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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

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EU Military Cooperation and National Defense

By Daniel Keohane

Since its formal birth in 1999, most defense experts have noted EU military cooperation more for its absence than its presence on the international stage. During 2017, however, EU governments and institutions invested much time and energy in efforts to re-energize EU military cooperation. This is partly because of the U.K.'s impending departure from the EU, which has changed political calculations. It is also because of strategic necessity: Europeans increasingly understand that they should take more responsibility for their own security.

But EU military cooperation should be understood more in the context of its utility for national defense policies across Europe, and less through its relationship with NATO or its role in European integration. In particular, the positions of France, Germany, Italy, and Poland will be crucial for the future success of EU military efforts. If the EU helps its governments to better spend their defense budgets and deepen their military cooperation, NATO will benefit too, as 21 countries will remain members of both the union and the Alliance. However, that will require EU governments to capitalize on the convergences and manage the divergences of their disparate national defense policies.

Since the U.K.'s vote to leave the EU in June 2016, a plethora of new initiatives to bolster EU military cooperation have emerged. There is some political opportunism at play here. For one, the other 27 EU governments are keen to display some unity. They also want to show that the EU remains relevant for their citizens, especially for their security.

But there is also an increasing awareness among EU governments that they sometimes need to fend for themselves. EU governments want NATO — meaning the United States — to continue to deter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. But the migrant crisis to the south of Europe has resulted in the EU sending military ships to Mediterranean waters to tackle people smuggling, while the EU has also stemmed piracy on the waters off Somalia, and is helping Sahel countries like Mali to counter terrorism.

EU Military Cooperation: Another Framework for National Governments

The EU, like NATO, is encouraging greater European military cooperation, not only to help avoid excessive fragmentation or duplication of European capability efforts, but also to coordinate and support disparate national policies. However, European military cooperation is mainly driven by the merging of national defense policies in various different ways rather than by the efforts of European (or transatlantic) institutions. This represents a potential for greater convergence or divergence of national policies that will determine the future success or failure of European military cooperation.

European governments are increasingly picking and choosing which forms of military cooperation they wish to pursue, depending on the capability project or operation at hand. Sometimes they act through the EU and/or NATO, but almost all European governments are using other formats as well, whether regional, bilateral, or ad hoc coalitions of the willing. The combination of more complex security crises and reduced resources has meant that European governments are more focused on their core national interests than before, and both are more targeted and flexible on how they wish to cooperate.

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As shown during the 2016 EU referendum debate in the U.K., there is a lot of confusion over what EU defense policy is and what it is not. Catch-all phrases such as "European army" can easily be misunderstood, and do not reflect the reality of what EU defense policy is about. Part of the reason for this confusion is that EU defense policy is not a defense policy, let alone a plan to create an army under the centralized control of the EU institutions in Brussels. The EU is also not a military alliance like NATO that defends territory from attack by external states. Instead, what is commonly called "EU defense policy" is the military component of EU security policies.

The EU's military efforts are mainly focused on international security beyond the EU's borders, and are carried out through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework, which is housed within the EU's foreign policy structures — alongside efforts to help EU governments spend their defense monies more effectively. It is more accurate to refer to EU "military policy" or "military cooperation" than EU "defense policy."

NATO is the collective defense bedrock for most EU governments, and this will not change in the face of Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. But the Atlantic Alliance cannot be everywhere, and Europeans increasingly have to cope with some security challenges by themselves, without help from the United States. Acting through the EU, therefore, is a useful strategic option for EU member states.

In addition, it is important to remember that national governments are in charge of EU military policies, and that those policies are voluntary. National armed forces will remain national, and EU governments decide their own defense budgets, whether or not they wish to cooperate with others and how, and whether or not they wish to participate in EU operations. The European Commission is trying to play a stronger supporting role to those intergovernmental EU policies, having developed a European Defence Fund that will offer financial incentives for cooperation projects, and agreeing that some of its vast civil scientific research projects should have military applications to supplement feeble national defense research and technology spending.

But it is the intergovernmental initiatives that matter most politically, for example the use of a mechanism in the EU treaties that would allow a smaller group of countries cooperate more closely on military matters. This mechanism, known as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), was formally launched in mid-December 2017. In principle the PESCO clause makes a lot of sense. Those member states that meet a set of capability-based entry criteria can choose to cooperate more closely after securing a majority vote. Military capabilities and ambitions vary widely among the member states. So the EU could rely on a smaller group of the most willing and best-prepared countries to run its more demanding military missions.

The nub of the PESCO debate revolved around quality versus quantity, with France preferring the former and Germany the latter. A focus on military quality would mean that some member states would be ex-

cluded. Politically this would be a counter-intuitive move, when 27 EU governments are trying to maintain their unity and solidarity following the British decision to leave the EU. Indeed 25 out of the remaining 27 EU governments are participating in PESCO (Malta has not yet joined, and Denmark does not participate in EU military cooperation). However, emphasizing quantity, involving almost all EU governments in PESCO, shows that the entry criteria are so easy as to offer no obvious new military value beyond what member states are already providing. And it has become a cliché to observe that Europeans greatly need to up their military game. PESCO was originally conceived in the early 2000s as a mechanism to create a military vanguard for the EU (led by France and the U.K.). However, since almost all EU governments will now participate, the PESCO grouping is no longer a vanguard.

France and Germany: Alliance or Army?

In a major speech on Europe's future in September 2017,[1] French President Macron outlined a number of proposals for EU military cooperation. His main military objective is enabling Europeans to act autonomously when needed, complementing NATO's territorial defense role with a European capacity to intervene abroad, particularly to the South of Europe (known as the European Intervention Initiative). Macron had three headline proposals: establishing "a common intervention force, a common defense budget and a common doctrine for action." Macron's proposals for a common military force and defense budget are likely to generate more headlines than his idea of a shared military doctrine. This is because they sound like the European army idea so beloved of some federalist politicians (and so loathed by some Euroskeptics).

In fact, his proposals are more akin in spirit to building a de facto military alliance from the bottom-up, which would include many forms of intergovernmental military cooperation, than establishing a top-down federal EU army directed by the institutions in Brussels. Macron wants to supplement the instinctive Atlanticism of most EU governments on military matters by strengthening their European intuition.

Moreover, the new French defense white book,[2] published since Marcon's Sorbonne speech, suggests that not all aspects of this intervention initiative have to be carried out through the EU. The Eurocorps, a multinational force based at Strasbourg, for example, is available to the EU and/or NATO, but it is not an EU force. While much of the current focus in Germany is on developing EU processes for military cooperation, France is more interested in effective policies over particular frameworks — whether through the EU, NATO, or ad hoc arrangements. However, developing an effective shared military doctrine could prove much more difficult than establishing a joint force or common budget. For one, an effective military doctrine should help armed forces to plan, train, and operate together, drawing on an assessment of threats and capabilities. Ideally, military doctrines orient armed forces for successfully coping with future contingencies — no small task.

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For another, developing a national doctrine involves a host of actors, from ministries and armed forces. Combining the disparate perspectives of EU governments is even more challenging. Because of their very different strategic cultures, the danger is that EU governments would produce a dysfunctional doctrine in practice. For instance, the glaring gap between French and German attitudes to military interventions abroad is well known. In addition, in contrast to

1 Emmanuel Macron, "Intiative pour l'Europe," Speech at Sorbonne, Paris, September 26 2017.

2 French Ministry of Defense, "Strategic Review of Defense and National Security," October 2017.

many German politicians, no French president would call for a "European army" (with its federalist overtones). France prefers a strong *Europe de la défense*, meaning a full-blown intergovernmental EU military alliance — which France would lead.

The central strategic importance of NATO for Germany is strongly emphasized in the 2016 German security white paper,[3] which says that "only together with the United States can Europe effectively defend itself against the threats of the 21st century and guarantee a credible form of deterrence. NATO remains the anchor and main framework of action for German security and defense policy." That German white paper also says that EU members should aim to create a "European Security and Defense Union" in the long term. However, it is not entirely clear what the implications of such an eventual European defense union would be in practice. For example, would it mean greater military integration under the control of national governments or ultimately via the Brussels-based EU institutions?

In sum, there are some major differences in strategic culture between Berlin and Paris. For one, France, which is a nuclear-armed permanent member of the UN Security Council, has a special sense of responsibility for global security, and is prepared to initiate international military interventions if necessary. Germany, in contrast, will only react in coalition with others, and remains much more reluctant than France to deploy robust military force abroad. Even though militarily Germany is doing more — spending more and cooperating more compared to before — the domestic political constraints on German defense policy remain considerable.[4]

Moreover, Berlin and Paris do not necessarily agree on the precise meaning of concepts they have both signed up to in EU documents — such as "strategic autonomy" — or even the end goal of EU defense policy. German calls for a "European Defense Union" or "European army" in the long term give the impression that EU defense is primarily a political integration project for some in Berlin. The French are more interested in a stronger intergovernmental EU defense policy today than a symbolic integration project for the future, since Paris perceives acting militarily through the EU as an important option for those times when the United States does not want to intervene in crises in and around Europe. Because of their different strategic cultures, therefore, France and Germany may struggle to develop a more active EU defense policy more than their proposals would suggest.

Italy and Poland: Comparing Frontline States

It is interesting to compare Polish and Italian national defense policies because they are both frontline states for EU–NATO security, and represent the two main operational priorities in European military cooperation: defending NATO territory in Eastern Europe, and intervening to stabilize conflict-racked countries south of the EU.

Italy received two thirds of migrants and refugees coming across the Mediterranean into the EU from January to November 2017 — over 117,000 people, according to the International Organization for Migration.[5] As Elisabeth Braw of the Atlantic Council has noted, this has placed considerable strain on the Italian coast guard and navy, which rescued around 25,000 migrants between January and June 2017.[6]

Poland worries greatly about the military threat from Russia, following Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent warfighting in eastern Ukraine. A year ago, Russia deployed Iskander-M ballistic missiles (nuclear-capable rockets with a

3 German Ministry of Defense, "White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr," July 2016.

4 Daniel Keohane, "Constrained Leadership: Germany's New Defense Policy," CSS Analyses in Security Policy, No. 201, December 2016.

5 International Organization for Migration, "Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean: Compilation of Available Data and Information," November 2017.

6 Elisabeth Braw, "Europe's Military Maestros: Italy," Politico Europe, August, 23, 2017.

range up to 500 kilometers) to Kaliningrad,[7] its Baltic exclave situated between Poland and Lithuania. Part of the joint Russia–Belarusian "Zapad" military exercise in September 2017 took place in Kaliningrad, as well as in Poland's neighbor Belarus. Understandably, the Polish and Italian defense policies must prioritize either defensive capabilities or an interventionist stance, partly because, with relatively limited resources, they must prioritize. By comparison, NATO estimated that the U.K. spent $55 billion, France $44 billion, and Germany $43 billion for defense in 2017. In contrast, Italy spent $22.5 billion and Poland $10 billion.[8]

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The 2015 Italian white paper on defense,[9] therefore, is very clear on what Italy's strategic and operational priorities should be. In particular, the "Euro-Mediterranean" region is highlighted as the primary geo-strategic focus for Italy. This region is conceived in broad terms, covering the EU, the Balkans, the Maghreb, the Middle East, and the Black Sea. But it is clear that Italy, which had previously sent troops as far afield as NATO's mission in Afghanistan, will now primarily worry about its immediate neighborhood. This is probably not surprising, given the turbulence that has affected some of these regions in recent years, especially North Africa and the Middle East. Turmoil in Libya, for example, has greatly contributed to the large numbers of migrants being smuggled across the Mediterranean to Italy. Interestingly, Italy not only intends to contribute to international coalitions (whether NATO, the UN, or the EU) in this Euro-Mediterranean space. It is also prepared to lead high-intensity, full-spectrum crisis management missions across this region. In other words, even if the geostrategic priorities of Italian defense policy are more narrowly defined than those of other large European powers, its external operational ambitions remain relatively robust. Even though Italian defense spending is equivalent to only 1.1 percent of its GDP, just over half of NATO's much-trumpeted headline goal, Italy is one of Europe's biggest contributors to international operations. The Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome says that Italy sent over 6,000 armed forces personnel to international missions and operations during 2016.[10] This is almost double Germany's number, which deployed roughly 3,300 during 2016, according to the German defense ombudsman.[11] The bulk of those Italian soldiers operated across Africa and the Middle East, reflecting the priorities set out in the 2015 Italian defense white paper.

Poland's geo-strategic and operational approach contrasts quite markedly from Italy's. For one, Poland is primarily geographically focused on Eastern Europe, particularly the military threat from Russia. Furthermore, its operational priority is to improve both its national defensive efforts and those of NATO, rather than contributing to robust external missions. Poland, for example, did not participate in NATO's air bombing campaign in Libya in 2011. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, following the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, strongly reinforced a perception in Poland that Warsaw must invest more in its national defense, including through NATO. The 2017 Polish Defense Concept, a strategic review published in May, pointedly states that "the number one priority was the necessity of adequately preparing Poland to defend its own territory."[12] The first threat and chal-

7 Sergei Sukhankin, "Kaliningrad: From Boomtown to Battle-Station," European Council on Foreign Relations, March 27, 2017.

8 NATO Communique, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)," June 29, 2017.

9 Italian Ministry of Defense, "White Paper for International Security and Defence," July 2015.

10 Paola Sartori and Giovanni Finarelli Baldassarre, "Bilanci E Industria Della Difesa," Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 2017.

11 German Bundestag, "Information from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces — Annual Report 2016 (58th Edition)," January 24, 2017.

12 Polish Ministry of Defense, "The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland," May 2017.

lenge listed in the concept paper is the "aggressive policy of the Russian Federation," followed by an "unstable neighborhood on NATO's Eastern Flank."

As a percentage of GDP, Poland spends almost twice as much as Italy on defense. Moreover, Polish President Andrzej Duda signed a law in October 2017 committing Poland to spend an impressive 2.5 percent of GDP on defense by 2030.[13] The same law also includes a plan to increase Poland's armed forces from the current 100,000 personnel to 200,000. Some 50,000 of those will belong to a new voluntary "Territorial Defense Force." Both Poland and Italy say that they have robust military intentions, whether to defend national territory or to contribute to international interventions. Even so, both want help from their allies, whether for countering Russian missiles or in coping with cross-Mediterranean migrants.

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Traditionally, Italy has been strongly committed both to NATO solidarity and to European integration. Working through the EU, however, is becoming increasingly important for Rome, for carrying out external operations. For example, at a summit in Brussels in October 2017 Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni asked other EU governments to help more with stemming migrants, including sending a mission to police Niger's border with Libya, on top of current EU efforts such as naval operations in the Mediterranean. In addition, Italy is prepared to make proposals on EU military cooperation. Rome, for instance, proposed during summer 2016 that Europeans create a multinational military force that would be available to the EU, NATO, and the UN. Italy sees no real or potential contradiction between its firm commitment to NATO and its wholehearted support for deeper EU military cooperation.

The Polish government has long called for stronger NATO defenses, and it was greatly reassured by U.S. President Trump's endorsement of NATO's mutual defense commitment in Warsaw in July 2017. However, Polish enthusiasm for military cooperation through NATO in recent years has not always translated into strong support for complementary efforts through the EU. After some hesitation in Warsaw, Poland only indicated in November 2017 that it would participate in the EU's PESCO initiative.[14] The 2017 Polish defense concept puts this in clear terms: "All EU actions in the security domain should complement and enrich NATO operations in a non-competitive manner." Moreover, in the paper, that observation is preceded by a statement on the central importance of NATO for Poland, "which is key to our policy of collective defense."

Conclusion

The new initiatives on EU military cooperation may generate enough political momentum to keep EU defense high on national agendas. Plus, the remaining 27 EU governments can no longer blame the U.K. for any lack of progress. There have been worries in London and Washington that some EU initiatives might undermine NATO. But if the EU helps its governments to better spend their defense budgets and deepen their military cooperation, NATO will benefit too, as 21 countries will remain members of both the union and the Alliance. However, that will require EU governments to capitalize on the convergences and manage the divergences of their disparate national defense policies.

In addition, to ensure that EU plans do add value

13 Damien Sharkov, "Fearing Russia, Poland Boosts Army by 50 Percent," Newsweek, October 24, 2017.

14 Radio Poland, "Poland to Join EU's PESCO Defense Initiative: Government Spokesman," November 10, 2017.

will require much more buy-in from national defense ministries. There is a structural quirk at the core of the current EU decision-making system. National foreign ministries currently lead EU military cooperation efforts, not national defense ministries. This reduces the incentives for defense ministries to embrace EU plans, which include sound but challenging ideas like coordinating national defense planning cycles. A formal EU defense council with equivalent status to the foreign ministers' council would encourage peer group pressure among defense ministers, and more generally help to educate national defense ministries in the workings of the EU. Furthermore, it is understandable that some European politicians have used U.S. President Trump's heretofore-wavering rhetorical backing for NATO to garner support for deepening EU military cooperation, which is welcome if it results in Europeans taking more responsibility for their own security. However, taking more responsibility is not the same thing as "strategic autonomy," and few European governments seem serious about reducing their military dependence on the United States.

It would be helpful, therefore, for EU officials to better define "strategic autonomy" — a concept contained in the EU's 2016 Global Strategy[15] — as it is easy to characterize it as a threat to NATO, which it is not. In principle, EU military operations are deployed to enforce international law beyond the EU's borders, and in practice when the United States has been unwilling or unable to do so. The EU institutions are trying to create a system to help member states cooperate more closely on military matters: essentially spending sparse defense euros more efficiently and operating together externally if needed. But that is all.

15 European External Action Service, "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe — A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy," June 2016.

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