Nato’s sea and air mission in Libya is the first major military engagement undertaken since the global financial crisis. With European nato allies drastically reducing their defense spending, there were legitimate fears as to whether they could still afford to respond to such complex crises. Reports early on that the operation lacked sufficient strike capabilities reinforced these fears. But the unprecedented speed, scale, and sustained pace of execution of Operation Unified Protector tell a different story. As of early May, the pace of air sorties had remained high since the beginning of the operation, and strikes had accounted for just under half of those sorties. When requirements changed as Muammar al-Qaddafi’s forces altered their tactics, nato allies provided more of the high-precision strike capabilities that the commanders needed. Meanwhile, more than a dozen ships have been patrolling the Mediterranean Sea and enforcing the UN arms embargo.

The mission in Libya has revealed three important truths about military intervention today. First, to those who claimed that Afghanistan was to be nato’s last out-of-area mission, it has shown that unpredictability is the very essence of security. Second, it has proved that in addition to frontline capabilities, such as fighter-bombers and warships, so-called enablers, such as surveillance and refueling aircraft, as well as drones, are critical parts of any modern operation. And third, it has revealed that nato allies do not lack military capabilities. Any shortfalls have been primarily due to political, rather than military, constraints. In other words, Libya is a reminder of how important it is for nato to be ready, capable, and willing to act.

Although defense is and must remain the prerogative of sovereign nations, an alliance that brings Europe and North America together requires an equitable sharing of the burden in order to be efficient. Downward trends in European defense budgets raise some legitimate concerns. At the current pace of cuts, it is hard to see how Europe could maintain enough military capabilities to sustain similar operations in the future. And this

Anders Fogh Rasmussen is Secretary-General of NATO.
NATO After Libya

touches on a fundamental challenge facing Europe and the alliance as a whole: how to avoid having the economic crisis degenerate into a security crisis. The way Europe responds to this challenge could determine its place in the global order and the future of security.

Nato allies should concentrate on taking fresh steps on three fronts: strengthening European defense, enhancing the transatlantic relationship, and engaging with emerging powers on common challenges. But before turning to prescriptions, it is important to look at the facts: what happened in Libya and whether the financial crisis has affected the global distribution of military power.

THE SPENDING GAP

Operation Unified Protector has shown that European countries, even though they spend less on their militaries than the United States or Asian powers, can still play a central role in a complex military operation. Indeed, after the United States, Europe still holds the world’s most advanced military capabilities. The question, however, is whether Europe will be able to maintain this edge in five or ten years.

This is particularly worrying when one considers the ongoing redistribution of global military power, a shift embodied in the relative decline of European defense spending compared to that of emerging powers or the United States. As European countries have become richer, they have spent less on defense. Since the end of the Cold War, defense spending by the European NATO countries has fallen by almost 20 percent. Over the same period, their combined GDP grew by around 55 percent. The picture is somewhat different in Asia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2000 and 2009, India’s defense spending grew by 59 percent, and China’s tripled. This led to a double leap forward: a transformation of these countries’ armed forces and their acquisition of new weapons systems.

If one compares Europe’s defense spending with that of the United States, the contrast is also large. By the end of the Cold War, in 1991, defense expenditures in European countries represented almost 34 percent of NATO’s total, with the United States and Canada covering the remaining 66 percent. Since then, the share of NATO’s security burden shouldered by European countries has fallen to 21 percent.

Many observers, including some in government circles on both sides of the Atlantic, argue that the biggest security challenge facing the West is rising debt levels in Europe and the United States. They have a fair point; after all, there can be no military might without money. Others even argue that there is little need to worry if European nations invest less in defense, since this reflects a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. But these arguments fail to consider three important facts.

First, military might still matters in twenty-first-century geopolitics. The security challenges facing Europe include conflicts in its neighborhood, such as in Libya; terrorism from failed states further away; and emerging threats such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and cyberwarfare. What defines these threats is both their diversity and their unpredictability. Investing in homeland security and retrenching will not be enough to counter them.

Nor will it be enough to rely only on soft power. Nobody is advocating a return
to nineteenth-century gunboat diplomacy, but in an unpredictable environment, hard power can enable peace. Just as the presence of a police officer may deter a burglar, the projection of military power can help prevent and, in extreme cases, diminish threats, as well as ultimately open the way for political solutions. Events in Libya have underlined that although a military approach cannot solve a conflict on its own, it is a necessary tool in a wider political effort. Europe needs to build a strong continuum of hard and soft power so that it can respond to the full spectrum of crises and threats.

Second, new economic and military powers, such as Brazil, China, and India, are entering the field. It would be wrong to see their presence simply as a challenge to the West or to assume that they pose a military threat to NATO. After all, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty benefits everyone. Those countries have little interest in overthrowing the global system on which their prosperity was built. Instead, Europe should welcome what these nations can offer to international security in terms of military capabilities.

If Europe is creating a security gap, then these powers could, in theory, reduce this gap. Yet this is unlikely to happen because the interests of these powers and the interests of Western ones may not coincide, and it is not certain that emerging powers have the same approach to addressing security challenges. In the case of Libya, for instance, although Brazil, China, India, and Russia consciously stepped aside to allow the UN Security Council to act, they did not put their military might at the disposal of the coalition that emerged. (China did dispatch a military vessel and planes to the region, but only to help evacuate its citizens.) The episode serves as a reminder that emerging powers’ interests will not necessarily coincide with Europe’s. The paradox, then, is that the global order enjoys more stakeholders than ever before and yet it has very few guarantors. Europe is still one of them, but for how long?

Third, the transatlantic partnership remains the main engine of global security. The partnership has been successful in sharing common goals and values, while boasting interoperable and rapidly deployable forces. But the United States is facing its own budgetary challenges, and as Libya has shown, Washington will not always take the lead when it comes to power projection. The United States will demand with an even stronger voice that Europeans assume their responsibilities in preserving order, especially in Europe’s periphery. But if European defense spending cuts continue, Europe’s ability to be a stabilizing force even in its neighborhood will rapidly disappear. This, in turn, risks turning the United States away from Europe.

SMARTER DEFENSE

The obvious solution to all these problems would be for Europe to spend more on defense. In light of the unfolding events in the Middle East, a debate on whether to reverse the decline in defense spending has begun in several European capitals. But given the economic environment in Europe, it is highly unlikely that governments there will make any significant changes. Thus, the way forward lies not in spending more but in spending better—by pursuing multinational approaches, making the transatlantic compact more strategically oriented, and working with emerging powers to manage the effects of the globalization of security.
First of all, Europe should pursue a “smart defense” approach. Smart defense is about building security for less money by working together and being more flexible. This requires identifying those areas in which NATO allies need to keep investing. The operation in Libya has underlined the unpredictability of threats and the need to maintain a wide spectrum of military capabilities, both frontline and enabling ones. Keeping a deployable army, a powerful navy, and a strong air force costs money, however, and not all European countries can afford to have a bit of everything. So they should set their priorities on the basis of threats, cost-effectiveness, and performance—not budgetary considerations or prestige alone.

Smart defense also means encouraging multinational cooperation. As the price of military equipment continues to rise, European states acting alone may struggle to afford high-tech weapons systems such as the ones used in Libya. European nations should work in small clusters to combine their resources and build capabilities that can benefit the alliance as a whole. Here, NATO can act as a matchmaker, bringing nations together to identify what they can do jointly at a lower cost, more efficiently, and with less risk.

Second, European countries can help bridge the gap with the United States by increasing their contribution of two ingredients, deployable and sustainable capabilities, as well as mustering the political resolve to use them. To pair both ingredients, Europe and North America should strengthen their connections through an open and truly strategic...
dialogue, with both sides sitting around the same table to discuss issues of common concern. Promoting this dialogue has been one of my main priorities within NATO since the adoption of the alliance’s “strategic concept” at the Lisbon summit last November. But there is room for improvement. Particular efforts must be made to ensure that the two major Euro-Atlantic security providers, NATO and the EU, cooperate more closely. This will be essential, as both will have a role in helping states transitioning to more democratic systems. For instance, in the Middle East, both NATO and the EU could assist in reforming the security sectors of nascent and fragile democracies.

Third, Europe and the United States should work more closely with emerging powers. This is not going to be easy, so building confidence will be essential. The process can begin by fostering a mutually assured dialogue with these countries, which would help defuse crises, overcome disagreements, and clear up misperceptions. Working together could eventually lead to a common understanding of how to build twenty-first-century global security, which entails a sense of shared responsibility. This way, what too often seems like a zero-sum scenario can be turned into a win-win one.

NATO can make a major contribution to this new global security understanding. The alliance can build on the already extensive partnership network it has established and consult key emerging powers. It can continue to address common security challenges that transcend national borders. Of course, the UN Security Council must remain the overall source of legitimacy for international peace and stability. A more inclusive dialogue among the main security stakeholders, however, would help it prevent and manage crises.

The economic challenges that European nations face are immense, but that must not prevent them from seeing the wider strategic picture. Uncoordinated defense cuts could jeopardize the continent’s future security. Libya can act as a wake-up call, but this mission needs to be followed by deeds. Making European defense more coherent, strengthening transatlantic ties, and enhancing NATO’s connections with other global actors is the way to prevent the economic crisis from becoming a security crisis.©