

31st of March 2009

Comment to Article of Vlasta Parkanová, Defence Minister of the Czech Republic

In her article, Ms Parkanová makes a powerful case for the EDA's added value in the field of European defence modernization. She demonstrates convincingly how unjustified the fear of duplication with NATO really is. Her arguments can be broadly summarized thus: first, the EDA and NATO have different memberships, so a certain overlap in some work areas isn't necessarily harmful; second, NATO never concerned itself with some of the most important domains of the EDA's action, such as the construction of a true European defence equipment market and the promotion of cooperative armament programmes between European states; third, and above all, the EDA is embedded in an institutional set-up - the EU - which has a multitude of non-military tools at its disposal that can be mobilized in the interest of peace and security and that NATO lacks.

What Ms Parkanová fails to mention is that NATO has often served as an impediment to the consolidation of European defence interests, due to the overwhelming influence of the US. One good example of this is the issue of 'Transatlantic defence cooperation' in the industrial field. In the 60 years of its existence, NATO has not contributed one bit to the creation of a level-playing field for European and US industries across the Atlantic. Quite the contrary, it has served as a catalyst for programmes where US industries merely provided platforms for European customers, without any technological transfer and/or real sharing of industrial work.

In short, in some areas NATO has traditionally had the exact opposite goal to what the EDA is now trying to achieve: the definition and articulation of European defence interests. By the way, this is not about isolating Europe from the US, or even building a much-feared 'Fortress Europe': all the EDA is trying to do is turn Europe into a real partner for the US by putting an end to the piecemeal approach where Member States would "cooperate" with the US on an adhoc basis, often weakening themselves - as well as European interests - in the process.

Where I disagree with Ms Parkanová is in her fear of an EU developing "independently" from NATO. But being politically independent or, in other words, strategically autonomous, is the whole point of this endeavour.

Also, after listing the many reasons why the EDA brings an extraordinary added-value to European defence, Ms Parkanová can't resist the temptation of raising the perennial spectre of "the risk of overlap, confusion and rivalry" between NATO and EU. Is it important for the EU and NATO to move beyond the asphyxiating remit of Berlin Plus and into a broader relationship? Yes. Should there be unencumbered political and technical dialogue between the two organisations? Absolutely. Should

NATO or the US hold a veto over further steps in European defence integration? Absolutely not: NATO and the EU are different political animals, performing what are essentially different tasks and aiming for different goals.

Finally, I was surprised to read that the defence minister of the Czech Republic believes that "with luck, the EU has a new reform treaty within its grasp that will put the EU defence and security framework onto a new basis of permanent structured military cooperation". Ms Parkanová, this is not a question of luck! It's a question of political will, political courage and political vision.