Quiet Power – Europe’s Best Way Forward*

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What role can or should Europe play in the world? Should it remain an economic power? Or should it also become a military one? But have not the limits of the use of force become all too clear these days? If Europe wants to be an actor on the international stage, should it not define more clearly its own conception of the world that needs to be built? And should it not use the means that suit those ends?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it would be useful to examine the issue of military power as experienced by the United States. After the Wall came down in 1989 and the USSR disappeared in 1991, East-West bipolarity gave way to unipolarity. Today, the US is the world’s one and only “hyperpower”, 1 and it has grown stronger than ever. US military spending alone accounts for 45% of the world total.

Power and weakness

Some believe that this trend has been accelerating over time. “Thus, if it was preferable to speak of hegemony under Clinton, bearing in mind the scant evidence of an imperial policy (whether territorial or military), Bush’s policies may no doubt be more appropriately compared to those of an empire, due to ideological visions and plans which combine imperial willpower with direct (and unilateral) military interventions in order to control the evolution of the international system.”2

When George Bush became President at the beginning of 2001, all the analysts portrayed him as lacking any will to assert himself at the international level, as his election programme had been highly inexplicit on this issue. Then came 11 September 2001. It was in the aftermath of the New York and Washington attacks that the “imperial temptation” 3 became concrete, due to the influence of the neoconservatives who were seen to have suddenly gained great influence within Bush’s entourage.

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1. Described as such by Hubert Védrine, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time.
The neoconservative project assumes that the mission of the US in the world is to use its military strength in a unilateral way, in order to impose a “democratic imperialism”. One of the neoconservatives is Paul Wolfowitz, former Deputy Secretary of Defense and the main artisan of the Iraq war in 2003. Since the beginning of the 1990s, he had been convinced that the overwhelming might of America could impose regime change. Through a knock-on effect this would, he believed, lead to a remodelling of the entire Middle East and the imposition of democracy there.

Positioned to the right of the “realists”, some neoconservatives are in fact “idealists” who were too hasty in believing that the use of force would suffice to achieve their ends.

In Of Paradise and Power, another neoconservative, Robert Kagan, wrote in early 2003⁴: “It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common vision of the world. On major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus. Europeans regard the United States as a country that behaves unilaterally and is unnecessarily warlike; Americans have little confidence in an inconsistent and erratic Europe. They agree on little and understand one another less and less. The reasons for the transatlantic divide are deep, long in development, and likely to endure.”

The powerlessness of power

In his L’impuissance de la puissance⁵ (“The Powerlessness of Power”), one of the “post-modern critics”, Bertrand Badie, answers the neoconservatives and more particularly Robert Kagan. Badie analyses the gap between present-day realities and the beliefs of those who vaunt the benefits of military power. He argues that, once bipolarity ends, “power becomes a factor of disorder (...). Today, hegemony is a source of instability – the more that power shows itself, the more it turns people against it (...). The United States is at the centre of this paradox: never in all of history has a State accumulated such resources of power; yet never before has a State proved so incapable of tackling the challenges that it must face.” Badie feels that the neoconservatives and the “realists” are mistaken in their analysis, as they still refer to Hobbes, Clausewitz, Weber or Schmitt, whereas the theories of these philosophers were rooted in a world that has vanished. Today, globalization has entirely recast the roles of the actors on the world stage, notably through the appearance of non-State actors who can make aggressive use of technological means that are both sophisticated and inexpensive.

Another observer of international relations, Ghassan Salamé, argues along similar lines in his Quand l’Amérique refait le monde⁶ (“When America Sets the World to Rights”). Salamé notes that “the logic of force has seemingly destroyed the force of logic”. America, “served by unrivalled military power”, has set out to “recreate the world in its own image, even if this means harking too closely to the siren songs of militant neoconservatism, overestimating the efficiency of military means, to the detriment of the other instruments of influence, and taking culpable liberties with the rights and opinions of others”.

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In *Incoherent Empire*, Michael Mann\(^7\) also noted the powerlessness of the United States. In a more recent article, he writes that “the new imperialism could generate more instability in the oil-producing countries, more deaths among Muslims, more Muslim terrorists, more weapons of mass destruction, more American deaths and more economic and financial difficulties for the United States. We take the view that this situation would cause the outright collapse of the imperial adventure. We will then perhaps find ourselves in a truly multilateral world in which the United States will have to be content with occupying a place equal to that of others.”\(^8\)

**A fragile hyperpower**

Before the Iraq war, Emmanuel Todd in 2002 described “the decomposition of the American system”\(^9\). He argues that the US is teetering on the brink. Impressive deficits in its public finances and its trade balance could, he says, put the whole world economy at risk. Since 2002, these deficits have grown further, notably due to a spectacular rise in military spending (up 57% in real terms between 2000 and 2005). Todd thinks that “the US is becoming a problem for the world. We were more used to seeing it as a solution. For half a century, the Americans were the guarantors of political freedom and economic order, but they now increasingly appear to be a factor of international disorder, maintaining uncertainty and conflict wherever they can.”

The worrying thing is that many past US military interventions ended in failure. This is what the novelist Gore Vidal\(^10\) meant when he called his country “the United States of Amnesia” – “We learn nothing because we remember nothing”. And John Judis, in an article entitled “Imperial Amnesia”,\(^11\) highlighted the recurrent US tendency to forget failures in its multiple attempts to export democracy through the use of force.

“America is suffering from a curious ailment,” writes Ghassan Salamé, “and America is making the world ill, because the world can no longer live without the US, nor against it for that matter, but is less and less able to live with it.”\(^12\) However, he remains confident in the future: “The United States will find the means to cure the disease that besets it” and it will reach a new equilibrium in its relations with the world, due to internal self-corrective mechanisms. But “the point is to know when this adjustment will occur, and how many errors of judgement, far-flung misadventures and denials it will take first.”

The unipolarity in which we find ourselves since the end of the Cold War is a wholly relative one. The “realists” see it as an indisputable given. But the “post-modern critics” have been able to demonstrate the weakness of the American superpower. Thus, Joseph Joffe\(^13\) et Samuel Huntington\(^14\) speak of a “uni-multipolar” system in which the US is in top position, above all

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militarily, but has to coexist with other actors who are also political, economic or commercial powers. So a reversion to a multipolar world is not to be ruled out.

**Europe’s power?**

Where does Europe stand in terms of power? In 2005, the European Union achieved a gross domestic product of 10,166 billion Euro, as against 10,325 billion Euro for the US. The Europe of the 25 is therefore undeniably the equal of the US as an economic power. But as the European Union has 457 million inhabitants, its per capita GDP in 2005 was 23,455 Euro, whereas for the 296 million inhabitants of the US, GDP per head was 34,890 Euro. On the other hand, Europe’s commercial power worldwide is stronger, as its 1,100 billion Euros’ worth of exports (outside the EU) in 2005 were 40% higher than the 774 billion Euro value of America’s exports.

EU public development assistance was worth 36 billion Euro in 2004, or 0.35% of GDP, while America’s was 16.4 billion Euro, or 0.17% of GDP. The world’s biggest contributor of development assistance is the Europe of the 25, as it accounts for 53% of the total.

But the European Union is not a military power. Will it ever be one? Some would like that. Others fear the prospect. A large number of Europeans do not favour the idea, for historical reasons. Battered and bruised by the wars of the twentieth century, they have an “awareness advantage” over the Americans. Europeans have experienced the reality of armed conflict on their own soil. In the Second World War, 40 million people were killed in Europe, half of whom were civilians. True, the Americans lost 300,000 soldiers, but few of their civilians died. European construction as a whole has been motivated by Europeans’ desire to eliminate the logic of war and armed violence among themselves. The collective unconscious is markedly different: Europe was obliged to “win the peace” at home, whereas in the US, people go off to “make war” in other people’s homes. This, incidentally, explains the trauma suffered by American citizens after 9/11, as never before in their history had so many civilians been killed in a single day by an attack from outside.

**The use of force**

Perceptions of the use of force appear to be quite different on either side of the Atlantic. In the US, the military power role has always been of the essence, and it took on prime importance when the neoconservatives became influential. In Europe, there is a fairly widespread consensus that armed force is to be used as a last resort and a whole range of other civil, political and diplomatic means should be employed first. This is the essential difference between the two documents setting out the **European Security Strategy** (the Solana Report) and the **National Security Strategy of the United States of America**. Where the two papers do agree, however, is in their assessment of the threats. The European document is highly ambiguous about the preventive use of force, whereas the American doctrine clearly envisages the possibility of conducting unilateral preventive wars.

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18. For a critical presentation of the European strategic concept, see Caroline Pailhe, “Une Europe sûre dans un monde meilleur”: un concept stratégique utile mais dangereux, Note d’analyse du GRIP, 6 January 2004, available at [www.grip.org](http://www.grip.org)
Box 1: Military power versus terrorism – five years of failure

9/11 was the factor that triggered a massive expansion in the United States’ use of military force. But five years on, the balance sheet is a disastrous one, and this should cause the decision-makers to take a much more moderate line when they have to examine the possible use of armed forces to manage crises.

At the State Department, an expert on terrorism summed up the situation in the following terms: “It is not the people Al-Qaeda might kill that is the threat. Our reaction [that of the United States] is what can cause the damage. It’s Al-Qaeda plus our response that creates the existential danger.” The Al-Qaeda attacks caused 3,000 deaths in the United States in 2001. But within the space of five years, according to the US based National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 72,000 people have perished as a result of terrorist attacks worldwide, including 40,000 Iraqi civilians. On 1 September 2006, the Pentagon published a report stating that the conditions which could lead to a civil war are fulfilled in Iraq. In mid-2006, also according to the Pentagon, the number of deaths was running at 3,000 a month, of which two-thirds were attributable to sectarian violence. In another significant development, CNN reported on 3 September 2006 that the number of troops killed in Afghanistan and Iraq had just overtaken the number of victims of 9/11.

In 2003, the American government justified its launching of the Iraq war by asserting that the links between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda had been adequately demonstrated. On 8 September 2006, the US Senate published a report showing that this theory had been completely fabricated and that, on the contrary, Saddam Hussein had refused to assist Al-Qaeda, which was regarded as a threat to the Iraqi regime.

The great danger for international security is that the policy pursued by the US has produced the effect that Bin Laden was seeking – to create chaos and a “clash of civilizations”. America’s reaction to 9/11 has generated more global disorder than the act which triggered that response in the first place.

America’s three mistakes

The Bush administration made three mistakes. Firstly, the “war on terror” is conceived as a global struggle against a multitude of actors, with no distinctions made. The targets are the “rogue states” of the Axis of Evil as well as many groups described as “terrorist”. The great weaknesses in this approach are, on the one hand, that it exaggerates the threats and creates a generalized, permanent sense of insecurity and, on the other, that it does not differentiate between the causes and motivations of the various actors, although these call for responses adjusted to each situation.

Secondly, as far as the modalities of action are concerned, the response has been unilateral, whereas it should have been multilateral. What is at stake is not the security of the United States alone but that of the whole world. Hence, the approach required necessarily entails cooperation among all States within the UN, so as to seek out the best means of fighting against terrorism within a perspective of joint, collective security.

Finally, this unilateral response has placed excessive emphasis on military force (with the advent of the “preventive war” concept), and this has ultimately, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, produced the opposite effect to what was intended. Combating terrorism requires greater finesse. In the short term, more policing and judicial resources have to be used. And in the long term, greater insight and patience are needed in order to achieve a lasting victory over the causes that can lead some people to resort to terrorist acts.

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2 “The war on terror, five years on: an era of constant warfare” in The Independent, 4 September 2006.
3 Le Monde, 3 September 2006.
management of the “post-war” situation showed the limits of a military engagement. Hence the growth in European scepticism about the usefulness of using force.

To Dominique de Villepin, then the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, “indisputably, power is measured less and less by the military yardstick, and is shifting towards economic dynamism. The army still embodies power, guarantees it, preserves it, but no longer forges it: ten divisions are worth less than ten multinationals.”

Even Robert Cooper, formerly Tony Blair’s special adviser, a supporter of the Iraq war and one of the drafters of the December 2003 European Security Strategy, acknowledges this development: “Whereas in the modern world, following Clausewitz’ dictum, war is an instrument of policy, in the post-modern world it is a sign of policy failure.” Cooper recognizes that the utility and importance of force are reduced by the existence of alliances and disarmament treaties. On the other hand, and this will no doubt be the nub of future debates on the development of European military resources, he argues that in the “pre-modern” regions which still exist in the world, where chaos reigns and where some areas are beyond the rule of law, force must be used when necessary.

Military projects in Europe

If the current tendency is to play down the use of force, it must nonetheless be noted that some signals to the contrary can also be seen in Europe. In the European Security Strategy, the use of force is regarded as possible, including anticipative force. This could be seen as a dangerous shift towards the concept of “preventive war” found in the American strategy, the more so as the European document is silent on the matter of prior authorization by the Security Council. While most European countries are reducing or stabilizing their military expenditure, France and the United Kingdom are increasing theirs. In the European Union, the European Defence Agency (EDA) was created in 2004. Its roles are multiple and ambiguous: it is to improve European cooperation in order to strengthen the defence industry, but it is also to monitor respect for minimal criteria (meaning military budgets) by the Member States. And the draft European Constitution provided for “permanent structured cooperation” in the field of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which could bring together “those Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions.

While some commentators emphasize Europe’s current military weakness, projects to change this state of affairs do exist. It is therefore important to thoroughly examine the evolution of political choices and, above all, to avoid any blunders in the casting list. First, the risks and threats should be assessed, then there must be a definition of the role that the European Union intends to play in the world, so as to subsequently specify the way in which it plans to act (which toolboxes, military or otherwise?) and finally to determine the military means needed. And it is only at the end of

these four stages that industry should be asked to produce these means. All too often in the past, history has shown that the means have dictated the doctrine. The military-industrial complex exists in the US, but also in Europe, although no doubt in a less aggressive, more subtle form.

Box 2: The danger of nuclear proliferation

What should be the response to Iran, which is suspected of wishing to acquire nuclear weapons, and North Korea, which on 10 February 2005 declared that it has them?

The keystone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime is the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which was adopted in 1968 and came into force in 1970. At that time, five States possessed nuclear weapons – the United States, the USSR, France, the United Kingdom and China. The aim of the treaty was primarily to prevent "horizontal proliferation", i.e. to stop further States from gaining access to nuclear weapons. More than 180 countries voluntarily renounced these weapons. Some of them had previously conducted military nuclear programmes – for example, South Africa (which had produced seven nuclear warheads), Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan and South Korea. Three ex-Soviet countries which had nuclear weapons on their territory – Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan – also gave them up.

But others did not stick to the NPT rules – nor, indeed, did they sign up to them. In Asia, India and then Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons. And in the Middle East, Israel, which has never acknowledged that it possesses any, reportedly has more than 200 nuclear warheads. The aim of these States, just like the other nuclear powers, is to protect themselves, through nuclear deterrence, against neighbours who are seen as threatening.

The second aim of the NPT was to halt "vertical proliferation" by the five nuclear States and to launch a programme of nuclear disarmament. When the NPT was adopted, these States possessed about 38,000 nuclear warheads. Almost forty years later, they still have almost 30,000. Moreover, they still regularly reaffirm the importance of this weapon in their military doctrines and some of them, such as the US and Russia, are launching new development programmes.

Nuclear disarmament vital

In these circumstances, the arguments used by the international community vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea are ambivalent. On the one hand, it would be truly dangerous if further countries came to possess nuclear weapons. But on the other, Iran and North Korea would simply be following the example of the eight nuclear weapons possessors...

The US has been taking the most threatening line with Tehran and Pyongyang, as the Americans are implicitly brandishing the threat of military action. And yet it was through negotiation that the Americans, together with the UK, managed to get Libya, led by Colonel Gadhafi, to renounce nuclear weapons.

The non-proliferation regime would be strengthened, vis-à-vis new candidates, if the 5 + 3 agreed to launch, within the NPT framework, a nuclear disarmament process, the first step in which would be to halt any new development in order to clearly demonstrate that nuclear weapons were being marginalized within their foreign policies.

In fact, all of the States that wish to acquire this weapon say that their motive is to ensure their own security. Therefore, the only way of defusing this proliferation would be to provide these countries with security guarantees, within the framework of regional negotiations – i.e. they should be given a guarantee that force will not be used against them and a commitment that crises will be settled peacefully.

As Robert Cooper pointed out, it is towards the risks or threats coming from the world’s “pre-modern” regions that Europe may have to act. The use of force by the Europeans should be conditional upon the strict respect of international law as defined in the United Nations Charter. This permits States to use force in two sets of circumstances. Firstly, as a response within the
framework of legitimate self-defence (Article 51 of the Charter). But it is important to note that the declaration adopted on 16 September 2005 by the Heads of State and Government in New York at the end of the summit marking the UN’s 60th anniversary clearly ruled out any “legitimate preventive defence” through a unilateral preventive war. The second permitted case is armed intervention arising from a Security Council resolution. But the usefulness of using force must be carefully assessed. This is why five conditions for authorizing military action have been proposed by a special Commission established by the UN Secretary-General, at Canada’s initiative, in 2001 within the framework of the “responsibility to protect” civilian populations.

These five conditions are: 1) the just cause (gravity of the threat: genocides, massacres, ethnic cleansing etc.), 2) the right intention or legitimacy of the motives (to actually end or avoid a threat, rather than from any other motivations) 3) last resort (all the non-military options have been exhausted) 4) proportional means (the minimum mobilization required for the military action concerned), and 5) reasonable prospects (consequences must not be worse than those of an absence of military intervention). Emphasis should be placed here on the two criteria of the last resort and the reasonable prospects – non-military means should always have priority and when military action is decided upon, it must be truly useful and effective. The opposite will sometimes apply: it will be more useful to abstain from any military intervention.

“Soft Power”

Certain observers believe that the Europeans will continue to reduce their military resources. In Patrice Buffotot’s view, “the economic crisis affecting a large number of EU countries and the absence of an immediate military threat will strengthen the hand of those who advocate a reduction in defence-related borrowing in order to cut public spending and thus the deficit. The result will be a further reduction in the size of European armies and in their intervention capacities.” Is that cause for sorrow or rejoicing? Bertrand Badie takes a rather optimistic view: “Does Europe really stand to lose everything if it does not achieve the status of a military superpower? The patent failure of European policies on integrated defence may be a blessing in disguise. Unable to make its mark as a formidable martial power, the Old Continent is finding a different route on to the international stage: through its commercial virtues, the promotion of human rights and democracy and the invention of a new form of integration.”

So Europe is more of a “soft power”, as defined by Joseph S. Nye. Incidentally, he was hoping that the US would adopt a similar posture. Noting that military power and the use of armed forces are ultimately generating fewer and fewer advantages, he regards political, diplomatic, economic and commercial tools as more important.

Europeans’ world view reflects the peaceful edifice that they have been building so patiently for so long. The European Union is an institution, admittedly a complicated one, which has made it possible to banish conflicts from its own midst, and indeed from its relations with almost all of its neighbours. The method used is cooperation rather than confrontation – the creation of a common market by focussing on economic and commercial relations, which have spread out into the social, cultural and scientific fields. The result is an extremely dense tissue of criss-crossing

relations in many sectors, enabling common interests to be furthered. Moreover, a system for aiding the least developed countries and regions has made it possible to support the integration of the weakest into the system. Hence the pull of this progressive construction: six member countries at the outset, 25 today, and about ten potential new candidates, without counting all the other States in the neighbourhood who hope to at least conclude cooperation agreements with the EU.

Box 3: Can democracy be imposed by force?

After the Iraq war began in 2003, one of the objectives declared by American leaders was to overthrow the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein and bring democracy to the country. In fact, Iraq was presented as the first stage in a game of dominoes which would end in the establishment of democracy throughout the “Greater Middle East”. As has been seen, the result has been the opposite – terrorism and civil war have been “imported” into Iraq.

Before embarking on an adventure of this kind, the American leaders would have been well advised to examine the historical reality of their country’s military interventions. In May 2003, a study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an American research centre, pointed out that, since 1900, out of 200 armed interventions by the United States, only 16 led to the reconstruction of a State. Of these 16 interventions, 12 were conducted unilaterally. And of these 12 countries, none had yet become a democracy ten years later.¹

To impose democracy by military force in countries that have never known democracy is impossible. The blossoming of real democracy is generally the result of a long, progressive process. It is founded on domestic negotiations leading to a “social contract” among the people and the political leaders. And it makes possible the establishment of a foreign policy that is open to cooperation and security agreements with neighbouring States. If any outside influence is conceivable, and if it is to produce positive effects, it is therefore more likely to be through multiple relations of a peaceful, non-military kind.

The example of Vietnam is symbolic. At the beginning of the1970s, the Americans lost the war against North Vietnam, which reunited with the South to form one single country, with a communist regime. Thirty-five years later, Vietnam is still communist, but it has changed quite considerably, both at home, where it has welcomed a massive influx of American companies, and abroad, where it is no longer a threat to its neighbours.

Also at the beginning of the 1970s, a quite different development took place in Europe. Three dictatorships evolved into democracies without any outside military intervention having taken place. Spain, Portugal and Greece came over to the side of democracy thanks to their multiple economic, cultural and tourist relations with the neighbouring European States.


The “European model” is certainly not exportable as such. But the method and the objective undoubtedly are. International security would be noticeably improved if similar regional groupings of States could be formed, negotiating peacefully to resolve their differences through an approach of mutual recognition and cooperation. There is no reason to think that this formula could not work elsewhere than in Europe, which after all was the continent that suffered the most divisions, victims and armed conflicts in the course of the last century. Europe is a complex and complicated blend of a federation of Nation States retaining part of their sovereignty and a supranational whole which somewhat diminishes the sovereignty of its Member States. In the longer run, the global system could also consist of a similar blend – a community of regional powers (to be constituted) and a multilateral whole (which already exists in the form of the United Nations).
**Strength through norms**

The way in which the Europeans have organized themselves explains why they are among the most constant advocates of reinforcing the UN system. By supporting multilateralism, they wish to contribute to the prevention and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. They support the principle of “good global governance” through the development of the UN institutions and of international law, which should in particular make it possible to combat terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction more effectively, to uphold the defence of human rights and to further assist the developing countries in achieving take-off.

Zaki Laïdi\(^28\) sees Europe positioning itself within a logic of interdependence rather than a power strategy. He notes that Europe could choose any one of three paths. Either it could attempt to become a classic power, including a military one, rivalling the US, China or India, but this is not a very realistic option because Europe has long since decided that it is no longer going to greatly develop its armed forces. Or it could adopt an avoidance strategy, the consequence of which would be to let the other powers, including the US, dictate their own preferences for running the world – but Europe is not (or no longer) inclined to accept this. Then there is the only possible choice – complex, long drawn out but more productive – namely to take an off-centre approach by going for “power through norms”, patiently working to build new international relations founded on international law. “Norms are and will remain not only the best shield for Europe but also its brightest banner,” Laïdi believes.

So Europe can become, as Tzvetan Todorov puts it, a “quiet power”\(^29\). But if Europe wants to project its own experience out into the world, as it should do in the interests of its own security, it will have to show more determination. First, it should stop lamenting its so-called lack of power (it has plenty) and should dare to assert itself as it actually is, with all its diversities (which are its wealth) and its institutional complexities (which are also a reality in international relations). Then, it should convince itself that this way of organizing the world, while certainly slower and less spectacular, is also more “realistic” than the impetuous and ultimately counterproductive approach of reorganizing the planet through the use of military force.

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