Lukas Schmelter says that Europe now, more than ever, needs to create and support a unified strategic foreign and defence policy if it wants to retain and strengthen its global influence.
n objective examination of the current state of global affairs must surely lead one to the conclusion that Europe now, more than ever, needs to create and support a unified strategic foreign and defence policy if it wants to retain and strengthen its global influence.

A number of crises have made clear that those who continue to believe in the ability of individual European nation-states to actively shape global affairs and thereby maintain full control over their own fate, are hopelessly misguided. Recent developments have demonstrated that in today’s world the role of ‘dreamers’ is occupied by the ardent advocates of the classic nation-state model, whilst the proponents of federal European solutions are driven by realism.

This is because no rational observer of current events, whether it be Russian aggression on the continent’s Easter periphery, the ongoing sovereign debt crisis, or the unprecedented influx of refugees, can truly claim that a retreat to a Europe of nation-states would translate into concrete improvements in our situation. Those who nevertheless make this claim, do so out of ignorance or more often due to short-term political calculations.

The fact of the matter is that if Europe is to remain master of its own fate, the ‘third rail’ of European politics, namely the subject of closer cooperation in the realm of foreign and defence policy, must be tackled. Over 60 years after the most far-reaching proposal on this matter, the European Defence Community (EDC), was offered and subsequently rejected, the topic is once more on the political agenda.

Following Jean-Claude Juncker’s call for a joint European army shortly after his election as EU-Commission President, the debate surrounding the possibility of further integration amongst Europe’s armies has been led with the familiar controversy.
It is undeniable that the existing structure simply delivers too little effect and consumes too many resources. Taken together, EU member states still inefficiently deploy soldiers in far too many garrisons, equipped with partly incompatible weapons systems. Moreover, inefficient procurement is under the command of too many generals and administered by vastly oversized ministerial bureaucracies. Based on 2011 data, EU member states spent more on defence than Russia and China combined, second only to the United States, which spent about 2.5 times the combined European effort. Europe’s current defence has no rationale other than the fact of its existence – it is neither adequate nor efficient.

A unified European army would almost certainly produce an overall positive effect in this area, as several studies have indicated. The member states could achieve much more value for money than the €190 billion that they spend to keep up 28 national armies, comprising roughly 1.5 million service personnel. Defence industries across member states would be able to follow a stronger common framework; and R&D as well as military hardware would become less diverse and more standardised.

We therefore need a mechanism by which western member states, like Portugal and Spain, are obliged to address the threats posed to the Eastern periphery and vice versa.
Faced with the weakness of financial flows allocated to defence research in Europe, and given that military research can have significant positive benefits for the civilian market (see the cases of ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network)/internet or the civilian use of the GPS signal), a closer coordination of spending in this area could not only see the production of superior military capabilities but also boosts in Europe’s economic growth.

Most importantly perhaps, costly and ultimately unnecessary duplications would be avoided. To cite just one example, the development of three fighters in Europe (the Rafale in France, the Gripen in Sweden and the Eurofighter created by a consortium bringing together Germany, Spain, Italy and the UK) generated significant duplications in spending - both in terms of research and equipment - to arrive at similar results. A similar squandering of resources can be observed in the development of other equipment, such as frigates or tanks.

In addition to these considerations about likely efficiency gains, one must point to the remarkable, and in many ways paradoxical, effects of European defence expenditure when discussing the possibility of a joint European army. The EU member states wish to maintain the illusion that they are independent in matters of defence, largely due to domestic political circumstances.

As a result, they reject closer cooperation through initiatives such as NATO’s smart defence or the EU’s system of pooling and sharing. Though collaboration of this kind would improve the defence capabilities of Europe as a whole, and thereby benefit each individual nation, it would also involve admitting the fact that the EU member states are undeniably mutually dependent upon one another when it comes to defence policy.

This act of self-betrayal has led to Europe losing substantially in its capabilities (roughly 20 percent over the last five years). This development has ironically increased the extent to which individual EU member states are reliant upon one another. No individual member state is today in a position to effectively defend itself without the assistance of
others. In reality, virtually all military engagements are built upon multilateral structures, exposing politicians’ references to autonomy in defence matters as utterly absurd. Moves to cut defence budgets unilaterally, that is to say without consulting the EU or NATO, in an effort to demonstrate national sovereignty, ultimately increase the degree of interdependence.

Few critics of a unified European army in fact deny the advantages outlined thus far. Rather they point to the issue of practicality and more importantly to what they see as a lack of desirability amongst European member states for such a unified army. They outline the fact that it makes little sense to establish a unified army, if the individual member states evidently have differing defence policy priorities. Indeed this is true. Germany surrounded by friendly neighbours in a central geographic location has very different security needs than Poland with its proximity to Russia, or Italy with its coastline facing a region in turmoil.

On the face of it therefore, such a differing range of priorities makes a unified defence policy appear unfeasible. The crucial point however is that none of these states can in fact deal with the particular challenges posed to their security individually. We therefore need a mechanism by which western member states, like Portugal and Spain, are obliged to address the threats posed to the Eastern periphery and vice versa. A unified European army would be such a mechanism. It would essentially ensure that individual member states take an interest in and contribute to the countering of threats that face members geographically distant from themselves, in return for help in maintaining their own security.

This is by no means a novel idea, yet one gets the sense that recent events have really driven home this point amongst policymakers throughout the continent. Particularly the refugee crisis, the prime example of what hap-
pens when some member states choose to ignore the concerns of others, has exposed the need for some kind of grand bargain amongst Europe’s member states.

Particularly Germany, which due to its geographic location has largely been insulated from the turbulence experienced by other member states located on the periphery of the union, has finally come to realise that it must take an interest in the concerns voiced by other member states. If it fails to do so, the problems will eventually traverse the continent and make it to the borders of the Federal Republic.

With the EU’s member states being demonstrated what mutual interdependence in a dangerous, constantly changing world truly means, the prospects for a new initiative in the field of defence policy do not seem as bad as they perhaps were several years ago. Times of crisis always present opportunity. As the particles are in flux, and we are called upon to determine how they fall into place, the entire process of European integration, of which defence policy is an important aspect, is up for debate. The big casualty of the last five years has been the ‘gradualist’ fallacy, the belief that Europe would be ‘built’ brick by brick, little by little, peu à peu.

What we need instead is a brief collective furnace in which new institutions and ultimately new identities are forged in the face of extreme foreign-political threats. If it is to be done, Europeans will have to turn their gaze to the example of the Anglo-American democracies of the West, where similar problems have been addressed and mastered in the past. The solution will have to be to take a leaf out of the Anglo-American book, both in the general and the particular. We need to turn the eurozone into a mighty union built on the same principles as the United Kingdom and the United States. The single state will by definition have a single border and a single army to defend it.

The historical record shows that successful unions have resulted not from gradual processes of convergence in relatively benign circumstances, but through sharp ruptures in periods of extreme crisis. They come about, not through
evolution but with a ‘big bang’. They are events rather than processes. The European political unity which the continent so desperately needs therefore requires a single collective act of will, by its governments and elites and ultimately by its citizens.

As Hans-Werner Sinn has argued, there is no need to ‘re-invent the wheel’ when a tried and tested model is available to us across the Channel and the Atlantic. We should instead follow the path set out for us more than two hundred years ago by the United Kingdom and the United States by establishing a full parliamentary, defence and fiscal union. This is the only way of solving the debt crisis, of deterring outside predators, resolving the historical paradox of Germany’s power and powerlessness in Europe, and turning Europeans and Germans into the force for good in the world that they should be.

Lukas Paul Schmelter is Head of Strategy at the Project for Democratic Union (PDU)