Insight

17 January 2020

Challenges to Europe's security and defence

Andy Scollick

Challenges to Europe's security and defence

Andy Scollick

Author: Dr Andy Scollick is a consultant in the field of European defence and security. He specialises in systems thinking and the development of resilience-based approaches. His focus is on the interconnections between climate change and defence, the role of emerging and disruptive technologies including uncrewed vehicles, strategic foresight and the Irish Defence Forces. Between 2014 and 2019, Andy worked as a defence policy analyst and advisor to government, military and civil society actors in Ukraine and other European countries. For 22 years prior to that, he was an advocate, policy analyst and consultant in the field of European marine sustainability and maritime policy, working for national, EU and international NGOs. Andy holds a PhD in sustainability science, complex adaptive systems theory and maritime governance from University College Cork where he also worked as an EU project researcher and lecturer.

We are just over halfway through January and 2020 is already another very challenging year for Europe. More specifically, for the European security and defence environment that faces a multitude of ongoing, emerging and evolving issues. Not least of which is the dangerous and escalating crisis between the United States (US) and Iran in the ever simmering Middle East. A baptism of fire for the new 'geopolitical' European Commission under President Ursula von der Leyen and a severe test of the European Union (EU) member states. But there are other equally pressing problems facing Europe.

In North Africa, the Libya crisis now intersects with the expansionist ambitions of both Russia and Turkey in the Central Mediterranean. It also threatens to impact neighbouring Algeria. Turkey's new geopolitical assertiveness endangers security and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean region, pitting Turkey against Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt over natural gas resources and the EastMed pipeline project. This is compounded by the deepening cooperation between Russia and Turkey in the areas of trade, energy and defence – largely to Russia's advantage. Furthermore, the stalled process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has opened a window of opportunity for the competing geopolitical ambitions of Russia, China and Turkey. Notably, President von der Leyen called the delay a "strategic mistake" (POLITICO 2019).

There is potential for further aggressive, revanchist actions by Russia against Ukraine and other European countries. Russia has become increasingly emboldened by the West's lacklustre response to its so-called 'hybrid' war against Ukraine and failure to penalise Russia sufficiently for violating the international rule of law by annexing Crimea and occupying areas of the Donbas region of Ukraine. Using multiple methods across spheres including economic, energy, cyber and disinformation, Russia continues to extend its political influence operations throughout Europe and the European neighbourhood. In addition, Europe has yet to come to terms with the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between the US and Russia, a cornerstone of European security, and the prospect of another 'Euromissile Crisis'.

Is a Russian 'test' of NATO's collective defence commitment under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty a possibility if an opportunity arose, for example, in the Baltic states? It is incumbent on the EU and NATO to coordinate efforts to strengthen resilience and bolster deterrence not only in Northern Europe, but along the entire eastern flank facing Russia.

Clearly, some of the above geopolitical issues relate to the challenge of energy security in Europe. Russia continues to use the supply of natural gas and oil to Europe as leverage against EU policy and political decision-making. Gas pipelines from Russia through Ukraine, the Black Sea and Turkey, and the Baltic Sea (Nord Stream and the controversial Nord Stream 2 extension) give the regime in Moscow control over the supply taps. Russia recently suspended oil supplies to Belarus: seemingly a message as part of Moscow's efforts to retain the republic within the Russian sphere of influence by deepening economic ties (so-called 'integration'). Competition between European and non-European states and companies for oil and gas reserves in the

Middle East, North Africa, Central and Eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea and Arctic is growing. The issue of energy security will continue to underpin much of the EU's security and defence thinking in 2020.

As a world power, Europe is caught between the US and China, which are the EU's first and second largest trade partners respectively. This tension is exacerbated by the growing rivalry and decoupling of ties between the US and China, and China's trajectory to surpass the US in terms of economy, finance, technology and defence spending. China's dominance in the telecommunications technology market continues to raise security concerns in Europe. There is also the 'inconvenient truth' regarding the ongoing Hong Kong protest movement for human rights and democratic principles. Inconvenient because the EU has a significant trading relationship with the Hong Kong special administrative region, but an even greater one with China. Some of the riot control equipment used by the Hong Kong Police Force, including armoured vehicles and water cannons, is manufactured by EU-based companies.

Regarding the various protest movements in Europe, there is potential for internal EU crises in two member states — Poland and Hungary — over backsliding on the rule of law. Whether or how this could affect EU internal security remains to be seen.

Brexit. The European Commission and other EU institutions will have to begin making the readjustments necessary to accommodate the United Kingdom's (UK) departure. EU and British officials face the enormous task of negotiating new agreements on everything, including security, defence and border controls. The changing relationship has major implications for the EU's common foreign and security policy and for EU member Ireland due to its geographical position.

It is likely that there will be an increased emphasis on the geopolitics of technology, including in relation to artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, robotics (lethal autonomous weapons systems or 'killer robots'), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), 3D printing of weapons, cybersecurity and cyberwarfare, and the potential hostile uses of biotechnology. Emerging technologies are both an opportunity and a threat to European defence capabilities.

A related issue will be to address the mismatch between the EU's ambitions to integrate and strengthen European defence cooperation and strategic autonomy, and the budget available and the sluggish, inefficient pace at which Europe's armed forces are being modernised with new equipment and technology to face 21st century challenges. Developing the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation on security and defence (PESCO) framework to accommodate participation by 'third states', such as the UK, Canada, Norway and Ukraine, in joint projects is a priority. This intersects with the views of French President Emmanuel Macron (MEFA 2017) and the von der Leyen Commission that a more independent and assertive EU should be "the

guardian of multilateralism" (European Commission 2019). Views that are already creating more tension with the US and China.

To these challenges must be added the continuing uncertainty over the future of transatlantic relations due to the current state of affairs of US domestic politics. We may also expect further strain between some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies regarding matters of political policy and financial contributions. There will likely be further impacts and uncertainty due to the political phenomenon of populism in different European countries. The ongoing threat to European security of extremism, terrorism and ideologically motivated violence must be addressed.

Last but not least, as bushfires continue to rage in Australia, anthropogenic climate change remains the overarching challenge to global security in 2020. The 'climate emergency' already has ramifications for the European security and defence environment. For example, as resources such as usable land, food and fresh water, upon which millions of livelihoods depend, are depleted due to climate-related impacts, people are forced to migrate, creating security challenges (EEAS 2018). Increasing competition for increasingly scarce resources may exacerbate existing conflicts and lead to new ones. In turn, these will exert an ever greater pull on EU budgets and resources needed for crisis management. In the longer term, the process of EU diversification away from fossil fuels toward clean energy will likely have knock-on effects on the economies and political stability of producer states that depend on oil and gas exports, including Russia as well as in the Middle East and North Africa. Solving one problem could deepen existing threats and create new ones.

Taken together, the challenges outlined above present a messy and seemingly intractable cluster of interwoven, constantly changing problems for which there are no simple or singular solutions. In order to provide useful knowledge for decision and policy making — in effect solutions to complex problem clusters — it is necessary to simultaneously untangle their complexity and understand how their components interact as a whole. This is where adopting a systems approach can significantly help by providing policy and decision makers with a strong foundation for dealing with the geopolitical changes, complexities and uncertainties that will dominate security and defence in the coming decade.

Addressing the issues facing European security and defence would in many cases benefit from better coordination and more cooperation between the EU and NATO. Particularly as regards joint efforts to build Europe-wide resilience and adaptability to deal with 21st century challenges.

PS. Since this insight was posted, the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV that emerged from Wuhan city and surrounding Hubei province in China appears to be developing into a significant additional challenge. (28 January 2020)

References

European Commission. (2019) The von der Leyen Commission: for a Union that strives for more. Press release IP/19/5542. Online at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_5542 [accessed 11/1/2020].

EEAS. (2018) Climate, Peace and Security: The Time for Action. High-level event hosted by High Representative Federica Mogherini mobilises partners from around the world, 22/6/208. Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations – New York. Brussels: European External Action Service (EEAS). Online at: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/47165/climate-peace-and-security-time-action_en [accessed 11/1/2020].

MEFA. (2017) United Nations General Assembly – Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic (New York, 19 September 2017). Paris: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEFA). Online at: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news/united-nations-general-assembly-sessions/unga-s-72nd-session/article/united-nations-general-assembly-speech-by-m-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the [accessed 11/1/2020].

POLITICO. (2019) Meet von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Commission'. By Lili Bayer, 4/12/2019 (Updated 9/12/19). Online at: https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-ursula-von-der-leyen-geopolitical-commission/ [accessed 11/1/2020].

❖