Designing a European Military Model

Michael Benhamou

Summary

Given the rise of military threats faced by Europeans, new European military concepts should be debated and agreed upon urgently. These concepts would then shape a European defence model that drives capabilities and institutional reforms in the right direction in terms of the distribution of tasks between European countries, establishing a hierarchy of internal and external threats, and more realistic defence planning with Europe's NATO allies.

Keywords Doctrines – Concepts – Planning – NATO – Europe

Introduction

Most European countries—and all of Europe's adversaries—possess a team or a department tasked with the demanding work of merging military means, field doctrines and threat assessments into one defence model. That model then enables broad understanding in the ranks, industrial or geographic prioritisation, and the distribution of tasks across all domains.

As wars multiply and the US means allocated to NATO and to Europe continue to decline, as they have been doing since the 1990s,[1] it is time for the EU to step up its conceptual output in order to shape Europe's new defence architecture to meet its own specific needs. NATO remains the cardinal security provider, but Europeans should break away from their post-1945 habits and seek a new long-term formula with the US that redefines how they want to fight together in a way that aligns with the partners' common values, perceptions and interests.

Worryingly, the EU is today rushing into crisis-driven capabilities silos and institutional conversations about the future without the conceptual basis that would provide a clear foundation for all players. Consequently, most policymakers and industry representatives fail to understand Europe's core defence plan. Today's decisions are typically based on hazy assumptions, feel-good narratives or national short-termism.

In this difficult transition, EU institutions have a responsibility to bring together all actors—EU27 countries, regional allies and partners—while respecting the primacy of nations in this high-stakes defence realm. Let us now address the matter of how the EU could proceed.

Defining the 'military model'

What is a 'military model'? Essentially, it is a long document in which European armies define their priorities and procedures. The thought process involved in the creation of a military model is necessary as armies develop defence policies over decades. In practice, developing a military model means tackling issues such as the distribution of tasks among European nations according to means and scenarios at the strategic level. It may also imply addressing issues of a more operational nature: for instance, reactions to warfare scenarios in our immediate neighbourhood (Russia and the Middle East) and to internal threats

---

[1]   M. Allen, M. Flynn and C.-M. Machain, 'US Global Military Deployments (1950–2020)', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39/3 (2021).

(jihadism). Tactics also come into play: for instance, establishing targeting processes against all types of adversaries; agreeing chain of command structures among air, land and maritime components; or integrating new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) into decision-making processes.

The aim of creating such a model is to enable like-minded European nations to solve defence equations within the complex triangle of means, doctrines and threats. To come up with the ideal security responses, European delegates need to provide the most honest data possible: the budgets allocated at the national level, energy and climate forecasting, the quality of their troops, a dispassionate analysis of the enemy and so on. It is the accumulation of such preparatory work that generates the necessary confidence within a coalition to launch a military operation.

Yet such a model should not be too rigid either. 'No formula should shackle decision-making', US diplomat George Kennan used to say.[2] German thinker Clausewitz also doubted those military analysts who built geometric castles out of thin air back in the nineteenth century: 'war has a grammar but little logic', he often used to write.[3] Once again, what matters here is the confidence that comes from acknowledging and repairing gaps and vulnerabilities—and doing so collectively.

Finally, one should bear in mind that Europe's adversaries have conducted similar intense reviews over the past decades. The Islamic State, for instance, studied Bin Laden's and Al-Zawahiri's operations before making decisive tactical shifts: it ultimately assessed that hitting America was counterproductive, while Europe was a softer target, particularly when it came to border areas where police control was weaker.[4] As early as the 1990s, Russia initiated similar research by financing numerous assessments of the reasons behind the collapse of the USSR. Breaking away from Communist habits and from a certain 'Stalingrad heavy infantry nostalgia', the country switched to a more indirect, flexible and multifaceted concept of warfare.[5] Before its return to a conventional invasion with the assault on Ukraine in February 2022, this concept had led to numerous successes from the Kremlin's vantage point: private military companies taking over Africa's security, Donald Trump's election in 2016 and Bashar Assad being kept in power in Syria.

Ignore concepts if you will, but do so at your own peril. Military models may not appeal to politicians or to the public—who both want quick, visual solutions—but they are the starting point for laying the solid defence foundations that will bear fruit in the 2030s and 2040s.

EU defence concepts today

The EU is not entirely passive when it comes to military concepts. Returning to the triangle of means, threats and doctrines, one notices that (1) means or capabilities have been dealt with by the European Defence Agency (EDA) since its 2004 inception; (2) threats are now addressed in the 'Strategic Compass' document[6] produced by the European External Action Service (EEAS); and (3) military doctrines are addressed by the European Union Military Service (EUMS) within its 'concept and capabilities' unit.[7]

These organisations have the merit of demonstrating 'group dynamics' and of 'forging shared norms',[8] but they fail to provide any sense of direction. The EDA's latest *Capability Development Priorities*[9] provides

2 G. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1983), 322.
3 R. Aron, *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz*, vol. II (Paris: éditions Gallimard, 1976), 37.
4 H. Micheron, *La colère et l'oubli – les démocraties face au djihadisme européen* (Paris: éditions Gallimard, 2023), 165.
5 D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes* (Paris: éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2023), 64.
6 EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (2022).
7 EU *WhoisWho*, 'Deputy Head of the European Union Military Staff (EUMS.DEP)'
8 J. Howorth, *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union* (Brussels: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 212.
9 *EDA*, 'EU Capability Development Priorities' (2023).

a list of 22 priorities without suggesting any hierarchy for them or establishing any connection between them and ongoing conflicts or threat scenarios. The Strategic Compass also resembles a shopping list written by someone who has failed to provide any thematic or geographic focus—with the EEAS covering all levels of tension from domestic terrorism to maritime squabbles in the Pacific without offering any specificity on the means required for each scenario. As for military doctrines, the EUMS does not publish official documents on its own at the moment, relying on NATO's battle-proven manuals. Finally, the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System proposes the production of high-quality foresight analyses, but this inter-institutional EU group has employed few military staff so far and has therefore covered defence only marginally.

This quick EU tour displays the already closely packed field of agencies involved in security matters, yet none with the ability to match goals with budgets, procedures with legislation or postures with actual mass. This has three immediate consequences for Europe. The first is an overreliance on NATO standards, which are sometimes not adapted to the European context. The counter-offensive of 2023 led by Ukraine against Russia—one pushed for by US advisers—has shown the limits of US tactical concepts without air dominance.[10] The second is a dependency on US tactical support in defence planning—a support that the diversification of American society and trade no longer guarantees at the same level. For instance, the defence plans of many Eastern European countries are too rigid in the event of a Russian attack, because they all expect massive support from Washington. The third consequence is a lack of trust from elected representatives with regard to the ability of European institutions to produce military-related laws. Most politicians prefer to bypass EU courts and legislative procedures. One recent example of this trend can be seen with AI: 'there is no EU-wide legal and ethical framework for the military uses of AI. Consequently, Member States may adopt different approaches, leading to gaps in regulation and oversight'.[11]

Defence norms are therefore dictated by allies and partners—but also by adversaries. After 20 years of arid policy debates on hybrid warfare and conventional tactics, Russia is now leading defence thinking in Europe.

Such intellectual leadership is dangerous as military victories are initially the fruit of simple ideas. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed the impact of poor force design and concepts: disbanding the Iraqi army in 2003, for instance, or asking untrained NATO soldiers to manage billions of dollars of farming or rule-of-law projects in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2014. We have also seen more cunning military management practices: using the opponent's social media to enable an election outcome favourable to one's own interests, creating autonomous and decentralised for-profit military units to reinforce friendly regimes with discretion, and maintaining a strong engineering and industrial culture to revive military production quickly, if necessary.

Unfortunately, Russia and China have been the countries producing these effective military concepts in the past decades, while NATO countries have often chosen the wrong path. Consequently, Europe is now approximately 20 years behind in military thinking.

Practical recommendations

We recommend the launch of a comprehensive European military conceptual effort as soon as possible. The EUMS should be expanded in order to start adapting the hundreds of NATO tactical manuals for European use and for all realistic scenarios: low to high intensity, classic warfare to post-conflict, permissive

---

10   F.-S. Gady, 'Making Attrition Work: A Viable Theory of Victory for Ukraine', *Survival* 66/1 (2024); M. Benhamou, 'Next for Europe: Defining Its Own Battlefield Tactics, *European View* 22/2 (2023).
11   R. Fanni, 'Why the EU Must Now Tackle the Risks Posed by Military AI', *Centre for European Policy Studies*, 8 June 2023.

to non-permissive; and also in terms of intelligence practices; logistics; the relationship between air, maritime and land components; and so on. Even though the EUMS is able to use NATO's material, this work will take time and require a lot of war-gaming.

We anticipate three main tasks:

1. *Designing a European concept for intelligence.* Establish a European Crisis Response Process. The fusion centres operating under it should be tasked with the detection of weak signals and determining planning principles prior to the launch of an operation. Put European targeting principles in place to address the dilemma of tactical opportunity versus civilian casualties, in close coordination with the European Parliament, the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court for Human Rights. Define European cyber and AI standards for military surveillance and influence, whether defensive or offensive. The future of human–machine teaming should be outlined here.

2. *Designing a European concept for operations.* Define coordination and capability balances between the air, land and maritime components in case of any non-permissive military scenarios—all based on Europe's current wars and threats. Establish European manoeuvring guidelines (defence versus offence, attrition, centre of gravity definition etc.) for air, maritime, land, space and special forces operations, always drawing from existing NATO standards. Establish civilian–military principles in line with Europe's philosophy—that is, field coordination of the military with aid and development projects.

3. *Designing a European concept for logistics.* Establish a European concept for the use of all sources of energy (oil, gas and renewables) and modes of transport (plane, train and truck) within the European military forces and for all scenarios. Define a European approach to medical support in low- to high-intensity scenarios involving numerous wounded and casualties—all based on actual European medical means. Set up European rear-zone principles for use during high-intensity battle—these should define staging areas, the mobility and location of headquarters (HQ) and units, ammunition rules, speed criteria and so on.

Conclusion

The twenty-first century began with a lot of conceptual and battlefield defeats for the US and Europe: Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, the Sahel and Crimea. Ukraine's future is more uncertain than ever. Given these setbacks, the time has come for Europeans to reflect and react.

EU institutions are currently providing European capitals with a framework that would allow defence thinking to occur at the right level of discretion and trust. We believe such conceptual discussions to be urgent given that wars are won primarily by imposing your own principles on others. Guilt, denial or external dependencies can no longer be the driving forces for Europeans.

Designing a military model is not one of those activities that produces a quick, satisfying 'ribbon-cutting' result, but it is imperative to undertake this work if we wish to reach the decade of the 2030s with confidence and unity.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Designing a European concept for intelligence	**Designing a European concept for operations**	**Designing a European concept for logistics**
Project 1	Establish a European Crisis Response Process. The fusion centres operating under it should be tasked with the detection of weak signals and determining planning principles prior to the launch of an operation.	Define the coordination and capability trade-offs between air, land and maritime components for all scenarios— permissive to non-permissive. This assessment should be based on Europe's current wars and threats to the east and the south.	Establish a European concept for the use of all sources of energy (oil, gas and renewables) and modes of transport (plane, train and truck) by European military forces and for all scenarios.
Project 2	Put in place European targeting principles to address the dilemma of tactical opportunity versus civilian casualties. This should be done in close coordination with the European Parliament, the CJEU and the ECHR.	Establish European manoeuvring guidelines (defence versus offence, attrition, centre of gravity definition etc.) for air, maritime, land, space and special forces operations, always drawing on current NATO standards.	Define a European approach to medical support in low- to high-intensity scenarios involving numerous wounded and casualties—all based on actual European medical means.
Project 3	Define European cyber and AI standards for military surveillance and influence, whether defensive or offensive. The future of human–machine teaming should be outlined here.	Establish civilian–military principles in line with Europe's values—for example, field coordination of the military with aid (DG ECHO) and development projects (DG INTPA, DG NEAR).	Develop European rear-zone principles for use during high-intensity battle. These principles should pertain to staging areas, the movement and location of HQs and units, ammunition, speed criteria and so on.

Bibliography

Allen, M., Flynn, M. and Machain, C.-M., 'US Global Military Deployments (1950–2020)', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39/3 (2021), 263–285, accessed at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/07388942211030885 on 27 February 2024.

Aron, R., *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz*, vol. II (Paris: éditions Gallimard, 1976).

Benhamou, M., 'Next for Europe: Defining Its Own Battlefield Tactics, *European View* 22/2 (2023), 166–75, accessed at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17816858231205729 on 27 February 2024.

EDA, 'EU Capability Development Priorities' (2023), accessed at https://eda.europa.eu/publications-and-data/factsheets/factsheet-the-2023-eu-capability-development-priorities on 28 February 2024.

EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (2022), accessed at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en on 27 February 2024.

European Strategy and Policy Analysis System, *ESPAS Report 2019: Global Trends to 2030* (2019), accessed at https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/node/1362 on 28 February 2024.

EU *WhoisWho*, 'Deputy Head of the European Union Military Staff (EUMS.DEP)', accessed at https://op.europa.eu/en/web/who-is-who/organization/-/organization/EEAS/EEAS_CRF_237397 on 28 February 2024.

Fanni, R., 'Why the EU Must Now Tackle the Risks Posed by Military AI', *Centre for European Policy Studies*, 8 June 2023, accessed at https://www.ceps.eu/why-the-eu-must-now-tackle-the-risks-posed-by-military-ai/ on 28 February 2024.

Fiott, D. and Simón, L., *EU Defence After Versailles: An Agenda for the Future*, EU Parliament, Directorate General for External Policies, PE 702.604 (October 2023), accessed at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_IDA(2023)702604 on 27 February 2024.

Gady, F.-S., 'Making Attrition Work: A Viable Theory of Victory for Ukraine', *Survival* 66/1 (2024), 7–24, accessed at https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2024/01/making-attrition-work-a-viable-theory-of-victory-for-ukraine/ on 28 February 2024.

Howorth, J., *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union* (Brussels: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

Kennan, G., *Memoirs 1925–1950* (New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1983).

Micheron, H., *La colère et l'oubli – les démocraties face au djihadisme européen* (Paris: éditions Gallimard, 2023).

Minic, D., *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes* (Paris: éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2023).