

Review - The Routledge Handbook of European Security

Written by Paul A. van Hooft

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PAUL A. VAN HOOFT, AUG 12 2013

The Routledge Handbook of European Security
Edited by: Sven Biscop and Richard G. Whitman
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For students of international relations, security studies, and Europeans studies the EU as a security actor is a frustrating subject in terms of scope, with its range of organizations, initiatives, and accompanying acronyms. It is also the uncertain result of an ongoing process that is inherently fluid, incomplete, and permanently under negotiation. This volume edited by Sven Biscop and Richard G. Whitman does a comprehensive and impressive job of systematically capturing and delineating the complex fluidity that makes up the structures and outcomes of the European security institutions in 26 succinct and tightly written chapters from 30 authors. The volume's four major sections on (1) the EU as an international security actor; (2) institutions, instruments and means; (3) policies; and (4) partners cover both the major theoretical positions regarding the EU as an international actor and the growing

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number of ways in which it is impacting the European and global environment. In short, the volume is a solid, up to date and cohesive introduction to what Europe is becoming in the security field, and can therefore be recommended to anyone interested in exploring the subject.

However, in spite of its impressive scope there are some problems with the approach of the volume. Like other discussions on the EU and its institutions, the underlying argument of the volume reads too often as if all problems within these institutions are simply matters of improving effectiveness and efficiency. These discussions risk turning into technocratic debates on how to fine-tune an engine rather than highlighting who would want to build it and for what purpose. It is not entirely clear to me why there is not a single chapter to discuss how the conflicting strategies of the U.K., France, and Germany disable cohesive European-level outcomes. Furthermore, there is no discussion of how the smaller Western European states resist being overshadowed by these big three states, let alone how newer members such as Poland with very different threat appraisals taken together have, until now, hindered any cohesive European grand strategy. At the very least, one would expect a discussion on the big three and how they have all pulled the European project in distinctly different directions with regards to the role of force, civilian capabilities, the relationship to NATO, and so on, in the two decades that followed the end of the Cold War. These national perspectives have not been static, as demonstrated by the French pro-Atlantic shift since 2008, and therefore the slow process is no reason to outright dismiss the European project on security. Yet, when Germany, the largest political and economic power in Europe, is currently not willing, able or even seemingly interested in pursuing traditional politico-military power for itself or for the European Union, there is little fundament for a proper Euro-grand strategy.

This is not intended as some fatuous Kissinger-inspired critique of the lack of European unity and dismissal of the European politics: I firmly believe that Europe has become a serious security player and that it should further develop as an autonomous actor. However, a feasible European strategy requires proponents to aggressively make the case for shared European interests and threats. This strategy should not only depend on more abstract shared ideas that are in opposition to the various centrifugal forces within Europe. It is also not simply a realist state-oriented critique on my part: over the past decade opposition to the EU- and to further integration - has grown within the member states as part of a populist backlash against internationalist elites. This populist backlash largely preceded, but was amplified, by the financial crisis and has taken place in states that were considered stalwart supporters of increased integration. It does not bode well for the willingness of policymakers to publicly signal support for more potentially costly operations under an EU flag or for integration of areas traditionally part of national sovereignty. Neither of these two developments receive a great deal of attention in Biscop and Whitman's book, which seems like a rather large omission from a volume on European security.

Without the acknowledgment of the persistence of national interests, and in some cases the renationalization of issue areas, several of the chapters have an oddly apolitical feel when explaining the consistent lacunae in European security policies. They also miss important parts of the necessary political context. The volume consequently spends less time on how 27 (now 28) nation-states negotiate a common foreign policy than a comparable treatment of a single state would spend on the effects of domestic ideas, interests, and institutions on its foreign policy. Spending more time doing this would aid the volume's discussion on the complex European arrangements that result from the EU's plurality of actors. The critique might seem unfair because the book does not set such an objective for itself. However, the difficulties in achieving cohesive European ways and means, which are a recurrent theme in various chapters, are rooted in the inability to settle on sufficiently unified strategic ends. It is not that the authors are unaware of these problems: several chapters note this complex interaction between national and EU objectives and interests, such as in Sami Andoura's contribution on EU policies towards energy security. He nicely makes the point that the various competing national interests constrain the creation of a comprehensive EU energy policy, which in turn presents a serious obstacle to the development of a common foreign policy. The volume would, however, have better been served by explicitly setting up these themes clearly in an earlier section.

The volume could also have used a single comprehensive chapter to make the case on what exactly are the shared European interests and how these are impacted by global developments -proliferation, an increasingly assertive Russia, and the question of how to deal with the rising powers. These are now discussed in separate chapters on policies and issue areas but the bigger picture might not be apparent to novice readers, although an interesting

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chapter by James Rogers on Europe's emerging geostrategic context does accomplish several of these objectives. It also seems an odd choice to discuss European security without thoroughly appraising the role of NATO and the U.S. There is a fine chapter that analyses NATO as one of the EU's partners, but NATO's role is much greater, and the development of the European security structures cannot be understood without the paradoxically supportive and undermining role of the U.S. Moreover, most of the European armed forces have been closely integrated through NATO, and most of the national European threat appraisals, the doctrinaire developments, etc., originate from within the transatlantic structures. The political context in which the European security policies are made is complex and constantly undergoing change, but it is less apparent from this volume than one would wish. The possibility of developing a cohesive European strategy exists, but to avoid it only being a wishful thought, a greater deal of attention must be paid to shifting interests and obstacles, rather than only the shared beliefs of some policymakers and academics. Still, the volume is far from one-sided, and there are several more contributions that are more explicitly critical of the lack of cohesive European strategy, such as Richard Young's prickly take on EU democracy policies. One perspective balances the other and the book is all the better for it.

From this book emerges a mostly comprehensive and complex image on European security, edited into a cohesive whole, and useful to navigate through the acronym soup of European organizations and institutions. The volume is set up schematically, covering the basic theoretical perspectives, as well as specific policy areas, issues, regions, and the other international actors most crucial to the European Union. It contains several informative chapters on European military and civilian capabilities, on developmental policies and the European defence industry, such as a nice chapter by Jan Joel Andersson on European defence industry. All of these chapters are very useful as an overview of the range of topics connected to European security. Despite some drawbacks pointed out above, this volume's comprehensiveness makes it useful as a teaching tool, and as an overall introduction to this developing subfield of international relations.

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