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Defence Union?

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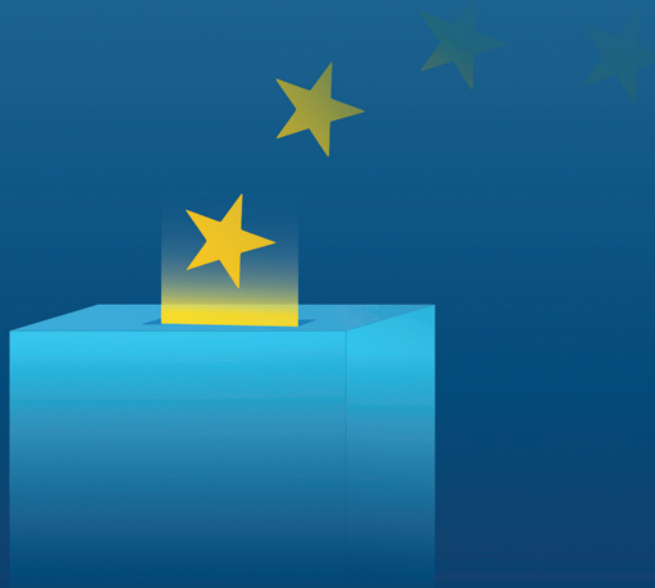
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

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Abstract

This paper addresses the policy issues facing the European Parliament and incoming Commission in the field of security and defence. It first assesses the rapidly evolving (and threatening) security environment before looking at some very specific challenges, notably Brexit and US policy. It goes on to review significant developments in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), most notably those in the areas of institutional and proposed budgetary changes – where the Parliament has a specific role. The paper then proceeds to assess four substantive policy options for the Union and the implications and challenges of each, before concluding with remarks on the nature and prospects for further development in this critical policy realm.

Keywords

Context and Scope of Issues

In a moment when Europe faces serious security threats, grapples with the departure of the United Kingdom and deals with internal political challenges, it is noteworthy that more than three quarters of Europeans demand that the European Union does more to strengthen the defence of its member states. Those in favour of "a common defence and security policy among EU member states" range from a high of 87 percent in Lithuania and Luxembourg to a low of 59 and 57 percent in Sweden and Austria respectively (Special Eurobarometer 461, April 2017).[1]

Since the 2016 publication of her Global Strategy,[2] the Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Federica Mogherini, has pursued an ambitious programme to strengthen defence cooperation. In partnership with the European Commission and the member states, this has developed into a significant set of initiatives and proposals, many of which require the agreement of – or funding approved by – the European Parliament. The question which now arises is whether or not the European Union should pursue the creation of a 'Defence Union' and, if so, what it should entail for both the EU and its individual member states.

There is little doubt that Europe's security environment has worsened over the last fifteen years. When Javier Solana drafted the EU's first security strategy statement in 2003, he could confidently declare that "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free." Today, such a statement would ring hollow. In her equivalent 2016 Global Strategy, the HR/VP acknowledged that "Our Union is under threat," beset from the outside but also weakened from within by the rise of far-right and illiberal forces. The Russian Federation's invasion, occupation and annexation of parts of Ukraine violated Europe's post war security order. The Union and its member states now face arcs of geopolitical instability to the east and to the south. In the medium to longer term, these are products of economic, demographic and environmental dislocations, but they are also, more acutely, the immediate result of as yet unresolved security disputes and civil conflicts. At a time of such existential threats, it is noteworthy too that the commitment of Europe's traditional anchor for security and defence – the United States – has also come into question.

An 'America First' foreign policy in recent years has witnessed both confused messaging from Washington and substantive policy challenges on Iran, climate change, trade and even the relevance of NATO itself. This has re-ignited debates in the United States on burden-sharing within NATO (as the US provides upwards of 70 to 75 percent of the alliance's military capacity) and on the 'strategic autonomy' of the European side of the alliance. Some European member states such as Poland, Portugal and the Netherlands prioritise maximising allied cooperation across NATO. Others – such as France, Spain and Italy – increasingly talk about the need to focus on reducing Europe's dependence on the United States for its defence.

To all of this must be added the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union on 29 March 2019. While estimates vary, this reduces the collective security and defence capacity of the European Union by upwards of 20 percent in purely material terms, while arguably diminishing it even further in political/strategic terms.

Of course, the question of Europe's security and defence capacity is key – even without the loss of the UK. European defence spending fell by 11 percent in the decade from 2005 and while there has been a recent increase, European research and development in new and emerging defence technologies is less

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[1]

http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2173

[2] https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

than a tenth that of the United States. This has led to claims that Europe's defence industrial base is being significantly weakened, with consequent threats to employment, investment and technological innovation.[3] This also has more immediate consequences for European military capacity and operations, with specific gaps in terms of tactical and strategic airlift, air to air refuelling, and command, control and communication technologies – all of which limit the ability of EU member states (even when working in concert) to deploy overseas.[4]

In this context, what is the scope of a policy response? To date we have seen a significant increase in both declared political will and proposals for change which, together, signal increased European ambition in the realm of defence. In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit decision, France and Germany outlined a joint vision for a European Defence Union,[5] while high-level political statements in several other member states such as Spain and Italy added to this momentum. This was reinforced by the 2018 Franco-German Meseberg Declaration, which highlighted security and defence ambitions and committed "to progress towards a better integrated European defence." Significantly, there was also President Macron's Sorbonne speech on 26 September 2017, which called for "a common intervention force, a common defence budget and a common doctrine for action" in Europe. This led directly to the creation of the nine-member "European Intervention Initiative" or EI2, designed to develop a common European strategic culture through enhanced cooperation in intelligence, scenario-building and strategy development together with practical interaction in training and operations.

This political impetus has been given substance through proposals which have now emerged from the European Union itself. Beginning with the Global Strategy and developed through the 2016 Implementation Plan on Security and Defence, the member states of the European Union have committed themselves to setting "a new level of ambition for the EU's security and defence policy."[6] This encompasses a new EU-based review process for defence planning and budgeting, a reinforced agenda for the European Defence Agency, a new Capability Defence Plan, a review of the EU Battlegroups and funding of EU military operations, the creation of a new Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) to undertake command over all military non-executive missions (such as the EU training missions in the Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia) and – finally – the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Originally provided for in the Lisbon Treaty to facilitate the creation of a small vanguard of member states willing to go further and faster down the road of military cooperation, PESCO was ultimately launched in December 2017 with 25 participating EU member states. Within this framework, 34 specific defence projects have since been launched which are designed to strengthen EU cooperation and to build defence capacities among subsets of member states which may then be shared more widely.[7] While the framework itself is innovative, the very breadth of its membership does not suggest the kind of trailblazing role that many originally envisaged for PESCO. This also, in part, explains the unilateral initiative from Paris on the aforementioned EI2, which is not linked to the EU and which includes the UK.

For some analysts, the above sketch is redolent of many earlier phases of EU development in defence: political declarations supplemented by institutional tinkering and very modest levels of actual material added value. The difference on this occasion – which gives rise to both hope and trepidation (depending on one's overall approach to European Union defence cooperation) – is new money on the table.

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[3]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0542

[4]   https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182365/Report_16.pdf

[5]   https://www.delorsinstitut.de/2015/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/20170719_FR-D-EU-Security_Koenig-Walter.pdf

[6]   https://cdn3-eeas.fpfis.tech.ec.europa.eu/cdn/farfuture/wUaWr0oStKtDvN9AMizjqLjqGTm4bvW0T4LFDxSP7lw/mtime:1520417772/sites/eeas/files/implementation_plan_on_security_and_defence_02-03-2018_jus_0.pdf

[7]   https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32079/pesco-overview-of-first-collaborative-of-projects-for-press.pdf

Intersecting with the renewed level of political ambition found among several member states has been the Commission's long-standing interest in the development of Europe's defence technological industrial base.[8] As a result, in June 2017 the Commission set out a Communication launching a European Defence Fund comprising two streams: the first in scientific and technological research and the second in the development and acquisition of specific defence systems. In total, over €3.5 billion is proposed to be allocated to a new European Defence Research Programme (EDRP) over seven years starting from 2019. This programme will fund new research and development in defence and security-related technologies. This is then linked to a €5 billion annual budget (2021-2027) for a European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP). This would focus on the development and procurement of specific weapons systems and associated technologies. The €5 billion annual budget would be composed of €1 billion in new EU funding, leveraging an additional €4 billion in EU member state financing. In total therefore, the EDF would account for over €41 billion in defence spending over the next seven to eight years. Interestingly too, it is proposed that any additional national defence spending would be excluded from consideration under the eurozone's Stability and Growth Pact – allowing for this spending to be ignored for the purpose of calculating budget deficits.

All of the above gives rise to significant policy choices and issues. At the most profound level is the question of whether or not the European Union is an appropriate vehicle to pursue military defence. Early scholars of European integration went to some lengths to make sense of the international personality of the then European Communities (now European Union), with some arguing that they represented a new departure in international relations – the creation of a 'civilian power' with a unique capacity to shape the world around it *without* the traditional coercive military methods of sovereign nation states. Since then, it has been argued that the Union has a unique capacity as an actor centred on the promotion of universal values, global governance through multilateral institutions and the rule of law. Therefore, to what extent, if at all, are such ambitions consistent with attempts to integrate the military defence of EU member states – or perhaps even to replicate national defence structures at the EU level? Even if this is to be pursued in principle, does the practice outlined above offer significant added value to the member states – especially to those committed to their collective defence through NATO? Do the Union's efforts threaten to weaken already brittle transatlantic links, or might they serve to reinforce them? Moreover, is the allocation of scarce resources to these ends appropriate and proportionate to the threats faced? Finally, if such efforts are deemed both necessary and fruitful, have they yet been appropriately grounded in democratic control and oversight? In the words of US President Dwight D Eisenhower, must we not ensure that we have "… an alert and knowledgeable citizenry (which) can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defence with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."?

Policy Options

These questions lay the foundations for the policy options facing Europe in this election and the subsequent construction of a new College of Commissioners. They hinge on whether or not it is appropriate to 'mainstream' defence within the European Union and thereby to agree the means and scale with which this might occur. Certainly, the Commission and the Union as a whole remain limited by what the EU treaties allow. The Union also possesses a weak strategic culture and is – always – subject to the preferences of the member states, which retain national vetoes in the realm of defence policy. Nonetheless, the agenda presented above is an ambitious one and the scope for further momentum is significant – up to and including the establishment of a 'common defence' across the Union. The role therein of the European Parliament – and most especially its budgetary and oversight powers – is critical.

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[8] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0542

One option is to reject the very concept of 'Defence Union.' This may begin from a claim that the very raison d'etre of European integration was to make the possibility of war impossible by removing national control over key war-making capacities – namely coal and steel. It may proceed from that point to argue that – by virtue of either principle or pragmatism – efforts to create a defence infrastructure at the EU level are objectionable. It might also suggest that the resources dedicated to this end are both disproportionate to the actual threats posed and serve little more than to feed an already rapacious defence and arms industry at the cost of more urgent human needs both in Europe and globally. Opposition to the 'militarisation' of the European Union is a key motif here.

A second option is to leave defence largely in the hands of the EU member states but to allow for EU-level structures which would at most facilitate cooperation on a voluntary and case-by-case basis. This could allow member states – or subsets thereof – to pursue strengthened cooperation among themselves but would minimise the engagement of the EU itself. Institutionalised EU-NATO cooperation, for example, would not arise.

A third policy option would see the Union take on the role of catalyst and promotor of defence integration among the member states. It would set out to incentivise such cooperation and to leverage the Union's own resources to that end – including the promotion of 'pooling and sharing' initiatives among the member states and shared financing of research and defence procurement. It might also take on dedicated tasks at the EU level such as cyber defence or border protection and would integrate security and defence policy priorities within other sectoral areas such as energy, space and trade policy. Such an option would also be likely to envisage greater policy coordination between the EU and NATO across the full spectrum of defence issues. This would appear to be the track that the Commission and the HR/VP are currently pursuing and wish to see further developed in partnership with the member states. This also underlines the issue of 'strategic autonomy' and the extent to which the Union becomes a security/defence actor in its own right. The implications here for the EU's NATO members are potentially very significant, while non-NATO members will be sensitive to suggestions that through the EU they might become NATO adjunct members.

A fourth policy option is essentially full defence integration at the EU level – up to and including the creation of a 'common defence' for those member states which choose to participate. The defence of Europe would thus become a mutually reinforcing responsibility of the EU and NATO. In partnership with its member states the EU would pursue a capacity to command and run major international security and defence operations. This would be underpinned by a substantial integration of member states' national defence capacities and the creation of a genuine European defence industrial market at the leading edge of global research and technological innovation. In terms of popular political parlance, this might encompass the notion of a 'European Army.' While this may be inaccurate, in as much as an army encompasses a single sovereign, it suggests a level of defence integration even beyond that of NATO's integrated military command structure. While the idea has been promoted (with some issues regarding translation) by senior political figures in Brussels, Paris and Berlin, it is not at all clear that this political shorthand for fully integrated national defence structures commands political support across the Union.

Challenges and Conclusions

Amidst these policy options there are a number of very specific challenges. The first is how to link European defence cooperation with third countries. This issue is significant not simply in strategic terms – i.e. how to relate to the NATO obligations of non-EU members – but it is also significant in terms of capacity development. Should, for example, the UK (as a third country) be included in EU defence research and development programmes? On the face of it, the answer here should be a resounding 'yes.' However, should such mechanisms to include the UK be available to other third countries such as Turkey, the United States or Canada? If so, what role then for them in policy development and decision-making (if any)? Indeed, at what point does European (or EU) 'strategic autonomy' trump intra-alliance

commitments? This issue becomes even more acute as defence industrial, research and trade competition between the EU and these third countries evolves.

In conclusion, it is useful to remind ourselves of two things. The first is that EU development in the sphere of foreign, security and defence policy has always been moderate, measured, incremental and acutely sensitive to the prerogatives of the member states. At the same time, if we compare the Union's current profile on security and defence with what it was 20 or 25 years ago, it is evident that significant movement has occurred and on the horizon more is likely. The second reminder is that the member states remain masters of this policy domain. The Commission may propose, it may incentivise and it may lobby, but the decision-making framework remains formally intergovernmental. Here, therefore, the political dynamics within and between member states become absolutely crucial – and appeals (even from the highest political sources) for member states to submit to qualified majority voting (QMV) in the fields of foreign, security and defence policy are likely to be unrealisable.

Left to its own devices, the Union would probably continue on a pathway of slow, modest and iterative evolution on defence. Critically, however – and as signalled above – this is one policy area where the Union is most certainly not left to its own devices. The geopolitical pressures it faces are arguably unparalleled in its history. The threats and challenges are complex, sometimes contradictory and always multi-layered. There is no doubt that these pressures are increasing and can be seen at the root of many proposals for change. The question is whether the Union is capable of responding. Clearly – as was indicated at the outset – many European citizens believe it to be necessary and desirable for the Union to do more on defence. Certainly, there are proposals now tabled which offer just that prospect. Critically, however, a substantive debate on the shape, cost and implications of such development has not yet taken place at the national or European levels. The 2019 European Parliamentary election offers an opportunity for such a debate – one which can shape the underlying policy direction of the Union rather than allow it to be driven entirely by events.

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