

# European Security & the Power of Knowledge-based Networks

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The question of whether the European Union (EU) is becoming a credible security actor capable of protecting itself and contributing to global stability is important now more than ever. In the 21st century, Europe faces a broad range of security threats in the form of terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, illegal migration, and cross-border trafficking of humans, drugs, and weapons. Failed and weak states in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East are often the source of these security threats. And more recently, Russia's aggression towards its neighbors has become of pressing, immediate concern.

Over the past twenty years, the EU has actually made remarkable advances in combatting these threats through the achievement of security integration – that is, the transfer of policy authority from the national to the supranational level – both in its external and internal dimensions. There has been even greater progress with internal security integration – dealing with border control, visas, privacy and data protection, cross-border investigations, prosecutions, and arrest warrants, among other things. But even in the external security realm, the number of civilian and military operations under the EU flag has mushroomed, and progress towards the pooling and sharing of defense resources has advanced significantly. Despite a few high-profile setbacks, EU member-states are gradually agreeing to dismantle certain barriers to security integration that previously stood at the very core of traditional state sovereignty. Why is this happening? And how can this ongoing process help the EU tackle its current security challenges?

Any analysis that focuses exclusively on the preferences of member states misses the crucial role played by various types of diplomatic actors, mainly based in Brussels, who

have been largely responsible for much of the security integration in recent years. Ambassadors, military generals, scientists, crisis management specialists, and others supersede national governments in achieving consensus in security decision-making. They comprise powerful knowledge-based networks of experts, or *epistemic communities*. They are at the heart of the process of security integration, making headway at a remarkable speed by virtue of their members' shared expertise, common culture, professional norms, and meeting frequency. These knowledge-based networks are able to effectively persuade member-states of their policy goals. Many of these actors are both connected to nation-states and operate beyond strict state control in carrying out their European functions.

Two strong examples include the EU Military Committee (EUMC) and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) both of which are housed within the Council of the EU, the EU's main decision-making body. As these examples show, cohesive epistemic communities can be persuasive diplomatic actors, achieving security goals that would have otherwise been very difficult if left to the member states alone.

## The EUMC & External Security

EU military representatives (milreps) have worked their way up through the ranks of their national armies or navies for an average of 35 years. In this time, career experience, education, and training give them a high level of technical knowledge. Many of them have served as commanders and chiefs of staff, and have been posted as faculty at defense colleges, among other things. The strong similarities in training and education add to a culture of shared values and worldviews. They find that by the time they begin work in the EUMC,

arriving at consensus is unproblematic. Their training and career experiences give them a body of shared knowledge that is virtually taken for granted.

The key source of their ability to agree so readily is their high level of tactical expertise. They have specialized knowledge of how best to devise the best military strategy on the ground, and during an operation. Over the past decade, this knowledge has also come to include a range of other military activities in which states are occupied, such as crisis management, civil-military relations, and humanitarian intervention.

Naturally, milreps may find that they have redlines from their capitals that they cannot cross. But if they are able to successfully persuade their capitals to shift their political positions, agreement in the EUMC comes very quickly as a result of their shared professional expertise.

Two Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) military operations – NAVFOR Atalanta and EUFOR Chad – provide illustrative examples of how milreps are able to regularly achieve consensus even when member-states disagree from the start. In the case of NAVFOR Atalanta, not all member-states supported the launching of such an operation at the outset. There were a number of issues at stake. First, it was to be the EU's first naval operation, and there were many non-EU ships in the region already, seeking to deal with the pirates in their own ways. Second, as the largest donor to Somalia, the EU wanted to ensure that World Food Program (WFP) ships were all safely escorted to ports. Third, 30% of EU oil is transported through this ocean region. Tackling the growing problem of piracy was clearly something that needed to be addressed, but some member states believed that the best course of action did not necessarily involve a formal CSDP operation. The milreps, however, saw the naval operation as politically attractive and with a high potential for success because of the EU's unique experience at incorporating the civil dimension into military initiatives, bringing together other (non-EU) actors, and promoting international stability.

Discussions within the EUMC resulted in a compromise to launch a formal CSDP operation contingent upon the creation of a coordination network between ships, including those from non-EU nations, such as China, Russia, and India, as well as between these ships and ground personnel. In addition, they called for advance agreements with nearby countries on procedures for dealing with captured pirates on the ground. In the end, the milreps essentially pushed for a wider mission, and by relying on military logic and expertise, they were able to persuade those in the capitals. In particular, their top priority was to ensure the safe passage of World Food Program ships, followed by providing protection for merchant ships as a second priority. Member states eventually agreed that a formal CSDP operation under EU command would be the best route to take given the nature of the threat and the shared goal of ensuring that humanitarian aid reached Somalia. Once the political mandate was in

place, the actual operation was launched in a matter of days on 10 November 2008. Since that date, not a single WFP ship has been lost to pirates, and member states agreed to renew the operation, which is still ongoing.

Similarly, in the case of EUFOR Chad – a humanitarian operation to bring security and relief to refugees and displaced people – member states initially disagreed about getting involved in an operation so far away that did not have any immediate political and economic interest for them. At the same time, they did feel increasing pressure to do something about the growing problem in Chad, and its 400,000 displaced Darfur refugees. Because of their colonial ties to Chad, the French put forward the proposal to launch a military operation. Within the EUMC, milreps decided to set aside the debate about interests versus moral obligation, and focused instead on whether such an operation could achieve successful results.

Given, the reluctance on the part of some member states to contribute troops, the answer to this question was not straightforward. Several attempts to generate promises of troop contributions had not resulted in the necessary level of participation, and there was an initial shortfall of 2,000 troops (it was thought that 6,000 were needed). Several member-states saw this as further reason not to go forward with an operation. However, milreps determined that despite this shortage, there were enough reserve forces to satisfy the requirements, alongside an extra contribution from France. They stipulated that as long as the UN took over as planned one year later, and that the EU operation complemented the UN's efforts to protect civilians, refugees, and humanitarian facilities the chances for success were high. They determined that EUFOR Chad should not address the core causes of the conflict – violence between different ethnic groups and armed militia – as this was not best resolved through military force. Despite great hesitance and division among member-states initially, the expertise and persuasiveness of the milreps served as a catalyst for the launching of a new operation on 15 March 2008 that would not have otherwise gone forward.

The role of the EUMC in developing military capabilities in the context of the EU over the long-term is another dimension of its power. The EUMC works closely with the European Defence Agency (EDA), in pursuing the goals of the Long-Term Vision for European Defence and Capability Needs, which focuses on increasing capabilities and achieving interoperability. The EUMC is thus a bridge between the member states and the EDA. Moreover, since their primary goal is to execute successful CSDP operations, and provide for the common security of EU citizens, they realize that working together will be necessary for the EU to have efficient and effective planning and procurement, particularly in light of declining populations and defense budgets.

### Coreper & Internal Security

Coreper is equally important to consider as an example of highly effective Brussels-based epistemic community. It is a committee comprised of an ambassador from each member state, but in practice its influence as a knowledge-based network is far stronger than its formal role would suggest. Among other things, it has had tremendous influence in developing the internal security side of EU integration.

Coreper's members undergo a rigorous selection and training process as part of their professional development. Professional selection begins right out of university, and is repeated when diplomats are subsequently promoted to new positions over time. The fact that they come from the same top universities contributes to a similar social and networking background. Training occurs at the foreign ministries, but it is clear that actual time in the field – performing the daily duties of a diplomat, navigating through a difficult multilateral negotiation, and learning the nitty-gritty of foreign policy – is a crucial component of this. Coreper ambassadors originate from this process, and after decades of service, have shown themselves to be the best at what they do. Among senior diplomatic postings, a Coreper appointment is considered one of the most prestigious and challenging.

Coreper's common culture holds the group together, and results in a similar worldview that enables them to more easily reach consensus and persuade their capitals of further integration. Coreper's *esprit de corps* is manifested as a feeling of being part of a club and empathizing with each other.

What does this wealth of expertise and common culture lead to in terms of actual policy goals? First, members of Coreper to a great extent believe that integration is inevitable and good for Europe. One manifestation of this is that there are no fixed alliances among certain member-states. They genuinely deal with each issue on its own terms, based on their expertise and ability to get the capitals on board. They feel that they are serving European citizens in common, as one constituency, and that the Council is in effect a kind of EU government.

They naturally face resistance from the capitals where the tendency is to try to directly control the direction of internal security policy and to guard national regulations. Generally, the main way in which a capital has leverage over its ambassadors is through formal instructions, and the main way in which ambassadors exercise agency is through flexibility with those instructions. While receiving instructions from capitals is a big part of how this network of diplomats operates and is constrained, in practice, instructions serve as a more formalized means of coordination and persuasion between the two. Instructions are rarely set in stone for high-ranking ambassadors. They serve as a basis for deliberation. Thus, ambassadors are able to persuade their capitals of consensus that they reach in Brussels. Sometimes there are certain red lines, but even then the obstacles are not insurmountable.

The example of the 2005 Strategy on Radicalization & Recruitment (SRR) provides a brief illustration of how Coreper is able to infuse a particular policy with the shared, expert beliefs of the ambassadors. The SRR was designed to define the terrorist threat to the EU, highlight the challenges the EU faces in overcoming extremist ideologies and threat vulnerabilities, and outline the pro-active measures the EU will take to undermine Al Qaeda's radicalization and recruitment in Europe. Coreper sought to advance particular goals that emphasized their twin norms of achieving more security integration alongside the strengthening of the EU legal space.

First, the ambassadors argued that the EU should enact a comprehensive response. They agreed that there is a dangerous, distorted version of Islam that must be combated with efforts to integrate Muslims into society and empower moderate voices. To do this, they emphasized the importance of non-state, transnational actors like NGOs, alongside state-driven solutions. The result was to decrease the responsibility of member states alone in tackling the problem. Coreper believed that empowering moderate voices and involving NGOs would weaken the influence of extremist Islam.

Second, the ambassadors wanted to elevate the perception of threat. They believed that more people were at risk, and more citizens could be impacted by terrorist activity than had been previously anticipated. Prisons, educational institutions, religious training centers, and places of worship were all places where recruitment was occurring. They argued that even if a specific country had not been a target, this did not mean that they were immune. They called upon member states to approach the problem of radicalization and recruitment as a *European* problem. Estonia, Finland, and Slovakia, for example, do not have problems with radicalization yet all three ambassadors agreed that they must take a European approach and engage in the debate about what should be done.

Third, they agreed that any action taken by the EU with respect to radicalization and recruitment must be legitimated. To accomplish this, they added to the final draft specific mention of protecting fundamental rights, putting in place a legal framework, encouraging a political dialogue, and involving experts such as academics in shaping policies. The idea of protecting fundamental rights, common to all citizens of the EU, once again demonstrated the idea that through asserting "Europeanness" radicalization and recruitment to extremism could be counteracted. As much of EU legislation already rests on a strong legal system and respect for rights, they argued that the effort to combat terrorism was no exception.

Since the Strategy was made public on 24 November 2005, Coreper has revised its policy goals every six months to take into account actual progress and their ongoing deliberations. The SRR became part of the more general EU Action Plan for

Combating Terrorism, a policy for which Coreper also performed the preparatory work. The new initiatives include: public diplomacy to explain and legitimate EU actions to the international community and to put forward a common EU image; information sharing across member-states; setting up funding for individual research that would aim to strengthen the relationship between civil society and European authorities, and multinational funding to generate policy proposals that would *require* a European approach to combating terrorism; and a new approach to extremism that would treat it as a danger within all religions, instead of emphasizing Islam alone.

Biannual progress reports show that major initiatives have been successfully launched along these lines, including: the implementation of a media communication strategy; the development of a “common lexicon of terms”; a signed agreement among member-states to abide by EU laws criminalizing both direct and indirect incitement of terrorist activities; multinational meetings to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue, direct involvement of major NGOs, and so on.

In the end, Coreper persuaded member-states to envision the EU as a contiguous “homeland” in which policy would be legitimated. Despite the fact that the majority of member-states had not even experienced the problem of radicalization, Coreper successfully reframed the issue as European thereby significantly advancing internal security integration.

#### Conclusion

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These two examples of knowledge-based networks, as well as many others, demonstrate how these expert groups have influenced the trajectory of European security policy for

some time. In facing the security challenges of today, member states should recognize the important role that these knowledge-based networks have played thus far. Indeed, the expertise-driven processes among these actors are gradually contributing to important innovations in European integration and enhancing its ability to act as one. In searching for a way forward in the context of such an intense threat environment, member states should not give into the temptation to “nationalize” their security policies, and to retreat into the old, state-driven ways of protecting themselves. This only serves to weaken the EU as an actor, and each member state individually, sending the message that Europe is fragile and divided. In this time of economic recovery, the EU has far more potential for success through finding innovative ways to pool and share on many levels.

Because of the work of these knowledge-based networks in the security realm, the EU has surpassed NATO in the variety of initiatives it can do around the world. Considering that some of the most urgent security challenges are inherently transnational – cyber war, terrorism, migration, climate change, and trafficking, to name a few – expert networks which are themselves transnational are ideally positioned to discover mutually preferable solutions that will work for Europe as a whole. Through their cohesiveness, these epistemic communities can also serve as a fulcrum to involve potential partners, such as the US, Norway, and others, in achieving these shared security goals together.

#### About the Author

**Dr. Mai'a K. Davis Cross** has written extensively about epistemic communities, including most recently a book entitled, *Security Integration in Europe: How Knowledge-based Networks are Transforming the European Union*, which is the 2012 winner of the Best Book Prize from the University Association of Contemporary European Studies. She is assistant professor of political science and international affairs at Northeastern University, and senior researcher at the ARENA Centre for European Studies. She is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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