EUROPEAN UNION'S RESPONSE TO THE RECENT SECURITY CHALLENGES

Ileana Tache, Professor, PhD

Transilvania University of Brasov, Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Admnistration/ Brasov/ Romania

Monica Raileanu-Szeles, Professor, PhD

Transilvania University of Brasov, Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Admnistration/ Brasov/ Romania

Madalin Sebastian Ion, Ph.D. student

Lucian Blaga University / Sibiu/ Romania

Abstract:
This paper examines the most recent security challenges for the European Union (EU) – a field of external EU policies which, unlike other areas like trade, enlargement, neighborhood policy, development assistance and humanitarian aid, is not yet a deeply integrated process. The emerging security issues are scrutinized from a policy perspective, highlighting some of the key issues raised in the contemporary literature. They are also analyzed with a view of their intractability and challenges for the relevance of the pacifist principles promoted by the EU. We attentively consider EU's efforts to adapt to the fluid, evolving security agenda of the last years and the mixed record in confronting the Arab spring, the Iran nuclear ambitions, the Ukrainian crisis, the EU's fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and the refugee crisis. Each case presented requires reexamining current EU strategy and identifying alternative strategies for assuring security in the EU.

Key words: EU, security, challenges, alternatives

1.Introduction

This paper examines, through an explorative policy analysis, the most recent security challenges of the European Union (EU), its positions, instruments, partnerships and strategies primarily linked to security and defense, while highlighting some of the key issues raised in the contemporary literature. Some emerging security issues are discussed, revealing their intractability and challenges for the relevance of the pacifist principles promoted by the EU. There will be attentively considered EU's efforts to adapt to the fluid, evolving security agenda of the last years and the mixed record in confronting the Arab

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Spring, the Iran nuclear ambitions, the Ukrainian crisis, the EU's fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and the refugee crisis. The paper intends an up-to-date of previous research[1].

According to these objectives, the next sections of the paper deal with: the popular revolt in Tunisia, Egypt's political turbulences, the crisis in Libya, civil war in Syria, Iran nuclear program, the Ukrainian crisis as a major test for EU's foreign and security policy, the EU's fight against the Islamic State and the refugee crisis. The last section is dedicated to the concluding remarks.

2. Popular revolt in Tunisia

Tunisia displayed an illusionary stability until the 2010 events. The popular revolt goal was ending the authoritarian rule and the overthrowing of President Ben Ali, which was achieved on 14 January 2011. Events in Tunisia triggered all the Arab unrest across North Africa and the Middle East.

The viability of the present Tunisian government is questioned by the opposition because reform processes are slow and the general feeling of uncertainty remains high. As regards security, there is little trust in the police force, because it has a bad reputation linked to its previous loyalty to President Ben Ali. Security issues have in some circumstances become a matter for religious communities, in that religious actors are being called on to maintain security (Eriksson and Zetterlund, 2013).

While the large and spontaneous mobilization of Tunisians has achieved success in ending Ben Ali reign, it remains unclear whether the near future will bring genuine political reforms essential for stability or whether continuing instability will affect other countries in the region.

A radical rethinking of EU policies towards the region is called for, the bottom line of which should be to halt lenient EU policies towards countries that are not implementing serious political reform, despite their proven willingness to cooperate in the fight against terrorism, illegal migration and broader geostrategic objectives (Ayadi et al., 2011).

The EU moved swiftly to support the transition in Tunisia. Political support is illustrated through regular visits, Council Conclusions and High Representative Declarations. An EU-Tunisia Task Force meeting was held in September 2011 and produced an impressive list of assistance projects.

The "EU's response to the Arab Spring: The State-of-Play after Two Years" reaffirms that EU-Tunisia relations are based on three interrelated "Ms": money, market and mobility. Mobility is especially problematic due to its interrelatedness with justice, security and defense issues. With the increasing violence in many other North African countries, the EU is not expected to take quick steps towards easing the entry to the EU of Tunisian residents and those in transit. Discussions with a view to a "Partnership for Mobility" on migration and security are ongoing.

At present, Tunisia's democratic transition appears at a critical interfering of conflict and peacebuilding. While the country made significant political progress with 2014 elections, it confronts threats of tough extremism. The government is focused on border security and on development policies to alleviate underlying causes of conflict. As

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[1] Tache, I. (2015) (editor), *The European Union and the Challenges of the New Global Context,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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USIP (2016) reveals, despite recent economic and security challenges, Tunisia continues to show perseverance and patience in its transition.

3. Egypt's political turbulences

Inspired by the popular revolt in Tunisia, massive protests erupted in Egypt in early 2011. Social, economic and political situation in Egypt produced a significant impact on neighboring countries. The revolution in Egypt had indeed a broad spillover in the Arab countries. In terms of regional security, Egypt remains a pivotal state in the Middle East and North Africa, enjoying good relations with Israel and close collaboration with the United States.

The euphoria which emerged from the Arab spring and the collapse of the Hosni Mubarak regime on 11 February 2011 has been replaced with a period of political and social polarization, increasing violence and economic stagnation.

The stability in Egypt is part of the comprehensive EU security strategy in its immediate neighborhood. The Southern Mediterranean region is an area that the EU sees as essential for its security and prosperity. In the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, the EU re-launched its ENP to express its solidarity with those calling for democracy. An EU-Egypt Task Force was launched in November 2012 .

This crisis revealed some challenges confronted by the EU. In Egypt's highly debated situation, it was the US that played a central role, while there was a lack of independent European policy. The fall of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 was a development strongly supported by the US and president Barack Obama. Referring to Egypt's unsustainable crackdown, Dworkin and Michou (2014) emphasize a long-term vision for European policy. In this sense, the temptation for the EU to accept Egyptian authorities' actions at face value should be avoided, because they are not likely to lead to stable politics or an improvement in security. In the Egypt situation, the EU faces also competition from other outside powers. While the European countries are eager to continue cooperation with Egypt on security and other areas, the Gulf states and Russia stand ready to provide alternative sources of financial and diplomatic support, as well as security cooperation and export of weapons. Another problem is that the political groups that best represent the vision that Europe would like to advance are too weak to play a major role in the near future.

The year 2013 marked the ouster of the former Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi. One year later, the former head of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah al Sisi, was elected Egypt's president. He tried to help transition of the country, proposing a new constitution. Recently, in 2015, many former Muslim Brotherhood leaders have been jailed and completely banned from political participation. A great concern for the EU is the fact that journalists have been persecuted and media freedom has been restricted. Meanwhile, instability in the Sinai region has grown, where insurgents are fighting the Egyptian army. As a consequence, Egypt closed the Rafah border crossing with the Palestine Territories, but talks to reopen the border are ongoing. Despite all these recent tense evolutions, Egypt remains for the EU an extremely important strategic partner and an ally protecting EU interests in the region.

4. The crisis in Libya

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Libya's armed conflict of 2011 between forces loyal to colonel Muammar Gaddafi and those seeking to oust his government offered a mixed picture in which European countries (France and UK) were in the head of military actions, but Europe was not, due to lack of member states will, fear and restrictions from UNSC Resolution 1973 . During the vote of this Resolution, the noticeable German abstention (attributable to German reluctance to use force or to the lack of political will from northern member states to invest in the Mediterranean), emphasized a division of the EU over a security issue.

The EU did not distinguish itself among the intervention leaders, although Libya is one of the close neighbors and Mediterranean and Arab countries represent an important region for Europe's stability. Libya's case, where only French and British leadership assumed action, demonstrates once again that the EU is leaning less towards a body of coherent security response and more towards a return to bilateral action.

The EU took indeed several measures for preventing the crisis escalation, such as humanitarian efforts and the opening of an EU office in Benghazi which brought more efficiency to EU actions and represented a de facto recognition of the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC).

However, Libya's crisis provides three key strategic lessons for Europe (Biscop, 2011): 1. EU's challenge to carry out its own vital interests, because nobody else will protect them; 2. the necessity of thinking and acting strategically, meaning to prioritize the regions where EU interests are essential and act accordingly; and 3. getting the right capabilities, because in the military realm European capabilities remain deficient.

The Libyan conflict proved indeed that the EU might be required to take military action if no other means can work, but of course this does not mean a militarization of the relationship with the Arab Mediterranean countries. It can be part of a comprehensive approach to the Mediterranean, including assistance, economic and technical cooperation, fair trade and trade access opportunities. All these measures could help North African states to rebuild their economies on a sustainable path and to create more security in the region.

Five years after Libya's dictator Gadhafi was ousted, the country remains trapped in a spiral of deteriorating security, economic crisis, and political deadlock. Trust in the nation's weak government institutions has fallen as political elites, unable to agree on a governmental structure, deploy armed militias to control territory and economic assets. An additional challenge comes from ISIS and other violent extremists exploiting the situation to expand operations in Libya. Still, civil society organizations remain active and committed to laying the foundation for a unity government capable of rebuilding the state.

Libya has an enormous shoreline along the long-peaceful Mediterranean. As National Post View (2015) warns, if ISIS establishes a presence there, there is plenty of opportunity for chaos. Cruise ships could be attacked and commerce disrupted if Libya becomes what some experts have warned will be a "Somalia on the Mediterranean." ISIS has also boasted of its plans to insert its fighters into southern Europe aboard the migrant smuggling ships that carry hundreds of thousands to the continent each year — and that, until now, the Europeans have shown little real interest in stopping. Italy, at least, seems to be changing its tune. It has deployed troops in Rome to safeguard high-value targets and is considering steps to guard its coasts. But this is not a problem for Italy alone. All of Europe is vulnerable to the threat spilling out of the Middle East. Finding a way to stabilize Libya and shore up its government(s) will not be an easy task. But it may be the best way to keep Europe safe.

5. Civil war in Syria

One of the most pressing challenges in EU immediate neighborhood is Syria civil war. In this country, over the past three years, more than 100,000 Syrians have lost their lives in the escalating conflict between forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and those opposed to his rule. The bloody internal fights have destroyed whole neighborhoods and forced more than nine million people to abandon their homes. What began as another event of the Arab Spring uprising against an autocratic ruler has mushroomed into a brutal proxy war that has drawn in regional and world powers.

Since violence and repression broke out in Syria in March 2011, the EU has not only called repeatedly for an end to attacks, but also suspended other agreements intended to forge a closer relationship with Damascus. Following EU sanctions in November 2011, the EIB stopped all disbursements for loans and technical assistance contracts with the Syrian state.

The conflict between the regime and the opposition has escalated to a full-scale civil war. Army defectors formed armed groups that wage a guerrilla war on government forces. By mid-2012 the fighting has reached capital Damascus and commercial hub Aleppo, with growing numbers of senior army officers deserting Assad.

The regional crisis in Syria proved again that in comparison with other fields of the European politics, the EU's defense and security policy is highly susceptible to differences among the member states. The EU opposed sending arms to Syria, but the heads of the European states could not reach an agreement on the revocation of the arms ban against the opposition. France and the UK announced that they would consider a unilateral abrogation of the agreement by sending arms to the Syria rebels. On the other hand, an unexpected consequence for Europe's foreign policy was highlighted. Major European states' (like France and Germany) opposition to the US-led Iraq war of 2003 was replaced by the most explicit European support to the US policy towards Damascus. François Hollande and Angela Merkel's positions were quite different from those of their predecessors Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Shröder in 2003.

However, taking into account the rejection in the UK's Parliament of a military intervention, the uncertain backing of the Assemblée Nationale for France's President and Germany's cautious approach and insistence for UN action, Syria civil war reflected the Europeans' overwhelming preference for the EU acting as a world power but without the military force that this entails.

At present, key army units remain loyal to the regime, and while Assad's long-term survival chances don't seem great, he is far from finished. A prolonged bloody civil war lies ahead, with possibly disastrous consequences for Syria's multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

In all uprisings that swept North Africa and Middle East and radically changed the international and regional landscape , the citizen-led spirit of reform and unity is now shadowed by polarization and tensions between secular liberals and Islamists, different Islamic groups and government and civil society. As Youngs (2014) notices, what Western observers initially saw as a process in which reformist civil society pitted itself against authoritarian regimes, today seems to be primarily about managing myriad levels of polarization within societies. In this context, the EU has increased the emphasis on consensus building in its diplomatic efforts and develops funding initiatives in the Middle East. It also tries to balance conflict mediation and reform promotion in these countries.

6. Iran nuclear program

Iran's interest in nuclear technology dates to the 1950's, when the Shah began receiving assistance through the US Atoms for Peace program. Iran signed the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as a non-nuclear weapon state in 1968 and ratified it in 1970, but the Shah's nuclear weapons ambitions did not cease. The expansion of the nuclear program was stopped by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war, but the 1990's witnessed Iran beginning to pursue an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle capability.

In August 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an opposition group established in Paris, revealed the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities in Iran, which provoked as diplomatic impasse with the international community and sanctions aimed at Iran's nuclear-related investments.

EU efforts to solve the conflict over Iran's nuclear program began under particular circumstances determined by US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which divided EU member states and damaged transatlantic relations. In these conditions, the stakes for international security were high. A nuclear armed Iran could have major consequences for regional and global security.

On 14 June 2008, Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, met in Tehran with Iranian Foreign Minister in order to freeze Iran's enrichment of uranium efforts, but Ayatollah Khamenei continued the path of nuclear development.

The EU recognizes Iran's rights to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, but these rights are conditional on compliance with the obligation of not building nuclear weapons. Despite EU's best efforts, Iran did not respect the requirements of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and there was no guarantee that the nuclear program is dedicated to peaceful purposes.

The unresolved stalemate over Iranian nuclear ambitions is indicative of the limitations of European diplomacy. Nonetheless, the participation in the Geneva Interim Agreement (November 2013) constitutes a major accomplishment of the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton. She served as chair and spokesperson of the P5+1 group to implement a strategy designed in Washington. Her ability in fulfilling this task contributed to the interim agreement success.

With a remarkable constancy of engagement, EU tried to find a diplomatic solution to the dispute over Iran's nuclear activities. It focused on maximizing tactical advantages in direct negotiations with Iran. As Meier (2013) showed, EU should try to capitalize on new opportunities for finding way out of the stalemate over Iran's nuclear ambitions by defining what a final deadlock could look like and outlining steps toward such an agreement. The coherence of European diplomatic efforts promised indeed success chances.

After more than two years of negotiations and threats to bomb the country's facilities, Iran and world powers agreed in July 2015 to settle the dispute. The deal sets limits on the Islamic Republic's nuclear work in exchange for relief from economic sanctions that crimped oil exports and hobbled its economy. International monitors verified that Iran had followed through on its pledge in January, and the country's oil producers and banks began to return to world markets.

Under the deal, Iran maintains the ability to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. It will retain about about 5,000 centrifuges capable of separating the uranium-235 isotope

from uranium ore. For fifteen years, it agreed to refine the metal to no more than 3.7 percent enrichment, the level needed to fuel nuclear power plants, and pledged to limit its enriched-uranium stockpile to 300 kilograms, 3 percent of its stores in May 2015. The International Atomic Energy Agency had already verified that Iran eliminated its stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium, which can be used to make medical isotopes and to power research reactors but could also be purified to weapons-grade at short notice. Keeping an enrichment capability was important to Iran, presumably for reasons of national pride. Like other enriching countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Japan and South Africa, the technology gives Iran the ability to pursue nuclear weapons should it choose to break its commitments.

On 16 January 2016 "Implementation Day" was reached and the EU lifted all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions against Iran.

7. The Ukraine crisis as the greatest test for EU's common foreign and security policy

A severe threat to European security is addressed by Ukraine facing undoubtedly the most prolonged crisis since its post-Soviet independence. The crisis unfolded as a result of the government dropping plans of signing the EU association agreement under pressure from Russia. The pro-Russian president Yanukovich's motivations were the concerns about damage to Ukrainian industry by harsh European competition.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine struggled to solve its internal divisions, to implement economic reforms and to fight the increasing control of oligarchs over the economy. The orange revolution of 2004 masked the divide between European-oriented western and central Ukraine and Russian-oriented southern and eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine was included in the EU Eastern Partnership established in 2009, which was negatively perceived by Russia, taking into account its proposed Eurasian Economic Union – a customs union that came into being on 2nd January 2015 and whose likely members were Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia. Ukraine pulled out from this project and continued unabated its struggle against Russia. EU's project to expand eastward to Ukraine through the association agreement is regarded as a security threat by Russia and as a possible stepping stone to NATO's membership. Actually, Russia has come to view the Eastern Partnership as a zero-sum game and an infringement on its perceived regional sphere of influence (Nichol, 2014).

In February 2014 Crimea peninsula overwhelmingly opted in a referendum for union with Russia. The EU's position in this regard is that the referendum violates both Ukraine's constitution and international principles and condemned Russia for its military intervention. As a response to the developments in Crimea, the EU announced $15 billion over the next years, conditioned on Ukraine agreement with IMF and adopting reforms like ending gas subsidies. Along with the US, Japan and Canada, the EU imposed sanctions (travel bans and freezing of assets) on Russian and Ukrainian officials linked to the escalation of tensions.

For the common EU foreign and security policy, Russia's annexation of Crimea triggers a major reappraisal of the EU-Russia relationship. While the last years EU developed with Russia a strategic partnership, the recent events made the European policy makers to confront with the prospect of Russia as a potential adversary rather than a partner. The Europeans were convinced that they had entered a new "postmodern" era

where soft power replaced hard power. Now this assumption arrives to be questioned, because Russia's attitude shows that old-style power politics are back. The EU conveniently delegated questions of hard power and strategy to the US, but at present the Europeans must take a more active role in the transatlantic security and shoulder more of the burden of their own security (Speck, 2014). The EU policy makers must rethink the bloc's allure as a soft power.

The Ukrainian crisis starkly reminded the fragile status of stability and peace on the European continent. The troubling relations between EU and Russia may affect all cooperation channels, calling also for a reconfiguration of the European Neighborhood Policy. After some hesitations, Europeans have finally put a common front and adopted credible sanctions towards Russia.

In 2014 the European Union and Ukraine signed an Association Agreement (AA) that constitutes a new state in the development of EU-Ukraine contractual relations, aiming at political association and economic integration.

The EU is currently focusing on support to the comprehensive reform process underway in Ukraine, notably through the implementation of an unprecedented support package of €11bn. Against the background of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, the EU supports all efforts for a lasting peaceful solution respecting the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country and which ensures a stable, prosperous and democratic future for all Ukrainian citizens.

8. The EU's fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and the refugee crisis

The jihadist group Islamic State burst on to the international scene in 2014 when it seized large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. It has become notorious for its brutality, including mass killings, abductions and beheadings. The group has attracted support elsewhere in the Muslim world. It seeks to eradicate obstacles to restoring God's rule on Earth and to defend the Muslim community against infidels and apostates.

Even if the military capability developed by the Islamic State in Syria does not represent a direct threat for the EU member states, it may encourage terrorist activities in Europe. As Arteaga (2014) comments, the EU as such does not have the required military capabilities to fight the insurgency on the battlefield. Only some of the EU states could use the military force of intervention, taking also into account strong divergences among the national strategic cultures regarding the use of force. In the above cited author's opinion, the EU is not expected to have a prominent role in the ongoing struggle against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but it should be prepared to take the lead in the next fight against terrorism.

After ISIS appearance, millions of people stream into the European continent to flee the Middle East terrible wars. In 2015, more than 1.1 million migrants entered Europe and there is no hope of slow-down in 2016, with about 135,000 persons having arrived so far.

According to the Guardian, BBC (22 March 2016), in the refugee crisis, ISIS has recognized a golden opportunity to further its narrative of a civilizational war between Islam and the West – and many European leaders have played directly into the terrorist group's hands. For example, when the Polish and Bulgarian Prime Ministers say that they are only willing to accept Christian refugees, it gives fodder for ISIS to rally more zealots to its cause. It is indeed too early to express how effectively ISIS has used Europe's response to Muslim refugees as a recruitment tool, but it has already managed to fracture

Europe's political unity. For instance, Angela Merkel is at her political low point, even after setting up a deal with Turkey to continue housing Syrian refugees outside the EU.

The Schengen Agreement – one of the cornerstones of the European integration, is significantly affected by the refugee crisis. Certain countries, such as Hungary, began to build walls in order to stem the flow of refugees. Even France, one of the founding members of the EU, took the decision to introduce border controls.

9. Conclusions

The recent pressures of the Ukrainian crisis, turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa have placed the foreign and security policy to the top of EU's agenda. The evolutions described above show that at present the EU is unequipped to address all challenges and to develop an effective external action. It seems that neither the European Neighborhood Policy nor the EU's instruments of diplomatic, civilian and military crisis management are sufficient to allow the union to play a genuine and sustainable stabilizing role in its surrounding regions (Lehne, 2014).

The developments in North Africa and Middle East raise a major challenge for the EU foreign policy, pressing to re-analyze the overall concept of the future role of the EU in this region as a constructive partner, able to provide assistance in the creation of a stable democratic system and laying down the foundations of civil society and free media. An enhanced economic cooperation will also be one of the main generators of stability in the region.

The joint fight against terrorism is not effective and with limited results because of bilateral action plans. To step up the efforts in combating terrorism, the EU must strengthen the monitoring of counter terrorism policies, better tackle the root causes of terrorism and improve dialogue with partners.

The recent security challenges presented in this paper show that, even if the European Union is an important global actor, in the realm of security and peace, it still fails to exert its influence. It cannot speak with a single voice on international crises and the difficulty to agree on joint interventions in conflict zones is evident.

First of all, there are differences in member states approaches, depending on diverse defense priorities and national political cultures and sometimes distinct from the EU stance as a global player. Member states hesitate to give up issues of mobilization of national resources for defense, the inter-governmentalism remaining the fundamental policy mode in this field. Then, the dependence on the USA for hard security and leadership in managing international security threats is obvious.

The present pressures of the Ukrainian crisis and the diminished strategic partner Russia, the turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa require a deep reconsideration of the EU's soft power attitude (betraying too idealist points of view), a radical shift to a more active role in the global arena and a reassessment of the EU strategic situation and security toolbox. The above events also highlight that protecting European security often requires helping others improve theirs.

The latest evolutions in Middle East and North Africa call for a paradigm shift: from the EU endlessly reiterating the responsibility it has to help MENA reforms to a more-headed look at how Europe needs to reposition itself geo-strategically in light of changes in the region (Youngs, 2011).

At the same time, by tackling the security threats represented by the chaos of the ever-smoldering Middle East region, the EU cannot neglect the very root causes that led to

the destabilization in the first place (authoritarian governance and lack of economic opportunities) and should act accordingly, providing assistance and enhanced economic cooperation.

European armed forces are at present in a malaise, due to the reserved approach to using military force and the constraints of the economic and financial crisis. As Rogers (2013) points out, these failings call for a conceptual reappraisal of the utility of European military power and a better understanding of both the active and passive uses of armed force. Of course, that is not an easy task for the EU, born as a project that replaced war with peace on the European continent and even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Military force becomes an option for the EU, of course never desirable, but useful eventually and legitimized when law respect should be imposed.

In an increasingly unstable neighborhood and a time of growing geopolitical stress across the world, the EU and its member states should take into account the lessons offered by the past divergent positions and be more engaged in a collective action, having a hard look at where they can make a difference together - thus recognizing the interconnected nature of all these global challenges. It seems that, at present, no member state can insulate itself from the security woes of others.

In the tense and severe current international context, the simple cooperation in military affairs is not sufficient. The EU has to consider or pursue military integration, with real moves to form a viable European defense community, a single military actor capable of asserting itself as a solid pole on the world arena.

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