Dr Julian Lindley-French is Professor of Military Operational Science at the Netherlands Defence Academy (NLDA) in Breda. An expert of international security issues, he has published many books, reports and articles in this field. In a February 2008 interview with Atlantisch Perspectief he discussed NATO’s mission in Afghanistan and argued that an ‘interoperability gap’ has opened up between NATO members. He discussed strengths and weaknesses of European militaries and stressed the need for new solidarity amongst NATO members in the face of future security challenges.

You once described the security debate in Europe as the ‘theatre of the absurd’: it focuses on what can be done rather than what needs to be done. “Europeans are only prepared to recognise as much threat as they can afford.” (NATO Review, July ’06)

Do you blame this on the political debate or rather on the lack of military equipment in many European countries, whereas – politically – they do want to go ahead?

It’s all about political leadership at the end of the day. It’s all about giving the security effort the proper investment across the civil-military spectrum to ensure it is relevant to meeting the challenges of the 21st century. In order to be effective, defence planning looks some 15 years ahead.

What has happened in Europe is that many countries got at the end of the Cold War and basically ‘gave up’. Yet while the operational tempo and the security environment become progressively more dangerous, we have not invested with that in mind. We have simply said: this is what we can afford given social security etcetera, and we ended up sending small militaries to dangerous places where they are daily under pressure. I see all the signs of organisational and operational stress as a consequence of that leadership gap. It seems that many European countries are not willing to sit down and carry out a proper assessment of the security environment, because that will lead to demands for increased expenditure on security and defence.

You often talk to high-ranking military officials. Do they indicate that they are willing to be deployed in the more dangerous environment (for instance Bundeswehr officers willing to operate in South Afghanistan) whereas politicians refuse to allow them, saying: “We can’t afford this politically”?

If the military could do the job, it would support its partners. Equally, it recognises that it faces severe constraints. Germany often gets reproached with hiding behind the political debate, but it regards other European countries as well, which simply say: First of all, we did not go to do a combat mission, but in Afghanistan the situation on the ground changed; second, we have not got the robust public opinion that will cope with casualties; and third, we have not got the military to do the job. All three are right – but the fact is that all three place an undue amount of pressure on certain Allies. The British now have about a hundred dead, the Canadians are suffering too, the Dutch, the Americans, the Australians as well. So what you see is a kind of ‘Anglo-Saxon-plus’ grouping emerge.

The political implications of this failure of our partners to support us is profound. And whilst NATO is not going to fall apart, it is clearly hurting it. People have to realise this. We will have
to restore the credibility of our solidarity, which has been damaged by the mission in Afghanistan. Solidarity – that's how an alliance functions. And when it is profoundly undermined, then it is very hard to trust each other.

Similarly, I have worked on the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) for many years now, and I have said repeatedly that there is no point talking about future ESDP operations in places like Sub-Sahara Africa of any robustness when solidarity collapses on the point of contact with danger. If that happens, we just re-nationalise our efforts – and in Britain we are close to doing that: we just do not trust our Allies sufficiently any more.

You refer to this in the European Parliament Study ‘Euro-interoperability’ (November '07): Europe is not only lagging behind the United States in the field of interoperability, but may even witness the ‘re-nationalisation’ of the armed effort. What do you foresee?

What could happen is that institutions are being relegated from being the frameworks for action to being enablers of coalitions of a few states. Informal groupings are becoming more and more important, such as the ‘ABCA’ (American, British, Canadian, Australian) group: this might form an interoperability council, probably involving the French. These groupings are increasingly bypassing institutions. So if we are going to place our soldiers to risk in dangerous places, we demand greater control over the operation. In both the European Union and NATO we do not get decisive support for action. As a consequence, we will step outside the institutional framework that not only prevents action, but also increases the risks to our soldiers.

The idea of the ‘coalition of the willing and the able’ is a fact of life. Look to ISAF Regional Command South: where it matters to the south, you have a coalition of the willing and able.

I do not think we are witnessing ‘the end of NATO’ or of ESDP – though a senior French general very recently said he did consider ESDP ‘dead’. The French too have profound concerns about a commonality of vision and effort. No institutional mechanism can operate efficiently in security and defence. Small operations not too far away and not too dangerous you can do reasonably well; extreme operations, crises as envisioned by NATO Article 5, you will do extremely badly. At present there is no alternative. But in the whole political area in between the two – where there is no automatic action as there is a lack of solidarity – it becomes very hard to organise effect on the basis of the entire institution – be it NATO or the EU.

This sounds very pessimistic, though. Others say: NATO just cannot lose in Afghanistan; it will not fall apart. Even the French – on the highest political level – indicate: NATO’s relevance to us might lead us to consider re-integration into its military structure. Are you referring exclusively to the Afghan mission or do you distinguish a larger trend?

‘Afghanistan’ is the end of the 1990s peacekeeping mindset. Afghanistan is the first strategic challenge to the West of the 21st century, where we are collectively engaged. Yet many of us have gone there with a 1990 peacekeeping mindset. But this is not a ‘Bosnia plus’.

I am pessimistic about the international security environment, but I am not about NATO. I am pessimistic about renewed great power competition, about the belt of instability across the world: the 21st century, just like the 20th, becomes progressively more ‘strategic’ again. NATO will consolidate; it is a question of how long it will take before many of the European countries will wake up to this. When they do, we will become cohesive again. The question for me is: will we engage in fundamental planning for the future, or will we only get together in response to a crisis that is so bad that we have no alternative but to reconsolidate?
The French understand this fundamental challenge, like the British do. Though not on the level of the Americans, both still have a global view and see the ‘big picture’. Many other European states simply have no strategic tradition and therefore find the whole idea of a strategic concept very hard. So what tends to happen is that everyone plans on an incremental basis: this is what we got, this is how much we can afford. Whereas what you need today is a radical strategic concept, where we look at the broader world and say: what is in our interest to do in the world over the next twenty to thirty years?

But the downside of an alliance is that everyone looks at the other. They say: Well, we can invest, but why don’t they?

That’s the point. If we all get a common vision, if we all say that we share the same strategic concept, if we all feel that the Alliance is about solidarity, then the proof of that is: investments in modern armed forces relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The British are spending 2.5 per cent of GDP, the average across Europe is about 1 per cent. The Americans are near 3 per cent.

Now look at what the Allies (particularly the Germans, Italians, and to some extent the French and the Spanish) in the north of Afghanistan are basically saying: It is OK for others to take the risks, but it is not OK for us. Ultimately, it is about the sharing of risks. We will have to move on with this – and I believe we will.

You have said that either Europeans increase their defence investments and “buy into the U.S. way of war”, or they collectively design a ‘European way of war’. What do these alternatives look like?

There are two profound differences between ‘Europe’ and the United States. One is: Americans tend to use armed forces earlier in the conflict cycle. Two is: they operate with a ‘combat specialisation approach’ to military effect.

A ‘European way of war’ would involve a very strong civil component: strong diplomacy and development; a strong comprehensive approach. The British are very ‘European’ in this: we pioneered the concept of the comprehensive approach. Also, the British and the French are very close on this issue; here, we instinctively agree with each other.

On the issue of the use of force: if we look at the history of the British army, it was an imperial policing force, not a combat specialisation force. For a European way of war to emerge, most Europeans would follow the present British model: not being the networked ‘super-warriors’ at the high-end of intensity, but of being networked multi-tasked forces. These European forces could do a whole range of tasks, from peacekeeping, policing up to pretty robust peacemaking. What they probably cannot do is the really highest level. Yet the American forces always have to relearn how to ‘do’ stabilisation because they are trained not to do it. The European way of war has many advantages over the American one. The two together are unbeatable.

Next to this, we have got to give both European and Alliance leaders political options. For instance: the flag you put on an operation in a complex environment these days is as important as the force itself. That is because it communicates a political identity: who you are and the way you deal with the operation. Take UNIFIL II in Southern Lebanon: basically, it is a European-led operation. You could not put NATO in the lead there because of the presence of Hezbollah and the involvement of Syria, but you could put the Europeans there. That is because it communicates a different set of messages of what we are trying to achieve and how.
The trouble is: we simply have not got enough deployable European forces. We get the situation that, according to RAND, by 2015 the British and the French alone will represent some 65 per cent of all of European NATO expenditures. We talk about a transatlantic gap; what I am witnessing more and more is an intra-European gap. You invest in relation to the effect you need to generate. But nobody is properly looking at the environment, at the ‘drivers’ of security, and saying: what is the effect we need to generate?

The Dutch are doing an incredible job with the amount of money they spend, but it is about the same level as the increase in UK defence spending over the next two years. You got a situation where Dutch defence spending would be about one eighth of UK defence spending by 2011, on a country with a population of a quarter the size: a ratio of two to one. What tends to happen is, all down the command chain, differences start to take place. The British spend about 21,000 dollar a year per soldier; the Dutch spend less than half of that. The Belgians spend about a fifth of that... Now the result is that you end up with an increasing interoperability gap between forces that simply cannot operate together because they have different levels of technology. Forget the Americans – they are vanished over the horizon. But it is happening within Europe, and this is a profound danger for the Alliance.

And it endangers the soldiers too.

It increases risk massively. Moreover, it increases risks to civilians in the areas where soldiers operate, as the latter have not got the awareness, the precision or the staying power. Given the smallness of the budgets, you see instead of a significant number of soldiers doing a significant number of jobs an ever smaller number of soldiers. That is because the cost of each soldier becomes increasingly great. And that is exactly what you see in South Afghanistan: a small numbers of soldiers, well trained but under pressure – day after day – because of their small numbers. The result is that they call in firepower early. And that actually defeats the very hearts and minds approach we need to have in Afghanistan to win.

You have said: we need highly deployable forces for power projection, as well as the capable forces that are interconnected, but along with that we need ‘critical mass’. Would you argue in favour of more ‘boots on the ground’?

Yes. We have what I would describe as a ‘capability-capacity crunch’. The costs of capability undermine capacity. That is: the technological advancement of each force comes at the expense of capacity, i.e. numbers, caused by the sheer cost of the modern soldier with his modern equipment. We have to solve this crunch, and we have to find a way of balancing our investment approach so that we are producing advanced militaries, but doing it in such a way that it does not come at the expense of a ‘critical mass of boots’.

Again, you see this in Afghanistan where, however advanced the individual soldier is, you do need to ‘cover ground’ – and to hold it. What we see there, time and time again, is the taking of ground by advanced soldiers and then losing it again because they have not got the numbers to sustain their presence. And then they hope that the Afghan National Army will somehow ‘do the job’ – knowing that it won’t. And they then have to go back – Musa Qala is already a classic example – to retake it! And even the Americans suffer this: the U.S. Army is about 485,000 men strong. It has gone down a great deal over the last 15 to 20 years. And in Iraq and elsewhere, you see that the Americans too suffer from this basic lack of critical mass for stabilisation operations.
Given strained defence budgets, would you prefer investments in high-tech equipment or in ‘boots on the ground’?

A balance of both. Defence planning and force planning is all about balance. What level of capabilities and capacity is required to generate sustained effect?

Now if the Alliance would work in the ideal way, you would get a ‘task sharing’ solution, whereby a few ‘high-end states’ (basically the Americans, the French, and the British, with some Dutch and German elements) would do NATO Response Force (NRF) type operations: straight in by forced entry to create the initial bridgehead, and be followed on by less capable forces, but – because they are cheaper – ones that are in greater number and do the stabilisation work. They would be followed on by some ‘gendarmes’ type of paramilitary forces that would carry out the transition from military to civil. This would be the logical force structure, comparable to what Hans Binnendijk and David Gompert have proposed for NATO: to establish a stabilisation and reconstruction force. Because of the lack of political solidarity, however, the ‘high-end’ countries are trying to use their small, forced entry forces to carry out everything across the entire task list. And that is where the lack of solidarity really starts to depreciate the force in the field.

But how to achieve an Alliance with both high-end forces and a stabilisation/reconstruction force in the present political environment? How to prepare the mindset of most member states’ leaders? Do we first need a major crisis again?

It comes down to leadership: it depends on leaders that have a bold vision, and who do not necessarily follow public opinion. Too often I hear in Continental Europe: We cannot do this, because public opinion does not allow it. But the larger public does not understand this issue automatically: it’s the job of leaders to explain to the public why it is necessary to invest in a strong security and defence future.

I think Germany will get there, it is a question of time. This country has come a long way since the end of the Cold War. One should not forget the sheer investment of Germany in European stability. It often is not given credit for that. Germany is the key to the future of NATO and the future of European security and defence policy. The only question is: will it get there quickly enough?

You do see it happening one step at a time: Germany recently decided to send a Quick Reaction Force to the north of Afghanistan to replace the Norwegian combat force next summer.

I have studied the history of the last two centuries at great length and I have to say: if you look at the history of European democracies it is always an amazing response to a disaster. Things became a disaster because we did not plan sufficiently in the first place.

So it is looking ahead with the vision, the courage, and the boldness to lead. And that is what the Alliance desperately needs right now, both at the Bucharest Summit as well as in Berlin (the 60th anniversary summit). The new Strategic Concept debate will reach the highest political level there. I think we will not have a new Strategic Concept in Berlin because the American president will only have been in power for three months. But we probably will have one at the end of 2009 or early 2010.

In a new Strategic Concept Article 5 will remain highly relevant. The principle of collective self-defence will be the cornerstone of a new security architecture. Look at what we face today: the threat of cyber attack, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and advanced missiles.
Coming back to initial entry forces: how do you see the relationship between the NATO Response Force and the EU Battle Groups?

They should be complementary. There are agreements over the rotation of forces through the NRF and the EUBG. But there is of course the politics of the relationship between the EU and NATO: the danger of it becoming a ‘frozen conflict’, as Secretary General De Hoop Scheffer put it. There are a whole range of political and bureaucratic reasons that prevent a good relationship, but I would say we need to ‘bang a few heads together’ and make it happen. I mean: it is a vital relationship.

The second reality is that the sheer intensity of operations of European forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and at the same time the small size of their forces, means that neither the NRF (which achieved Full Operating Capability once and then is no longer at that level) nor the EUBG, in my opinion, will ever be used for everything but the smallest operations. This is because the countries that are deploying their forces deploy them under national command and then try to operate together. We plan all these interoperability mechanisms, but when it comes to operations all you see is national commands with national stovepipes. So we carry out all this wonderful planning, but the moment there is a crisis we go back to national formations under national commands. We rotate our forces through NRF and EUBG while we do not use those forces. We should rather say: We have a crisis coming up, we now deploy the BG that may include our forces. At present it is more of a ‘paper commitment’ in a peacetime environment falling apart the moment you want to use it because there is no solidarity on the point of contact with danger.

You’re pessimistic again.

Well, if we could get it to work… The sheer economies of scale, and the leveraging and multiplication of effect would be apparent. But because of the institutionalised mechanisms we do not trust them to work. We got into a fragmented, national set of efforts and we punch far beneath our collective weight.

Prof. Lindley-French’s comments are personal and do not reflect the views of any institution or government.