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Munich Security Conference

The Kairos of European Defence

Security-wise Europe cannot simply rely on its longterm allies anymore. The most important partners are France and Germany.

Von JEAN-BAPTISTE JEANGÈNE VILMER

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French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Big challenges are on the horizon for the EU.

There are at least three reasons why the construction of a credible European Defence Union is no longer a choice but a necessity. First, Europe's strategic environment has changed in recent years, due to numerous – and simultaneous – threats, on Europe's territory (Russian belligerence, terrorist attacks, cyber operations, informational manipulations and organized crime) and in its neighborhood (the Middle East and Africa). An additional difficulty is the blurring of lines: between internal security and external defence, state and non-state actions, terrorism and crime.

Second, these challenges exacerbate the EU's ongoing existential crisis brought on by the failure to ratify a constitution in 2005, the 2008-2009 economic crisis, the more recent migration crisis, and most obviously Brexit. The latter trauma has put us at a crossroads: either we passively attend Europe's slow deconstruction, or actively further its construction.

Third, the current US administration's foreign policy doctrine of "America First" and its demands for Washington allies to share a greater part of the burden is an additional incentive for Europeans to take their fate into their hands and acknowledge, as president Juncker did, that their protection "can no longer be outsourced" – or perhaps more realistically, should be outsourced to as little a degree possible. Strategic autonomy is certainly a worthy ideal but also a distant one, given that US-backed NATO still is the bedrock of European security.

The EU should meet its responsibility as a security provider, not only because it is the logical response to these structural challenges, but also because it is what the EU's 440 million citizens expect: Europeans are increasingly preoccupied with their security, which is no longer seen as a given. 75% of the EU's citizens support a common defence and security policy (Eurobarometer 88, November 2017). There is also political consensus among leaders on this issue, and the election of a proactive and pro-European president in France has given new life to this movement.

In other words, the planets are aligned. This is the opportune moment for action, what the Ancient Greeks called the *Kairos*, and we should not waste it.

It is already happening

European defence cooperation is already accelerating, as reflected by several recent examples of increased solidarity between states: the mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7) invoked for the first time in 2015 by France, in the wake of terrorist attacks; the involvement of 'Northern' States in the South (Estonians in RCA, Germans in Mali) and of Western states in the East (assurance measures in the Baltic states and Poland).

At the institutional level, there is an unprecedented level of cooperation. The last year alone saw the launch of a European Defence Fund (EDF); a cybersecurity package with, for the first time, defence elements; and most notably the permanent structured cooperation (PESCO). For the first time, defence research and development will be financed by European funds. A next logical step for the Commission could be the creation of a "DG" (directorate-general) defence.

There are also parallel state-driven initiatives outside the EU institutional framework, such as the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EII), gathering states that are able and willing to act militarily.

The success of these initiatives will depend on a number of factors, first and foremost a much-needed investment in capabilities and infrastructure, and a greater political will to use them. This begins at the national level. Defence expenditures fell by 15% from 2006 to 2013 but, thanks to the combination of external threats and American pressure, they are now increasing. With the emphasis on territorial defence, and the development of bottom-up bilateral or "minilateral" cooperation, this process has been described as a "renationalization" of European defence cooperation. Provided that national priorities converge, this trend increases—rather than limits—the chances of a credible European Defence. The convergence of national priorities and strategic culture is indeed the crux of the matter.

Strategic culture convergence

The Franco-German relationship is in the paradoxical position of being both the engine of European defence – nothing important would happen without their agreement – and a disharmonious alliance as far as the use of force is concerned. France, a nuclear-armed permanent member of the UN Security Council with a long tradition of interventionism is quite willing to use military force, while Germany is more reluctant and emphasizes instead the use of civilian instruments.

However, the differences in strategic culture of Paris and Berlin should not be exaggerated. Germany has increased its defence spending, as well as stationed troops in Afghanistan, the

Middle East and the Sahel region. While differences remain, they should not prevent the two states from compromising.

That said, the Franco-German relationship highlights the main challenge of European defence integration: the variations in strategic cultures and priorities. Rooted in history and geography, these differences seem insurmountable and, in the case of Europe, they are exacerbated by a lack of political leadership. How could such differences be tempered? By socialization: through more bilateral, "minilateral" and multilateral cooperation, joint exercises and a sharing of personnel, protocol, intelligence, past experience, etc. In those respects, the current initiatives within the EU framework will help. The EU-NATO relationship likewise ought to nudge countries towards greater cooperation. The French EII could be an even faster integrator as it involves fewer, more like-minded, states. Simultaneously, it is more demanding of its members, requiring a substantive degree of strategic convergence in order to carry out expeditionary missions.

Don't wait for the next war

When it comes to security policy, war is demonstrated to have a generative force. In recent decades, brief phases of acceleration in the generally slow construction of European defence have coincided with armed conflicts. The Balkan wars in the 1990s revealed two things: that those who believed in a post-war world were naïve , as well as the limits of the EU acting as a purely civilian power. It is no coincidence that the decisive 1998 French-British Saint-Malo Declaration and 1999 EU Cologne Summit transpired against the backdrop of the Kosovo War. The current acceleration is no exception: it comes at a time of great regional tension, another ongoing armed conflict (Ukraine) and a multiplication of threats. Let us not wait for the next major war to serve as a wake-up call. It may come too late.

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