Philip H. Gordon

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Since the European Security and Defence Policy was launched five years ago, how much has been accomplished? From an American perspective, the recognition of the need for more effective European military capabilities – even if developed independently from NATO – has been welcome, but the progress toward developing those capabilities exceedingly slow. Over the past five years, enormous amounts of European leaders' and officials' time and energy have been devoted to developing the institutions and guidelines for European defence and for coordinating those efforts with national and other multinational organisations. Given the very disparate defence capabilities and traditions of the EU's 25 members, such an emphasis on institutional development is probably inevitable – especially in these early stages of the project. But it has also meant that, from an American perspective, ESDP has so far appeared to be far more about process than it has been about results.

Many Americans are rightly frustrated with the imbalance between the EU's focus on institutions and its development of capabilities. They also worry that ESDP will unnecessarily duplicate NATO's efforts and complicate decision-making without actually adding much military value. Some are reluctant to encourage the creation of a military, and therefore political, power that has the theoretical potential to rival the United States. Ultimately, however, the United States has a strong interest in a more effective ESDP. Indeed, with such a significant proportion of American military forces now involved in Iraq, the US interest in a more capable – and potentially autonomous – EU defence capability is today greater than ever. There are risks involved in EU defence autonomy, but nothing that cannot be managed with a modicum of goodwill and pragmatism on both sides (characteristics that have admittedly been lacking in recent years). But as it considers the vast military and strategic challenges it faces in the world today, as well as the enduring common interests of Europe and the United States, Washington should be far more concerned about

the EU's military weakness than about its potential strength.

ESDP's first five years have not been about process alone, of course. During this period, in fact, the EU undertook its first actual operations: police actions in Macedonia and Bosnia; a NATO-supported military mission in FYROM; and an autonomous EU military operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These were all small-scale missions and all could have been easily been done without involving the EU, either by a coalition of the willing within NATO or under an EU 'lead nation'. The Congo operation, in fact, was really a French mission supported by a handful of other Europeans, onto which an EU role was grafted. But these Balkans and Africa missions were none the less good indicators of the kind of contributions the EU could make if it continues to develop the will and capability to act militarily. The EU's role in both FYROM and Congo was an important symbol of the Union's common security and humanitarian interests. Both also provided useful lessons in identifying what the EU would need both institutionally and militarily for future missions of this type. At the end of 2004, the EU will also take over the ongoing peacekeeping operation in Bosnia from NATO. That mission will be another important step in proving both that the EU can act and that it can act alongside NATO's Kosovo mission without causing competition or confusion in political authority or military command. The EU is still far from ready to take on major military deployments without extensive logistical, planning and intelligence support from NATO or the United States, but it has begun to take the first steps in that direction.

In terms of developing military capabilities, the EU has also made some progress over the past five years, but there is still a long way to go. The political focus on capability development is itself already significant, even if it has not yet translated into increased resources for European military forces, except in rare cases like that of France. National defence reforms – sometimes modelled on the British Strategic Defence Review of the late 1990s – are moving forward. France has already professionalised its armed forces, while Italy and Spain are in the process of doing the same. Germany conducted a major defence review in 2003 and now plans to develop a 35,000-strong combat intervention force and a 70,000-strong peacekeeping force by the end of the decade. Collectively, EU members have committed themselves to the development of a European Rapid Reaction Force that would enable them

to deploy 60,000 troops within 60 days and sustain itself for up to a year. That force was declared operational in May 2003, though it cannot yet achieve its stated goals. European members of NATO have also made important commitments to the development, by 2006, of a NATO Response Force, which would consist of some 21,000 troops that could be deployed within one to three weeks and sustain itself for 30 days. The idea behind the NRF was to challenge Europeans to enhance their military capabilities and to show that they continued to believe in NATO as a military organisation even as they sought to develop ESDP – and the plan seems to be working. Even France, which has been outside of NATO's integrated military command structure since 1966, has committed 1,700 troops to the NRF, and senior French officers will have command positions within the new force structure. Not all of the European deployment plans are just plans, moreover – actual overseas deployments are increasing. Britain, France and Germany all have more than 10,000 of their soldiers deployed abroad, and EU member states collectively have deployed over 60,000 troops beyond Europe's borders.

Progress is thus being made, but much more remains to be done. The rhetorical commitment to developing military capabilities has been admirable and consistent, but nearly all European defence budgets are stagnant or falling – and there is little prospect of a reversal any time soon. In any case, the main issue is neither defence spending on high-end military capabilities nor overall troop numbers but effective deployability even for stability operations. EU countries maintain some 1.2 million ground troops but only around 80,000 can be deployed abroad. That must change if the notion of EU military autonomy is to have any real meaning. It is no secret what the deficiencies in capabilities are – they include airlift and sealift, precision-guided munitions and interoperable communications and intelligence. ESDP processes such as the European Capabilities Action Plan have been very good at identifying these gaps, but less effective at filling them.

Much progress could be made, however, even in the absence of politically difficult defence spending increases. Already, EU members collectively spend over $200bn on defence yearly. That is only about half of what the United States spends, but it is still quite a lot of money, and the EU does not have anywhere near as many defence commitments as the United States does. The problem is that the money is spent badly, and disproportionately on large,

outmoded, standing military forces. Brookings Institution defence analyst Michael O'Hanlon believes that, even without major increases in defence spending, EU members could in the near future develop the capacity to deploy some 200,000 troops abroad if they made the right procurement and organisational decisions. That would not only be a major contribution to Western security but it would also represent a capability that American decision-makers would have to take seriously.

On institutions – a necessary if insufficient part of ESDP – progress has been considerable, though once again not without problems. The institutions decided by the Cologne summit – the Political and Security Committee, the Military Committee and an EU Military Staff – are all now up and running. In addition, a number of member states have set up a joint armaments cooperation agency (OCCAR) and the EU has plans to set up a defence capabilities agency that would seek to hold member states to their commitments on military spending and procurement. These new institutions, however, are untested, and perhaps inevitably still seeking to define their proper roles. Certainly the small operations undertaken so far have yet to demonstrate that the EU has the political will or the capability to plan and conduct a large military operation.

One of most controversial issues has been the desire of some European countries to endow the EU with an autonomous operational planning capability. In spring 2003, during the transatlantic crisis over Iraq, a plan proposed by France and Germany to set up such a capability provoked a harsh reaction from both London and Washington. The Bush administration probably overreacted, but the irritation with the Franco-German proposal was understandable. From the American perspective, that proposal violated the painstaking compromise reached in 1999, whereby the EU agreed only to undertake autonomous military operations 'where NATO as a whole was not engaged' and to rely on 'assured access' to NATO planning capabilities to avoid political disagreements and wasteful duplication of resources.

It would have been one thing if Europeans had the logistical, intelligence and military assets, and political will, to undertake new military missions and lacked only an operational planning capability, but that was far from the case. Nor was it likely that the United States would refuse to allow assured access to NATO planning in the event of a crisis, since that would certainly drive the EU

to set up its own institutions. The timing of the proposal, moreover – in the midst of the biggest transatlantic crisis in decades – seemed driven more by a desire to take advantage of European anger at America to push the agenda for a separate European defence than by any genuine need. In December 2003, with Britain keen to repair relations with France and Germany, the parties agreed a compromise on the planning issue. The EU would send some of its own operational planners to NATO's headquarters at SHAPE, while adding another small unit of planners to the already existing EU military staff in Brussels. The initial capability of the new unit would be extremely limited, but for proponents of a genuinely autonomous EU defence it was at least a start. In deference to the British government, the United States did not publicly express its opposition to this plan, but American concerns about the necessity and consequences of the EU planning cell remained.

The development of an autonomous European operational planning capability is a greater threat to scarce European defence resources than to NATO or the United States. In fact, if the EU ever does make real progress in terms of military capabilities (as well as in developing a truly common foreign and security policy), an EU with the ability to plan its own missions could even be good for the United States. Contrary to some American fears, the problem with European defence today is not that the Europeans are likely to deploy their growing military power in ways inimical to American interests, but that they are unlikely to have enough military power to respond effectively to common US and European concerns. Crises in many areas of the world have cried out for outside intervention, and the EU still lacks the means to act. The recent European (if not EU) military interventions in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and the DRC, none of which the United States had any interest in joining, have saved many lives and supported American interests in a troubled part of the world. Americans, with their own plate full in Iraq, Afghanistan, and potentially elsewhere, should want to see more such actions, and if acting under an EU rather than a NATO banner inspires greater European support, then it should be welcomed rather than condemned. Ultimately, whatever the risks and frustrations, a more coherent and capable European partner is in America's interest.