

The European Union and the Use of Military Force: Mapping the Discursive Space of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy

D.Soc.Sc. Tommi Koivula

National Defence University, Finland

tommi.koivula@mil.fi

It is well-known that the EU as an international actor has a strong background as a pacific soft power, largely inspired by the will to distance itself from the violent past of the European continent and because it was initially left void of a military dimension by its Member States. The European Economic Community (EEC) lived up to this role since its foundation in the 1950s and through the Cold War decades, developing, sometimes perhaps unknowingly, a number of political, economic and diplomatic tools with which it could seek to influence its geographical neighbourhood and also the larger world around it.

The end of the Cold War era marked a discontinuity into this decades-old setting, as the EU Member States began to build a military dimension into the Union's foreign and security policy. Yet, over fifteen years after this declaration, it is questionable whether the EU has such a capacity, means or readiness. A strong incompatibility seems to prevail between the Union's stated security political ambitions and their actual realisation: while the EU Member States formulate common security political goals, create relevant institutions and decision-making bodies, develop military capabilities and engage in a number of crisis management operations throughout the world, in many respects these very same Member States undermine their own outspoken commitments by imposing caveats and restrictions on these efforts and on the actual use of this force within the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework. Instead, we seem to have a very specific and in many respects limited European perception of the armed forces and its uses.

At the same time, expectations and uncertainty about the EU's security political dimension seem to abound both within Europe itself and among some non-EU decision makers in world politics. Be it the Ukrainian crisis or the consequences of the Arab Spring, vocal views for instance by the U.S. government urge the Union or at least Europe to take a more active and decisive role. On the other hand, the Iranian regime or Putin's Russia often seem to have difficulties in defining whether the Union should either be seen as a true player of contemporary power politics or as a politically more or less irrelevant trade block.

This ambiguity of the role of the military power as an element of the European Union seems to have something to do with the complexities and inherent contradictions related to its nature. While most Member States seem to appreciate that military power is necessary for lifting the EU's weight on the world stage, and that engaging in military operations is a rational way to boost its hard power, they are well aware of the fact that the move into the military realm in certain respects does conflict with the very image of the EU and the ideas, values and norms that uphold it.

This article seeks to provide with an empirical study of the discursive space focusing on the use of military force by the European Union. This takes place by scrutinising the way in which the role of the military and military force appears both in the official and unofficial documents dealing with the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy.

The article will argue that even though the European Union engages in military enforcement extremely rarely – thus far only in a few crisis management operations – it nevertheless seems to be haunted by its relationship to the physical use of military force. Indeed, the question of the EU using or not using military force seems to be at the core of most perceptions of the Union's role in international security: while in some quarters the EU is seen as incomplete or insufficient because it is not particularly capable of military enforcement, others perceive it as a forerunner due to its renunciation of the traditional concepts of military power. A discursive tension related to military force persists in the continuum of diverse perceptions of the Common Security and Defence Policy.

Based on the material studied, it seems that instead of pointing out intentional actors or Others, it is the spectre of various disturbances, or a break-down in the management of the functioning of the international system that poses the most serious official threats in official CSDP, coming close to the concept of risk society in modern social science writing. Moreover, the paper argues that the contemporary discursive space of the European Union's military dimension is incoherent in nature and contains inherent contradictions, in particular related to the CSDP's credibility. At a deeper level, this tension culminates in the question of whether the extreme form of military enforcement, killing, is appropriate for the EU.

There is a lively scholarly literature about the dynamics of the EU foreign policy in general and its security and defense dimension in particular, indicating that these issues continuously attract interest within the academic community. The findings of the article are intended to contribute to the theoretical debate on the EU's strategic culture.