

Today, European publics, politicians and pundits agree nearly unanimously on the need for an expanded and more unified defence force. The logic is clear: the US and other great powers respect military force, so if Europe is to be influential in the world, it needs an army.

Everyone agrees that modest increases in the efficiency and effectiveness of European forces, particularly for peace-keeping and policing, are desirable. But rhetoric about a serious high-intensity force, no matter how irresistible to politicians, rests on dangerous and diverting delusions about European interests, capabilities and ideals. Consider the following.

A co-ordinated European military force with the global capabilities to fight a high-tech, low-casualty war à l'américaine would require a substantial increase in military spending and a wholesale restructuring of procurement and planning. The public would not accept this. And even if the force were funded, EU governments are deeply divided on whether to use it in "out-of-area" matters like Iraq.

And even if fiscal and political barriers were overcome, a Euro-force would have few realistic scenarios for autonomous use. The former Yugoslavia is often invoked, but such a scenario is "fighting the last war". Future Yugoslavias will be in Algeria, Chechnya and Iran. Do Europeans really contemplate such interventions, and without US backup? Even if credibly deployed, an EU force would in no way deter US unilateralism. The US military is sceptical about involving European forces in joint high-intensity operations. Do Europeans propose to deploy military force against the US or launch 'pre-preventive' interventions? At most, such a force would simply encourage the redeployment of forces outside Europe, fulfilling a US hawk's dream.

Even as a purely symbolic move, indulging unrealistic military ambitions is risky, if not counterproductive. Any failure to make good on them would simply convince US military planners not just that Europeans seek to fool the US, but that they are

fooling themselves. This would inspire not confidence but contempt.

So current thinking on European defence is based on unrealistic policy analysis. This betrays European ideals and squanders its true instruments of global influence.

The betrayal of European ideals is easy to see. EU governments have argued passionately that the US emphasis on military responses to terrorist threats was short-sighted and ineffectual. Europeans criticised Robert Kagan's celebrated but narrow concept of international power, whereby military superpowers are admirable Martians and all others parochial Venusians. European objections to US grand strategy are reasonable, which is why sober American conservatives like James Baker, as well as many Democrats, shared them.

Moreover, European objections are grounded in an admirable idealism about the potential efficacy of non-military foreign policy instruments. Yet now, after Washington invaded Iraq without clear multilateral approval and plummeted into a quagmire of nation-building – both ignoring and confirming European warnings – Europeans are hankering for a larger army. Kagan must be pleased. He has converted a continent!

Worst, concentrating fiscal and political capital on defence distracts Europeans from their true sources of strength. Better for Europe – and the world – would be to deepen the EU's investment in civilian and low-intensity power.

Today, Europe is a 'quiet superpower'. It provides trading opportunities, foreign aid, peacekeepers, international monitoring, and multilateral legitimisation. For intractable domestic reasons, the US remains unable to wield such instruments effectively. Europe, by contrast, has done so to help democratise and pacify up to 25 countries on its eastern periphery over the past decade. It is time to give up the 'feel good' political rhetoric of a European military build-up, and recognise that everyone would be better off if each side of the Atlantic focuses on what it does best.

