

# A distant dream

Even if prudent, there will be no European army any time soon

BY KLAUS NAUMANN

Concerns are growing in many European countries that they can no longer depend on the United States and the security guarantees enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO treaty. President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria marked the end of US reliability. Doubts about America's trustworthiness have produced a flurry of driving speeches in 2018 on the idea of a European army. So – what about it?

It is an old idea, which failed first in 1954 when the French National Assembly refused to ratify the European Defence Union treaty. It has since resurfaced from time to time but was never agreed upon and implemented. Will it fare better now, five years after the wake-up call produced by Russia's illegal seizure of the Crimea from Ukraine?

Quite a few initiatives have been launched in recent years. Twenty-five EU members agreed on establishing the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Its tiny steps towards building common force components compelled some to rekindle dreams of a European Defense Union. Within NATO, a similar German initiative was agreed upon: the NATO Framework Concept (NFC). Other political ideas have popped up, such as the creation of a European Security Council, the establishment of a Defense Committee of the European Parliament and the suggestion – a ridiculous one considering its legal impossibility – that France renounce its permanent membership in the UN Security Council and hand it over to the EU. While all were well-intended, there is simply no coherent political will to establish a common defense of Europe, to accept majority decisions or to transfer the defense portion of national sovereignty to a supranational organization – even a European one.

At any rate, such a body would have to be more inclusive than the EU. Defending Europe is politically impossible without the inclusion of the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland and even Turkey. And in terms of geostrategy, it is not feasible without control of the North Atlantic and adjacent parts of the Arctic Ocean.

As long as this reality persists, there will be no meaningful European Security and Defense Strategy leading to command and control arrangements, to joint operational concepts and to a common and, above all, comprehensive planning process encompassing all political and diplomatic tools: economic instruments, police capacities, security and disaster relief elements and military forces that can operate throughout Europe and its periphery on land, in the air, at sea, in outer space and in cyberspace.

None of the steps taken so far make much of a difference. The sad European reality will thus continue. Our armies will comprise 17 different tanks, 26 different howitzers, 20 different combat aircraft and 29 different frigates or destroyers. Europe's defense budgets combined total approximately 50 percent of the US budget, while the military manpower of the Europeans is close to 50 percent greater than that of the US, yet the combat power of the Europeans is at best 20 percent of what the US armed forces can marshal.

Moreover, a unanimous decision on the use of European military

power is rather unlikely; if such a decision were made, the command arrangements would be patchy at best. The EU Battlegroups established in 2004 is a telling example: They never saw action.

Looking at these sobering realities and at the multifaceted risks and dangers in the years ahead, there can be but one conclusion: Europe must improve its capabilities to protect and defend itself. To this end, the pledge to reach the goal of spending 2 percent of our nations' GDP on defense must be met.

What matters even more, however, is the real output. Demanding a European army now is putting the cart before the horse. Without two politically crucial prerequisites, there is not the slightest chance of making it a reality. The first is the political resolve to use military force as the ultimate instrument of politics; the second is agreement on a set of missions geared to the threats of today and tomorrow. The legal basis and rules of engagement must be agreed upon politically as well. Foreseeably, questions such as the potential area of employment and common funding of both equipment and operations will trigger divisive debates.

The transfer of authority to a European entity is a tricky problem. Could a European army only react to an attack on any of the EU members or would the presumption of an imminent attack suffice to trigger preventive action? These are by no means all the questions that need to be answered politically, but they indicate the intractability of the issues to be cleared before one can start planning a European army.

Beginning such a political process now, and were it by a core group, would be most desirable. But the complex nature of the issues suggests that there will be no such force any time soon. At best, we would get more empty shells such as an "army of the Europeans." The truly pressing question is therefore what to do in order to meet the urgent requirement of improving European defense now.

I could imagine that agreement could be won for a bottom-up approach. It would aim at force multiplying and enabling European component forces to be fully interoperable, identically equipped and able to cooperate with forces of non-EU NATO nations. They should be capable of operating under EU command while prepared and equipped to join up with units of other NATO nations, thus forming a NATO component force. This would kill two birds with one stone. The EU could act if and where it must defend its interests without US involvement, but it could also place these components under NATO command if and where NATO must act under Article 5 as well as Article 4.

Furthermore, this would strengthen both NATO and the EU. The justified American demand that the Europeans contribute more would be met, while the strategic indispensability of preserving the defense of the wider NATO treaty area as the sole responsibility of the Atlantic alliance would remain unchanged. At the same time, the US would no longer be the policeman for Europe, yet it would remain committed to serving its own national interest to protect its opposite Atlantic coastline.

In addition to the emerging European airlift capability

featuring air-to-air refueling capacity, such component forces should include a sea transport capability, as close to 80 percent of our world's hypothetical crisis areas are within 200 kilometers from a shore. An EU heavy transport helicopter component could help in disaster relief as well as in interventions. It goes without saying that satellite reconnaissance along with medium altitude ground surveillance and mobile missile defense should round out the EU components. They could be tailored in such a way as to supplement respective NATO capabilities yet simultaneously enable the EU to operate independently within its area of interest.

Last but by no means least, one must think about nuclear weapons, ultimately the decisive tool in preserving peace, as arms control alone can never succeed in doing so. France, after Brexit the only EU country with a nuclear arsenal, will never renounce its weapons or share them with the EU. But there are six European NATO countries, five of them in the EU, that already operate nuclear-capable aircraft. One could thus imagine a European nuclear strike force to be manned, equipped and financed by these six NATO members. Could there be a better solution than two multinational wings of dual-capability aircraft comprising six national squadrons flying the American F-35?

Cyber, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and robots may offer further options for EU component forces. More pressing, however, is the need, over time, to modernize and thus harmonize the equipment of the traditional land, air and naval forces. Europe should aim at standardized armaments programs. For this reason, it must strive for greatly improved industrial cooperation.

Mentioning the many obstacles on the long and bumpy road to meaningful European defense improvements does not mean that the process should not begin forthwith. Our politicians must develop the idea of a Europe that protects, "une Europe qui protège." Defense and security could thus become the core of a new vision for Europe, which could one day lead to the reality of a European army. ■

ALL TALK, NO ACTION –  
WHAT ARE THE CHANCES  
OF EUROPE ESTABLISHING  
ITS OWN ARMY?

# No platitudes

The future of the West will be a conditional, task-oriented and transient affair

BY FRANÇOIS HEISBOURG

NATO is not dead. European defense budgets have been rising steadily since 2014; American forces are staying in Europe; and Donald Trump will eventually leave the White House. Yet Europe can no longer assume the permanence of the historically exceptional strategic order created some 70 years ago. China has become the United States' peer competitor and the Indo-Pacific is the key theater in which that relationship will play out, with Russia providing a check on some of China's ambitions. US engagement in and with Europe will be fully determined by that reality.

While the Trump era did not create this trend, it has accelerated it, and the transactionalism introduced by Trump into Alliance relationships cannot readily be undone. By historical standards, the unconditional post-World War II alliance system is the exception, whereas transactionalism is the default mode. Thus, Europe must prepare for what will be referred to as the post-Alliance era, in which coalitions and partnerships between the nations of the West will remain important but will be of a conditional, task-oriented and transient nature. In effect, Donald Rumsfeld's statement after Sept. 11 that "the mission determines the coalition" describes the new normal, not simply a specific moment in time.

For Europe to meet the challenge, several existential decisions will have to be made. Paradoxically, the politically most visible item is also the least existential: levels of defense spending. Europe, however defined, spends more than four times what Russia does on defense and at least as much as China. Of course, as China's capabilities rise and Russia modernizes its forces, a good military case can be made for increasing our defense budgets and a political argument just as strong can be made in the name of burden sharing, i.e. the benchmark of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense.

But if our problems could be solved merely by spending, our life would be quite simple. Our main challenges lie elsewhere.

First, as the Atlantic security blanket loses its permanence, Europe must decide who it is and what it is. Is it the European Union? Then what happens post-Brexit? Is there a "core Europe"? And if so, who belongs? And why not recreate a Western European Union, one that would provide a home for the post-Brexit UK? But how to go about it? With no clear answers, there will be no space for a common European strategy, let alone a European army.

Second, a shared understanding has to emerge as to the nature of the threats and risks we have to face. Brave attempts have been made with the successive Solana (2003) and Mogherini (2016) documents. While they may be useful as snapshots of the world at the time of their publication, they are of little use as a guide to what awaits us. Who would guess from a reading of the Mogherini document that the US-Chinese strategic contest is the pivot around which US-EU and EU-Chinese relations will increasingly revolve?

Third, Europe will need to define its basic strategic objectives, which would arguably comprise three pillars: protection from the repercussions of war and state-collapse in the Middle East and Africa, including conflict exacerbated by climate change; defense against Chinese strategic attempts at control of the global commons from the South China Sea to cyberspace, technological predation and the leveraging by China of "debt-equity swaps" for strategic gain, already a factor in Asia and Africa and now spreading to the Balkans; and, deterrence and counterattack vis-à-vis Russian revisionism and interference from the Arctic to the Mediterranean.

A white-paper strategic assessment could then outline appropriate strategic choices to be made, such as:

- 1) thinking through the balancing of our economic interests with China and our strategic partnership with the US in its competition with China;
- 2) reviewing the policy mix in terms of the immediate threat from our revisionist neighbor Russia and the growing challenge from its bigger and more ambitious strategic partner, China;
- 3) revisiting Europe's strategic posture in the Middle East and Africa, including the actual – not merely rhetorical – ability to integrate the tools

of defense, diplomacy and development; 4) agreeing on the terms of Europe's burden-sharing debate, without which it cannot be resolved. Again, this is not principally about money, but rather risk-sharing. A system in which the French or the British do the shooting and take the casualties while others do training, as is currently the case in the Sahel, is not politically sustainable. Shared risk-taking should have a flip side: shared decision-making. A grand compromise along these lines is necessary. Paris may be more prepared for it than officials in Berlin may think. The same remark applies to the field of nuclear deterrence.

Talk of European defense and a European army has gone on for close to 70 years. And the more florid the talk, the greater the disconnect from the real world – hence its persistent political appeal.

What we do have is as follows: 1) the continued existence of substantial national armies, some with broad and global capabilities, many with legitimate niche capabilities; 2) limited yet increasing levels of defense expenditure; 3) new and potentially substantial means to build defense industrial capabilities as well as military acquisition at the EU level through the European Defence Fund, interfacing with the European Intervention Initiative (with the UK) and so-called PESCO; 4) substantial development and diplomatic assets with global reach, albeit hampered by our practical inability (as opposed to our rhetorical ambition) to synchronize them with each other and with defense policy, whether jointly or separately.

These instruments all exist or are in the process of development. It remains to be seen whether we build on them or succumb to the sterile temptation of producing yet more *Zukunftsmusik* – compelling yet impractical dreams of the future.

This basic list of conditions for the defense of Europe in a post-Alliance world could alone cause despair. And the sense of foreboding only worsens when taking into account the growing divisions within and between European countries and peoples in the form of right- and left-wing extremism. Only the thought that previous generations somehow rose to meet greater challenges offers some reassurance.

What is clear, however, is that none of these conditions can be met without agreement between France and Germany.

France's domestic situation remains uncertain, with a question mark on President Emmanuel Macron's political ability to continue the reform process launched in 2017; but the president was elected promising an agenda of European change. Germany has the opposite problem: no electoral mandate for big changes in Europe and a generally good economic situation that breeds inertia rather than the will to launch new initiatives. The result has been more *Sonntagsreden* and less dynamism. As the Merkel era and the grand coalition come to close, a window of opportunity may just open. ■

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