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of the United States
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

Security and Defense Policy

2017 | No.22

WILL EUROPE'S DEFENSE MOMENTUM LEAD TO ANYTHING?

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SUMMARY:

According to Federica Mogherini, more has happened in ten months than in ten years for European defense. The cultural change in Brussels is indeed undeniable, as several concrete instruments have been recently delivered to create an incentive for member states to cooperate, and many taboos about defense have been lifted. Besides, EU optimism is on the rise following the election of Emmanuel Macron and the renewed hope of a strong Franco-German leadership. However, the institutional momentum should not overshadow the political and strategic visions that continue to divide European powers on the concrete use of these new tools and the final purposes of European defense. Managing expectations will be crucial in the short term, as nation-states still have to accept difficult compromises and tradeoffs in order to implement this ambitious agenda.

The ideas presented in this article are partly based on a workshop on European defense organized in June 2017 by GMF in partnership with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Council on Foreign Relations. The authors would like to thank the participants for their input and support in this research process.

The debates around European defense run in cycles. Every decade has its “moment” when a convergence of strategic interests and political will creates a window of opportunity to deepen defense and security cooperation among European partners, and even further the integration of defense policies under the EU umbrella. These convergences have been mainly crisis-driven; the EU’s first attempt to frame a global strategy occurred at a time of deep divisions among member states in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War. It was therefore an opportunity to bring them back together around a shared security document.¹ The current situation is undoubtedly such a crisis moment, and expectations are high that in the coming months concrete progress can be achieved.

Two different dynamics are at play here: insecurity and enthusiasm. A general feeling of uncertainty about the future of the European project has spread since the Brexit vote, while simultaneously European security has been shaken by external factors such as terrorist attacks, the election of Donald Trump, and the ongoing crises in the Eastern and Southern neighborhoods. At the same time, a renewed enthusiasm for European cooperation has been fostered by the Macron election in France and the prospect of a potential relaunch of the Franco–German couple as the engine of European integration. With these complex sentiments of deep fragility on the one hand and regained optimism in key European capitals on the other, the time seems ripe to think ambitiously about Europe’s answers to current and future security challenges.

In parallel to political evolutions, the material situation has also improved, allowing for more concrete policy discussions about defense cooperation. Since 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, the defense budgets of most EU member states have stopped shrinking and have even begun increasing,² while 22 EU states, also members of NATO, have committed to “aim to move toward” spending 2 percent of their GDP on defense.³ In total, the combined defense budgets of EU member states reached approximately \$230 billion in

1 The European Security Strategy (ESS), adopted by the European Council on December 12–13, 2003, provides the conceptual framework for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including what would later become the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

2 In six cases (Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, and Slovenia), defense spending has continued to fall, but in all these countries the political leadership has been clear that they would aim to reverse the current trend. Hans-Peter Bartels, Anna Maria Kellner and Uwe Optenhögel, *Strategic Autonomy and the Defence of Europe*, Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., 2017, p. 25.

3 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Wales Summit Declaration*, September 5, 2014.

2016;⁴ this is more than three times the Russian annual defense budget and also higher than Chinese defense spending.⁵ While this spending positions the EU as an important military power in the world, it now needs to gain credibility and ingenuity to use its resources in a productive manner.

Although the actual use of the resources needs to be improved dramatically, the current budgetary trend sends a positive signal for those willing to ensure that Europe can assume more security responsibilities. In addition, the European Commission has delivered new instruments and guidance to develop European defense cooperation. The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) released in June 2016 and the different elements of the 2016-2017 EU Security and Defense Package are meant to give concrete tools for willing European member states to coordinate and integrate their defense efforts.

Yet, despite the political optimism and the constructive material dynamics, we cannot overlook the obstacles on the way to European defense. European partners do not necessarily share a common strategic vision, nor do they prefer the same methods to achieve their goals. Indeed, it is unclear to whether the divergences that blocked previous European defense moments will be overcome this time. Indeed, the question is whether this defense momentum will remain a temporary euphoria or a sustainable “cultural change in Brussels”⁶ and political willingness of EU member states to commit to a closer and more efficient defense and security union.

EU: Facilitator or Actor?

The fragmentation, or even complete collapse, of the European Union has been repeatedly predicted in recent years, not least due to the threat of anti-European populist parties gaining influence in numerous countries. It seems worth noting, however, that EU member states have proven more committed to European unity and solidarity than many expected. The sanctions toward Russia and the official support to the Minsk process have been sustained despite serious divergence and heated debates among and within European countries. Similarly, the British vote

4 See different estimates in the EUISS Yearbook of European Security, 2017, p. 96.

5 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Military Expenditure by Country*, 2015.

6 Sylvie Goulard, Interview, *Le Figaro*, June 8, 2017.

to leave the EU has not widened European divisions, but rather revealed the resilience of the European project as member states have — so far — shown clear signs of cohesion. New crises may well damage policy coordination, but the desire of many European countries to work together to avoid further weakening of the European project cannot be disputed.

European defense cooperation too can rely on a sense of unity. Europe's decision-makers agree that Europeans need to do more on defense and security matters, which implies at least a better coordination of defense policy and (in most quarters) an increase in defense spending at large. Angela Merkel's post G7 speech may have been controversial at the transatlantic level, but her call for more European responsibility as "the times when we could completely rely on others are, to an extent, over," is the result of a series of wake-up calls since the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea. In fact, her declaration echoed what French president Hollande had said about eight months earlier in October 2016: there are European countries "that think the United States will always be there to protect them . . . [but] if they don't defend themselves they will no longer be defended," adding that "the United States no longer has the same idea of defense protection . . . Europeans must realize that . . . they must also be a political power with a defense capability."⁷

Whether it was pushed by U.S. pressure for more burden-sharing with European allies or from the political necessity to make Europe able to "defend and protect its citizens,"⁸ political willingness for more robust European defense cooperation is now constantly reaffirmed. But will European member states, in particular those most exposed to the Russian threat, trust the EU as they trust the U.S. hard power? As Polish diplomats like to remind their French counterparts, if the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. had not taken the lead

in implementing the so-called reassurance measures in the East, Germany and Lithuania would be the only two remaining committed countries.

Translating this momentum into policy implementation, naturally, is where the difficulties start. The question of the long-term end goal of European defense remains open. Indeed, if short-term objectives are relatively consensual, the "end result" of European defense cooperation and integration is much more contentious. Both in terms of format and substance, key European countries do not necessarily mean the same thing when they talk about security and defense.

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The spectrum of European defense long-term objectives spreads from the minimalist current CSDP missions requiring very little political commitment to a maximalist European defense that would aim to guarantee security for all member states. Different scenarios have fostered different national fears, and it is currently impossible to know

where the cursor will be put. The U.K. has — fairly or not — been traditionally accused of preventing all initiatives of European defense integration from moving forward; with Brexit, EU defense proponents do not have this excuse anymore and the tough questions have to be addressed.⁹ Although concrete and gradual improvements can indeed be achieved without necessarily agreeing on the final goals, the issue of the end goal continues to produce a red herring that derails constructive debates on European defense cooperation. The idea of a European army, politically extremely toxic in France and many other countries, is an outstanding example of this issue. Still advocated by some decision-makers — notably in Germany — as an integration project and supporting the concept of "leading from the center," the European army is not a reality in the short or middle term. Its realization is so far-fetched given the current political divisions and institutional context of the EU that its evocation is simply irrelevant for the debate on European defense. France's former Prime Minister Manuel Valls famously replied to the idea of a European army in 2015: "The European army already exists: c'est la France!" in reference to French deployments in Mali and in the Sahel. Indeed, from a French perspective, there are 28

⁷ President François Hollande, Speech, Celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Jacques Delors Institute, Paris, October 6, 2016.

⁸ The expression, often repeated in Emmanuel Macron's speeches since the election, is one of the core commitments of the new French president regarding its European policy.

⁹ For more details on the implications of Brexit for European defense, see Keohane, Daniel et al, "Strategic Trends", CSS, 2017.

EU member states, but only a very few can pretend to have the necessary capabilities and — even more importantly — the strategic culture to project power and defend European interests abroad.

The concept of European strategic autonomy, used in the Commission's EUGS, is another point of divergence as to what European defense cooperation is meant to achieve. The definition of the idea of autonomy, with all its implications in terms of capabilities, industries, budgets, and strategic planning, can become highly controversial if it is perceived as leading to duplication — or worse, an eventual substitution — of NATO structures. While all European NATO countries would agree that the Alliance remains the only credible security guarantor, and that Article 5 is the final tool of deterrence, the rest of the issues around EU-NATO sharing of responsibilities remain unresolved. Following Brexit, countries such as Poland could replace the U.K. and take the lead in rejecting any progress in European defense that could potentially redefine NATO's role in Europe's security.

The United States has also, in its own way, contributed to this tension. Washington has for a long time pushed Europeans to do more and assume more responsibilities; Donald Trump's position is, in its content, in continuity with Barack Obama's free-riders comments in *The Atlantic*¹⁰ and Robert Gates' 2011 speech. But the development of European capabilities is supported as a way to better balance transatlantic burden-sharing and eventually to deploy troops in areas where the U.S. and/or NATO do not want to intervene. This conception differs from a comprehensive "European Strategic Autonomy" that would make the EU less reliant on U.S. capabilities within or outside of NATO. Thus, a substantial difficulty on the path to autonomy is that there is no agreement on the goal. It is not clear if EU members can find a vision of autonomy that they all agree with. Furthermore, even if they do, real progress toward strategic autonomy cannot be achieved by improving good practice alone. A definition of European interests and priorities is a necessity. EU member states should have a shared view of the severity of each threat, its proximity, and their response — all of which is currently missing.

10 Goldberg, Jeffrey, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

Finally, defining the level of ambition for European defense also requires agreeing on the nature of the operations that should be coordinated via EU instruments. There again different visions compete as some Europeans would like the EU to focus primarily on civilian and training missions, whereas others aim for a more military approach. The traditional division of labor between NATO — in charge of defense and deterrence — and the EU — using its soft and economic power to achieve its goals — may be recalibrated with a more ambitious EU on defense and security matters. How the EU can complement NATO is the key question, especially as NATO's priorities are also evolving, especially under the influence of Trump's counterterrorism agenda. For the EU, what is at stake is to define the security space it can take ownership of, between NATO's collective defense mission and current limited military operations like EUTM RCA.¹¹ An EU-led Barkhane type¹² of operation seems far-fetched in the current context, but should it constitute a potential model for the future of European defense? With NATO as the main actor of collective defense, the EU may be condemned to remain a facilitator of security. This question is particularly crucial for the French-German couple, as the use of force in out-of-area operations remains taboo for an important part of the German population, while cooperation on combat missions is an explicit request from France. The debate around the willingness to employ military force should therefore not be overlooked. The reconciliation of different strategic cultures will take time, but the use of the tools will be determined by the member states' ability to resolve these political issues.

Common Instruments, Different Purposes?

EU institutions, and in particular the Commission, have been very active in recent years to help create new momentum for European defense integration.

11 The EU Training Mission in the Central African Republic, launched in July 2016, is designed "to contribute to the Defence Sector Reform in the CAR within the Central African Security Sector Reform process coordinated by MINUSCA." Its mandate terminates in September 2018 and it involves around 150 people. See Council Decision (CFSP) 2016/610 of April 19, 2016 on a EU CSDP Military Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA), Article 1.

12 Launched by France in August 2014, the Barkhane Operation involves 3500 soldiers and aims at directly accompanying and helping the military forces of the countries of the Sahel region in the fight against terrorist groups.

In less than a year, a series of concrete instruments and strategic frameworks have been delivered so that cooperation could be enhanced.¹³

At the strategic level, the EUGS published in June 2016 constitutes an important step to design common objectives of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). This strategy replaces the previous document adopted by the European Council in December 2003. With the EUGS, the EU aimed to set a realistic level of ambitions as an actor of international security. The “principled pragmatism” of the Strategy gives priority to Europe’s security with an explicit military component, while the objectives of democratization of the neighborhoods are put on the backburner.¹⁴ This shift in the European paradigm on security was a clear signal to the member states that the Commission would support a more ambitious agenda on defense and security issues, which was confirmed by the Implementation Plan on Security and Defense of November 2016. In March 2017, the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker released a White Paper aiming at “mapping out the drivers of change in the next decade and presents a range of scenarios for how Europe could evolve by 2025.”¹⁵ In five more or less ambitious scenarios, the Commission presents its ideas for the debate on the future of the EU — not only in the defense and security realm — without offering clear guidance on the way to meet the different targets. Interestingly, the scenarios do not present a black or white picture of the years to come, but highlight the grey areas for European cooperation, where integration and fragmentation can be articulated at the same time. Finally, the EU-NATO joint declaration after the 2016 Warsaw Summit was also meant to contribute to the development of this strategic framework for European defense.

In parallel, different initiatives and structures have been imagined and realized — such as the European Defense Fund (EDF), the Coordinated Annual Review

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on Defence (CARD), and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) — since 2016 as part of the implementation of the EUGS. This development is one of the key reasons for the current euphoria around European defense; the EU is dedicated to provide tools to financially support defense research and development projects (EDF), to better coordinate national defense plans (CARD), and to help the management of European military operations (MPCC). The latter, although a rather modest structure and not the operational headquarters some countries could have hoped for, marks the end of a taboo as the EU now accepts the idea of having a specific command structure for some military operations.¹⁶

This institutional context is undeniably positive for a deepening of European defense cooperation. The frameworks and structures presented by Brussels constitute an imperfect but tangible basis on which discussions can be engaged, and reverses a trend in which the “mission determined the coalition,” mostly outside of the EU framework. The next step, however, concerns the European member states, as it is now at the political level in the main European capitals that the concrete use of these instruments will be decided.

The EDF, among others, provides an incentive for member states to invest in cooperation through the EU rather than continuing to only rely on ad hoc cooperation and NATO, but divergent national visions could put an end to this momentum. It represents an historic push by the EU into a new phase of cooperation on military and security policy, including on procurement of weapons and new technologies, as it is the first time that the EU budget will be directly used to buy military equipment and joint defense capabilities. The fund is part of Franco-German efforts to develop a more integrated European defense to respond to threats on Europe’s borders, as security becomes a unifying issue for the EU after Brexit. However, with Germany viewing defense as an extension of the political agenda, with a limited military component, and France preferring strong intergovernmental military cooperation, what concrete capabilities are to be funded and how defense will be

13 See Fiott, Daniel, “European Defence: The Year Ahead,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, January 2017.

14 Sven Biscop, “The EU Global Strategy: Realpolitik with European Characteristics,” Egmont Institute Security, No. 75, June 2016.

15 Ibid.

16 Tardy, Thierry, “MPCC: Towards an EU Military Command?” European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2017.

executed remain open questions. Germany and France are working on specific proposals for an EU defense fund ahead of a bilateral ministerial meeting on July 13, 2017; joint work on drones, military transports, and combined efforts to stabilize the African Sahel region are projects that could be funded by the new plan.

The existing opposition on the use of the European defense instruments is best illustrated by the debate on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). PESCO is not, per say, part of the enthusiasm for defense cooperation that followed the EUGS, as it is based on the Treaty on European Union that entered into force in 2009. In fact, the changing European and transatlantic contexts have revived the interest in what Jean-Claude Juncker called “the sleeping beauty of the Lisbon Treaty,”¹⁷ which has long been considered an abstract and purposeless object by many European countries, including France. PESCO was designed to provide a framework for cooperation among “member states whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions.”¹⁸ This framework, however, is interpreted differently by key stakeholders; while the French consider that it could be a group of select like-minded and more ambitious countries forming a defense core in Europe, the Germans insist on the inclusive character of the framework, whose purpose is to help countries develop an appetite for European defense. For Paris, the priority is therefore efficiency and concrete deliverables in terms of capabilities and missions even if it means deepening the divisions within the EU. For Berlin, the priority is integration and institutional legitimacy, even if it means that the deliverables are less ambitious and the instruments are less efficient.

Today, PESCO is not a Brussels issue; it is a political project with potentially significant implications for the European project as a whole, as it could formalize a “two-speed Europe” in defense matters. The debate about the inclusivity or the exclusivity of PESCO has often proven toxic and counterproductive, especially as it could alienate Central European countries that support the concept of PESCO, but also fear being left

17 Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Defence and Security Conference Prague, “In Defense of Europe,” The European Commission, June 9, 2017.

18 Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012, S. Treaty Doc. Article 42(6).

behind from European defense efforts if the criteria go against their interests and strategic priorities. A certain degree of flexibility on the goals and conditions may be necessary, especially as there is no clear alternative to PESCO in order to effectively deepen European defense cooperation.¹⁹ Implementation is already moving forward, as the European Council decided On June 22nd, 2017 that “A common list of criteria and binding commitments . . . will be drawn up by Member States within three months, with a precise timetable and specific assessment mechanisms, in order to enable Member States which are in a position to do so to notify their intentions to participate without delay.”²⁰ The next three months will reveal whether Europeans can agree on an inclusive yet ambitious format for PESCO.

Avoiding Another Disappointment

European defense is a recurring issue that predates the Treaty of Rome and construction of the European Union. Since the end of the Cold War, several windows of opportunity have been missed. Thus, we should view the current “moment” for defense cooperation with lucidity. The right political landscape in France and Germany is essential but not sufficient to overcome the next difficult obstacles, and the signals sent by both Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel do little to negate the issues detailed in this paper. Besides, Europe has also demonstrated impressive complacency at times of crisis, and remains fragile to external events that could weaken the political willingness to find costly compromises. A new financial depression would create a very different environment for European decision-makers and would probably put an end to greater defense and military ambitions. Similarly, the Brexit negotiations will be a difficult period for the coherence of the Union, and could have both positive and negative implications on future integration processes. Furthermore, one should not overestimate the impact of the U.S. elections on the future of the European project. Donald Trump may lead the transatlantic security partnership to unknown territories and durably impact the trust that some European countries have in U.S. security guarantees,

19 The Task Force on European Security and Defense organized by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) chaired by Javier Solana had, for instance, proposed that the “sole criterion for member states to join this Permanent Structured Cooperation is to commit to a mind-set.” In “More Union in European Defense,” Report of the CEPS Task Force, Feb. 2015, p. 21.

20 European Council conclusions on security and defense, June 22, 2017, Article 8.

but U.S. policy is not a central factor in European defense cooperation. Washington is neither a solution nor an insurmountable obstacle on the way to defense integration, and the implications of the Trump election are thus not all-determinant.

To translate the current momentum into a new deal for European defense it must be included in the larger context of the European project. Defense integration has important industrial, economic, and social implications, and the most challenging debates will probably not revolve around purely defense issues. They will imply costs as well as benefits, and the support of the European populations on initiatives that aim to change their national industrial traditions could also be a problem. As President Macron's former minister of armed forces Sylvie Goulard recently declared: "if we wish to build a European defense, choices will have to be made."²¹ These tradeoffs cannot only be justified by rational security imperatives, but will also need to be presented as a more comprehensive political project for Europe. In parallel, European countries cannot expect defense cooperation to fix other European political and economic issues; the legitimacy of the European project is the condition of the defense integration, not its result, and trust in the EU has to be strengthened at all levels. It is undeniable that several taboos about defense did get removed in the last 12 months, but the positive institutional momentum cannot lead on its own to a change of mentality in the capitals about Europe as a whole.

Finally, it is imperative to manage expectations and reaffirm that the instruments provided by the EU are meant to offer more flexibility to European powers in order to achieve their strategic goals. Europeans cannot afford to be ideological as they aim to reinforce their common security; pragmatism implies that ad hoc cooperation and other formats of cooperation could remain sensible options in different cases. Flexibility may mean different things in different countries, but a strong enough consensus will only be reached at the European level if investing in European defense appears to create more opportunities than constraints.

²¹ Cabriol, Michel, "Si nous voulons faire l'Europe de la défense, il va y avoir des choix à faire," *La Tribune*, June 2017.

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