

Summary: Europe does not seem to have a role to play in the Asia-Pacific, both because it does not want to, and also because it does not have the capabilities to assist the United States. Meanwhile, the Americans hope that Europe will not spread itself thin and that it will be ready to take on responsibilities in the Middle East and North Africa region. If not, dark days are in the making for the transatlantic partners, who are now more preoccupied by continuing economic crises, rather than the new balance of power.

The Pivot: Test of Europe as a Security Actor?

by *Gideon Rachman*

Europe has no role to play in the U.S. pivot to Asia. In fact, U.S. ambitions seem to be limited to hoping that the Europeans do not actively undermine U.S. policy in Asia, by — for example — lifting the EU arms embargo on China.

The pivot, of course, has military and non-military aspects. The main non-military element appears to be the desire to build a network of trading relationships that effectively exclude China, the Trans-Pacific Partnership being the main example of this. However, since it is a Pacific partnership, Europeans are clearly not going to be part of it — although they might form an association agreement at some later stage.

Efforts to forge an EU-U.S. trade deal are tangentially related to the pivot, in the sense that — faced with the rise of China — there is a temptation to try to form a huge “Western” trade bloc, that can protect common EU-U.S. interests in the global trading system, by, for example, laying down tough new rules in the area of intellectual property. However, there are considerable grounds for skepticism about whether the EU-U.S. trade deal will ever be concluded. The farm lobby in France and elsewhere in Europe (Poland, for example), will ultimately block a deal that would involve

effectively dismantling the Common Agricultural Policy.

On the military side, Europe has almost nothing to offer. In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States saw Europe as their most promising partner for “out of area” military operations, a model that has since been destroyed in Afghanistan. In the current economic climate — and given the war-weariness from Afghanistan — it is extremely hard to imagine getting the same level of European commitment to another out-of-area operation, or even to a permanent EU military presence in Asia.

This is particularly the case when it comes to countering the rise of China or dealing with tensions in the South China Sea or on the Korean peninsula. Other than at the rarefied level of top policymakers and inhabitants of think tanks, Europe’s foreign policy debate is marked by an almost complete absence of strategic thought about the implications of the rise of China. Asia, in general, is still seen primarily in economic terms — as both a threat and an opportunity. The idea that emerging markets are also rising strategic powers has yet to permeate in Europe.

Policy Brief

Even if Europeans suddenly decided that they had a major strategic interest in Asian geo-politics, they increasingly lack the military resources to cope with their own backyard — let alone Asia. Since the beginnings of the recession in 2008, most big European countries have cut defense spending by around 10 to 15 percent. The longer-term trends are even more striking: Britain's Royal Air Force now has just one-quarter of the number of combat aircraft that it had in the 1970s. The Royal Navy now has 19 destroyers and frigates, compared to 69 in 1977. The British Army is scheduled to shrink to 82,000 soldiers, its smallest size since the Napoleonic wars. In 1990, Britain had 27 submarines (excluding those that carry ballistic missiles) and France had 17; the two countries now have seven and six respectively.

And yet Britain and France are commonly regarded as the only two European countries that still take defense seriously. The British point out that, even after the current round of cuts, the U.K. will have the fourth largest military budget in the world. Britain is also, for the moment, one of only two European nations to meet the NATO target of devoting 2 percent of GDP to defense — the other is Greece.

The situation in most other European countries is much worse. Spain now devotes less than 1 percent of its GDP to military spending, and much of European military expenses is spent on pensions or pay, not equipment. While the Belgians distinguished themselves in the Libyan campaign of 2011, some 75 percent of Belgian military spending now goes on personnel — causing one critic to call the Belgian military “an unusually well-armed pension fund.”

None of this would matter much if the United States were still willing to step in whenever the Europeans fell short. But, the United States is losing patience with Europe's inability to act on its own. The Obama administration was clearly reluctant to get involved in Libya. And when the French found that they needed U.S. help on air-to-air refueling for the Mali operation, they were aghast to discover that the Americans initially wanted to charge them.

In the end, despite the United States agreeing to provide its facilities for free, its point was made very clearly: the United States is fed up with a situation in which it alone now accounts for some 75 percent of NATO defense spending. One day — perhaps soon — the Europeans

The United States is losing patience with Europe's inability to act on its own.

may wake up and find that the U.S. military is simply not there to deal with whatever threat is lapping at the frontiers of Europe, for the fact is that the United States itself is preparing for a new age of military austerity. If automatic budget-cuts kick in next month, the Pentagon could have to cut \$1 trillion in defense spending over the course of the next decade. And even if the United States avoids such drastic measures, the long-term trend is clearly downward.

The United States is also determined to concentrate a greater portion of its military might in the Pacific. The U.S. Navy currently devotes 50 percent of resources to the Pacific and 50 percent to Europe and the Middle East — but, in future, the Pacific will get 60 percent. From a U.S. point-of-view, this makes sense. While European defense spending has gone down by roughly 20 percent over the last decade, Chinese defense spending has risen by almost 200 percent. Last year, for the first time in centuries, Asian nations spent more on military force than European countries.

If the United States is going to devote more of its declining military budget towards Asia-Pacific, the U.S. presence in Europe and the Middle East must clearly diminish. But to what extent does this presence matter? The threat of land invasion in continental Europe seems to have more or less disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The menace that currently seems to most worry Europeans is that to the vaunted European social model rather than any conventional military threat. Politicians are responding to public demand by trying to protect health and social budgets ahead of military spending. Even the newer security threats — like terrorism — are not obviously susceptible to conventional military power. A decade of bitter experience in Afghanistan has been an object lesson of the difficulty of using the military to tackle a “failed state.”

Yet one does not need to look very far beyond Europe's borders to see an array of potential threats massing over the next decade. The Middle East is in turmoil and thousands are dying in Syria, threatening the stability of the whole region. Iran's nuclear program could well lead to confron-

Policy Brief

tation and threaten European energy supplies. Russian military spending is rising. And growing tensions between China and the other Pacific powers could one day threaten the freedom of navigation on which European trade depends. The latter threat suggests that Europe does indeed have major strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. But there is little evidence that it intends to do much to defend them.

About the Author

Gideon Rachman has been the *Financial Times* chief foreign affairs commentator since July 2006. At *The Financial Times*, Rachman writes on international politics, with a particular stress on U.S. foreign policy, the European Union, and globalization.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

Contact

Dr. Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer
Director, Paris Office
German Marshall Fund of the United States
Tel: +33 1 47 23 47 18
Email: adehoopscheffer@gmfus.org