terrorism and the management of the EU's external borders.⁵ However, when it comes to deterrence or collective defence, a majority of EU member states believe that NATO is actually in a far stronger position. The Alliance possesses a fully-fledged planning, command and control infrastructure and is in the midst of a rather ambitious process to strengthen its posture and capabilities, one that arguably belittles current speculation about a potential leap forward in EU defence cooperation.⁶

The EU does not seem to be cut out for high-intensity operations 'out of area' either. Recent experience in Libya, Syria or Mali suggests that when the military stakes are (somewhat) high, NATO and ad-hoc coalitions remain the go-to options for most Europeans.⁷ Despite their all too familiar theatricals and grandstanding rhetoric about their (alleged) commitment to EU 'strategic autonomy', most EU Member States have so far shown little signs of actually wanting to see CSDP venture beyond light-on-risk, constabulary-like peacekeeping, stabilisation or border management tasks. In other words, when it comes to defence or expeditionary warfare, European countries may talk the EU talk but walk the NATO walk. Member state reservations about an EU role in real-life defence or high-intensity operations 'out of area' are a fact of life. But they should not stand in the way of CSDP's potential to make a constructive contribution in

discussions related to the level of military ambition or capability development, for those are discussions in which the member states remain the ultimate referents. Admittedly, the Union remains legally and conceptually committed to both defence and high-intensity operations 'out of area'.⁸ And that is likely to remain the case for some time. With defence and deterrence becoming once again common currency in European strategic parlance, and NATO (re)claiming the centre stage of European security politics, if the EU is to stay relevant vis-à-vis its member states it cannot but somehow ring the defence and deterrence bell too. No wonder the Global Strategy argues that 'Europeans must be ready and able to deter, respond to, and protect (ourselves) against external threats'.⁹ That is indeed the right spirit. Regardless of whether the member states end up going for NATO or coalitions of the willing when the push of a given real-life crisis comes to the shove, the EU must speak the same language as NATO and their leading member states in terms of the level of ambition and capabilities. That means setting the bar high, i.e. thinking about defence and deterrence against significant powers, and about expeditionary warfare in highly hostile, heavily defended environments.

Taking into account the general geographical and functional parameters outlined above, this policy brief attempts to bring east, south, deterrence and expeditionary warfare together around a unifying theme: the global proliferation of precision-strike, and the concomitant emergence of so-called anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in and around Europe.

European Security in a Mature Precision-Strike Context

Since at least the end of the Cold War, Americans and Europeans have drawn on

5 See, respectively, Luis Simón, 'CSDP, Strategy and Crisis Management: Out of Area or Out of Business?', *The International Spectator* 47:3 (2012) 100-115; Margriet Drent, Lennart Landman and Dick Zandee, 'The EU as a Security Provider', *Clingendael Report* (December 2014).

6 Alexander Mattelaer, 'The Seven Paradoxes of NATO's Comeback', *LSE EUROPP Blog* (Forthcoming, November 2016)

7 See, e.g., Nicole Koenig, 'The EU and the Libyan Crisis: The Quest for Coherence?', *IAI Working Papers* 11/19 (July 2011).

8 See, e.g., Sven Biscop, 'The European Union and Mutual Assistance: More than Defense', *The International Spectator* 51:2 (2016) 119-125.

9 European Council, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, p. 19.

their technological edge in communications, navigation, and precision-guided munitions (PGMs) to assert their strategic command over the 'global commons', i.e. global freedom of movement under the seas, in the air above 4,500 metres, in space and cyberspace, as well as the ability to deny that same freedom to others.¹⁰ This has allowed them to transit in and out of different operational theatres pretty much at will. However, the end of the Cold War and globalisation have presided over the progressive proliferation of PGMs beyond the West.¹¹ In turn, their progressive adoption of PGMs has allowed non-Western countries and actors to develop their A2/AD capabilities, i.e. by way of ballistic and cruise missiles, offensive cyber weapons, electronic warfare, etc.¹² Anti-access capabilities are used to prevent or constrain the deployment of opposing forces into a theatre of operations, whereas area-denial capabilities are used to reduce their freedom of manoeuvre once in a theatre.¹³ All in all, anti-access and area denial capabilities pose a direct threat to the forward deployment, movement, communications and situational awareness of Western militaries.

The global proliferation of PGMs and the concomitant development of A2/AD capabilities is leading to a levelling of the playing field, i.e. by challenging the foundations of Western global military-technological supremacy and, most importantly for our purposes, of European and allied military supremacy in and around Europe. The US has already begun to grapple with the implications of the global proliferation of PGMs and the mounting A2/AD challenge. In late 2014, the former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel set in motion a new offset strategy aimed at developing

the necessary capabilities to mitigate the pacing A2/AD threat. By leveraging US advantages in 'breakthrough technologies' like stealth, advanced manufacturing, cyber capabilities, directed-energy, or robotics, the third offset strategy seeks to give the US a military-technological edge in a world where PGMs are no longer the preserve of the West.¹⁴

Most of the discussions in the United States about how to overcome A2/AD have revolved around China's rise and the evolving strategic balance in the Western Pacific.¹⁵ However, Europe presents its own share of A2/AD problems.¹⁶ These problems bear serious implications for Europeans both in the context of defence and deterrence in the east, as well as when it comes to conducting out of area military operations in the south.

The East: Defence and Deterrence in a Mature Precision-Strike Context

Over the last decade or so Russia has made significant inroads into precision-strike warfare, to the point that those NATO and EU member states bordering it are increasingly vulnerable to its A2/AD capabilities.¹⁷ Moscow's integrated air-defence system and short-range land-attack missiles already cover the Baltic States in their entirety, as well as swathes of Polish, Swedish and Finnish territory. This problem

10 See Barry Posen, 'Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony', *International Security* 28/1 (2003): 5-46.

11 See, e.g., Thomas Mahnken, 'Weapons: the Growth & Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime', *Daedalus* 140/3 (2011) 45-57

12 Barry Watts, 'The Evolution of Precision Strike', *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments* (2013).

13 Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., 'The Pentagon's Wasting Assets', *Foreign Affairs* 88:4 (2009)

14 See Robert Martinage, *Towards a New Offset Strategy: Exploiting U.S. Long-Term Advantages to Restore U.S. Global Power Projection Capability* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 27 October 2014)

15 See, e.g. Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, 'Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia', *International Security* 41/1 (2016) 7-48; Thomas G. Mahnken, 'China's Anti Access Strategy in Historical and Technological Perspective', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34/3 (2011) 299-323

16 See, e.g., Luis Simón, 'The "Third" US Offset Strategy and Europe's "Anti-Access" Challenge', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39:3 (2016), 417-445.

17 See, e.g., Diego Ruiz-Palmer, 'Back to the Future? Russia's hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs and cold war comparisons', *NDC Research Paper* 120 (October 2015).

is further compounded by two facts. The first is the ongoing modernisation of mobile (i.e. naval and air) platforms that extend the geographical reach of Russia's A2/AD capabilities further west. The second is the deployment of A2/AD systems in various geographically advanced locations alongside Europe's eastern flank, broadly defined, running from Murmansk in the high north, through Kaliningrad in northeastern Europe (where Russian capabilities are perhaps most serious), and Crimea in the Black Sea, all the way to Tartus and Latakia in Syria.

Without prejudicing their degree of maturity or lethality, the emergence of Russian A2/AD capabilities alongside the eastern flank poses an operational problem for NATO. In the case of a conflict or crisis, it would become riskier for the Alliance to move aircraft, ships and troops into frontline states in northeastern or southeastern Europe. It is arguably possible to suppress those A2/AD capabilities.¹⁸ However, this would significantly raise the military stakes – and that very prospect could pose a serious challenge to intra-Alliance political cohesion. Relatedly, the perception that A2/AD may give Russia 'local escalation dominance' at the conventional level can help to undermine political confidence in front-line NATO and EU countries, thus strengthening local stakeholders that are in favour of accommodation with Russia. In other words, the *perception* of local escalation dominance can turn out to be a rather effective form of psychological or political warfare.

The South: The Future of Power Projection in a Maturing Precision-Strike Context

While great powers like China or Russia may be far ahead in the game, PGMs and A2/AD capabilities are proliferating on a global scale. In fact, they are also finding their way into Europe's extended southern neighbourhood, i.e. the geographical space running from the Gulf of Guinea, through the Sahel, the Mediterranean and Red

Seas onto the Western Indian Ocean – as far as the Persian Gulf.¹⁹ To be sure, the A2/AD challenge in Europe's southern neighbourhood is still relatively immature in terms of its technological sophistication. However, several actors are exploiting the advantages offered by PGMs to progressively build up their own A2/AD capabilities in creative and operationally efficient ways.

Iran's A2/AD strategy combines technologically sophisticated elements – such as advanced air defences, cruise missiles, cyber weapons, and even attack submarines – with the application of precision-guided systems to more 'rudimentary' munitions, such as rockets or mortars.²⁰ Thanks to its advances in the realm of A2/AD, Tehran may already be in a position to either block or substantially complicate passage through the critical Strait of Hormuz. In Syria, Russian-made, precision-guided surface to air missiles and thousands of anti-aircraft guns make up an advanced air defence network that makes it increasingly difficult for Europeans to project power there. Other countries, like Egypt, Libya or Nigeria, are also likely to take advantage of precision-strike to (continue to) ramp up their A2/AD capabilities in the future, and even terrorist and rebel groups are making forays into precision-strike.²¹ For instance, Hezbollah used anti-tank guided missiles against Israel in the 2006 Lebanon war; whilst, more recently, Houthi rebels in Yemen have fired anti-ship missiles at US ships in the Red Sea.²² Much as is the case in the Strait of Hormuz, the proliferation of PGMs near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait could give an edge to otherwise militarily

18 See, e.g., Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias, 'NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge', *Survival* 58/2 (2016) 95-116.

19 For a good discussion on the global proliferation of precision-strike and the emergence of the A2/AD challenge see Mahnken, 'Weapons: the Growth & Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime'.

20 See, e.g., Mark Gunzinger and Christopher Dougherty, *Outside-In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran's Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011).

21 Mahnken, 'Weapons: the Growth & Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime'

22 'A New Threat to Red Sea Shipping', *STRATFOR*, 5 October 2016.

modest rebel groups and allow them to threaten vital European lines of supply and communications.

Time for a Mature Debate on Europe's Military Ambition

What does the current and future proliferation of PGMs, and the emergence of A2/AD challenges in and around Europe, mean for current EU debates on military ambition? In addressing that question, it is important to bear in mind that the proliferation of PGMs and the emergence of A2/AD present different levels of (technological) maturity in Europe's east and south, and that they also pose different sets of challenges for Europeans.

The emergence of A2/AD in the east could undermine deterrence. European countries should therefore think long and hard about how to strike the appropriate balance between those strategies or operational concepts aimed at *defeating* or rolling back Russia's A2/AD capabilities (i.e. deterrence by punishment) and those *hedging* strategies or operational concepts that are less dependent on unhindered access, and instead seek to restore deterrence by actually imposing A2/AD on Russia, including through asymmetrical forms of warfare.²³

Insofar as hedging or deterrence by denial is concerned, Europeans should perhaps think harder about how they can raise the costs of a potential aggression. One way to do that is by investing in A2/AD themselves.²⁴ Another is to resort to asymmetric forms of warfare

to impose denial costs. For instance, EU and NATO member states sitting on the frontline could look into 'protracted warfare' concepts, e.g. small, modern and highly distributed resistance forces armed with short-range, portable guided rockets, guided artillery, and guided mortars that can conduct very rapid and lethal manoeuvres, ambushes and sabotage.²⁵ By signalling that they would be 'hard to digest', frontline states could significantly raise the costs of a possible Russian aggression.²⁶

At the same time, European countries should not give up on trying to defeat, or at least mitigate, Russia's A2/AD. One way to do that is through adaptive missile defence concepts, by resorting to 'hardening', 'dispersion' and 'tunnelling' techniques and exploring the potential of new technologies like directed-energy or electromagnetic rail guns. Another is by investing in offensive capabilities to restore deterrence. In this regard, there is a seeming need to invest in strike capabilities that can cut through Russia's A2/AD layer, such as stealthy air combat and land-attack aerial systems, submarines (which are becoming increasingly important in the context of land-attack missions), and offensive electronic and cyber weaponry. In addition to that, NATO should preserve its nuclear options for escalation control, and look into ways of integrating such options in its thinking on defence and deterrence along the eastern flank.²⁷

As far as Europe's southern neighbourhood is concerned, the present *and future* proliferation of PGMs and A2/AD concepts and capabilities may increasingly challenge the assumption that Europeans can safely access most operational theatres in Africa and the broader Middle East, and move freely within those theatres. In this regard,

23 For a more detailed discussion on the different strategies aimed at defeating A2/AD and hedging against it see Luis Simón, 'The "Third" US Offset Strategy', esp. 431-433. For a cognizant discussion on deterrence by denial vs. punishment see A. Wess Mitchell, 'The Case for Deterrence by Denial', *The National Interest* (12 August 2015).

24 See, e.g., Guillaume Lasconjarias and Alessandro Marrone, 'How to Respond to Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)? Towards a NATO Counter-A2/AD Strategy', NDC Conference Report 01/16.

25 Jim Thomas, 'Protraction: a 21st century flavor of deterrence', *Small Wars Journal*, 11 September 2015.

26 Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, 'A Preclusive Strategy to Defend the NATO Frontier', *The American Interest* (2 December 2014).

27 See, e.g., Elbridge Colby, 'The Role of Nuclear Weapons in the U.S.-Russia Relationship', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Task Force White Paper*, 26 February 2016.

the relatively powerful air-defences of the Assad regime made a possible European military intervention in Syria in 2013 almost prohibitive without substantial US engagement. This means that certain areas in the Levant or North Africa could conceivably become 'no access zones' for European military power. Moreover, and much as is the case in Eastern Europe, A2/AD could embolden some countries and actors in Africa and the Middle East to engage more confidently in asymmetric forms of warfare in the future, and (continue to) undermine European political influence in those regions.

As already argued, ever since the end of the Cold War, the assumption of the freedom of (military) access and movement has guided European strategic thinking. Thus, European discussions on the level of ambition and capability development (whether in an EU, NATO or national framework) have revolved around crisis management or peacekeeping endeavours in rather benign and permissive strategic environments. That has led to an emphasis on concepts like deployability, mobility or rapid reaction. The NATO Response Force or the European Battlegroups bear witness to that process, as do the EU's 2003 and 2010 Headline Goals, with their emphasis on deployability and rapid reaction. In terms of capabilities, Europeans have prioritized military transport aircraft, air-to-air refuelling, satellite communications, and helicopters, whether for tactical transport or tactical strike missions. All those are distinctively non-stealthy capabilities, and are therefore increasingly vulnerable in maturing precision-strike and A2/AD environments. Thus, Europeans should perhaps think harder about power projection capabilities and technologies that are 'A2/AD proof', and can give them an edge in an era where most present and future competitors are likely to have PGMs. This would include an emphasis on stealthy land-attack aerial systems, offensive cyber and electronic weaponry, and leveraging the potential of submarines for land-attack missions and for dispatching special operations forces. Relatedly, Europeans should also invest in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities that are 'anti-access' proof.

This is a point that is relevant both in the context of defence and deterrence as well as in that of expeditionary warfare. This means reducing their current dependence on space-based assets, given their high vulnerability in mature A2/AD environments.

As Europeans think about how to take the Global Strategy forward, questions related to the appropriate level of military ambition and capabilities will become increasingly important. Such questions will likely guide the European Defense Agency's (EDA) upcoming revision of its Capability Development Plan, as well as the European Commission's European Defense Action Plan, which is due to be published in December. It is imperative that, in addressing those discussions, Europeans get to grips with the new military-strategic paradigm, characterized by the global proliferation of PGMs and the advent of A2/AD. To do that, they must exploit all of the relevant bilateral and multilateral channels to connect with current US thinking on offset and defence innovation.²⁸ Relatedly, and given the prospect that the NATO defence planning process reaffirms its influence over force planning and force structure in Europe, it is only logical that this process feeds into discussions on the level of ambition and capability development at the EU level. This means that greater efforts may be needed to link NATO's International Military Staff and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe with the EU Military Staff, and also NATO's Allied Command Transformation and the European Defence Agency.

28 See, e.g., Daniel Fiott, 'A Revolution Too Far? US Defense Innovation, Europe and NATO's Military-Technological Gap', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (early view, May 2016).

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