



# The Role of Capabilities in the Transatlantic Defense Relationship

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Under the leitmotif of strategic autonomy, the EU started a new attempt to define its global role in 2016 with its Global Strategy. The transatlantic relationship quickly became a core issue. This is not only because the current U.S. president is challenging the EU, but also because the meaning of autonomy, particularly in defense, to a large extent depends on the relationship that Europe has with the United States. Independence, hedging against a U.S. withdrawal, or improved cooperation due to better burden sharing are just some of the options.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of the transatlantic debates are the new EU defense initiatives. While these have not yet delivered many results, they have the potential to substantially improve Europe's capability development and industrial landscape. Meanwhile, European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen has said hers would be a "geopolitical Commission."<sup>2</sup> If Europe's role in defense changes, the transatlantic relationship is likely to change too.

This current debate is by no means new. Defining the U.S. role in European security has been a crucial issue since the end of the Second World War. The three following interconnected questions have been the defining features of European and transatlantic defense debates.

**The strategic question:** Whom/what to defend against whom/what?

**The capability question:** With the help of which capabilities, and what is acceptable burden sharing?

**The institutional question:** How to organize defense and what role for the United States?

The answers to these questions have been neither eternal nor unambiguous, nor have transatlantic and European ones always converged.

The foundation of NATO in 1949 gave a first answer to the institutional question. The alliance became the



primary framework for European security and defense, and the United States a constant and crucial actor. Strategically, it was about collective defense against the Soviet Union. When European countries failed in 1954 to establish a European Defense Community, European integration and defense parted ways. The Western European Union, founded that same year, and NATO concentrated on defense, while the European Community and later the EU concentrated on literally all other policy areas. This odd situation of having a politically integrated union without having a credible defense policy to defend it still exists to large extent today. The current initiatives are yet another attempt to bring the defense dimension back into the EU and to answer the three core questions of European defense differently.

## THE MANY ATTEMPTS TO DEVELOP EU DEFENSE

Most of the previous EU defense initiatives struggled to deliver. At the end of the Cold War, European countries tried new answers to the three core questions. The idea of an autonomous capability to act gained ground with the growing political relevance of the EU, but also with the apparently decreasing importance of military issues and collective defense in Western Europe after 1990 and the shrinking interest of the United States. In 1992, the Western European Union was tasked “to elaborate and implement decisions and actions of the [European] Union which have defense implications.”<sup>3</sup> The strategic scope was limited to crisis management, as embodied in the Petersberg Tasks; this seemed then the most likely scenario.<sup>4</sup> The following debates called for a pool of European forces in NATO to serve European security priorities—the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI).

Yet, these attempts to strengthen European defense did not add new capabilities to European forces. Instead,

the 1990s were a decade of major capabilities cuts, as almost all European states were cashing in the peace dividend after the end of the Cold War.

This not very efficient but rather harmonious transatlantic phase ended in the late 1990s. Earlier in the decade, the EU had wanted to play a key role in the wars in the Balkans, but it quickly had to recognize that it needed U.S. support to end the fighting there. For France and the United Kingdom, the shameful lack of Europe’s capacity to act in its own backyard should be the wake-up call for Europe as a whole. In 1998, they launched a bilateral defense initiative with the objective to enable the EU “to be in a position to play its full role on the international stage.” Boldly, they insisted that Europeans should have “the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.”<sup>5</sup> Supported by other EU members, this led in 1999 to the creation of the European Security and Defense Policy and the formulation of the first EU-military level of ambition with the Helsinki Headline Goal. The latter targeted crisis-management scenarios and largely reflected what European countries would have needed in the Balkans: 60,000 soldiers ready in sixty days, sustainable for one year.

Although the United States wanted European countries to increase their contribution to European security, it met these developments—outside NATO and barely coordinated—with suspicion. For example, in 1998, then U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright set clear redlines, requiring that “any initiative must avoid preempting Alliance decision-making by de-linking ESDI from NATO, avoid duplicating existing efforts, and avoid discriminating against non-EU members.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the EU had started a diversification of formats and actors in European defense—and gave a new answer to the institutional question: it aspired to offer a framework

for defense (understood as crisis management) on its own. This ambition was enshrined 2009 in the Lisbon Treaty and the new tools it promoted, like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Yet, few of these promises materialized. Quite the opposite; the economic and fiscal crisis in Europe that unfolded that same year marked the beginning of the next wave of capability cuts. Already weakened by previous reductions, European armed forces were further hollowed out.

Nonetheless, the Lisbon Treaty's ambition to frame a common defense policy created confusion because it seemed to redefine the answers to the three core questions of European defense.

## WHAT DOES THE EU WANT?

A first area of confusion regards the institutional setting, namely between European and EU defense. EU defense is defined by EU membership, EU goals, and the capabilities of EU members. This differs from what the European countries independently and regardless of EU membership can offer as capabilities to act in various frameworks, be it coalitions of the willing, NATO, or the EU. This includes non-EU countries like Norway, prospectively the United Kingdom after Brexit, and to a certain extent Turkey. For many countries, European defense means a strong European pillar in NATO, thereby referring to the traditional institutional setting of organizing Europe's defense with the United States. European defense does not equal EU defense, yet the EU can strengthen European defense by improving the capabilities of member states; for example, by fostering cooperation or co-funding innovation. Yet the EU can hardly speak for Europe as a whole.

A second area of confusion concerns strategic goals. The EU's 2016 Global Strategy identifies crisis management and stabilization in Europe's neighborhood as core tasks.<sup>7</sup> Collective defense is explicitly left to NATO,

with the EU underlining the complementarity of the two organizations. Yet, the Global Strategy clearly states that an "appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy" is necessary for the EU to carry out its tasks.<sup>8</sup>

Here are two gray areas. First, while the EU refrains from collective defense, it has in theory been tasked with it. The Treaty on European Union contains a mutual defense clause in Article 42.7, which states that if a member state is the victim of an armed aggression on its territory, the others have an obligation to aid and assist it. This obligation is binding, without affecting the neutrality of certain members or the NATO commitments of others (twenty-two of the twenty-eight EU members are also NATO members). France first activated Article 42.7 after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and is pushing its implementation. Besides, the EU adopted a solidarity clause with Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which obliges members to act jointly in case one of them is the victim of a terrorist attack or a natural or man-made disaster. Hence, there is a basis for a larger EU defense role, as some EU members that are not in NATO, like Finland, point out. Yet, most NATO members, particularly those in East-Central Europe, remain highly reluctant. They do not trust the EU being able to credibly organize collective defense in view of the growing threats to Europe and the rather poor results of EU defense in the past, when rhetoric tended to be much stronger than tangible results. If the EU claims too loudly such a role, they fear, it might antagonize the United States and undermine NATO, which for most countries remain the key elements for credibly defending Europe.

The second gray area concerns the future role of the United States in Europe's defense. Most European countries interpret the changing U.S. policy since President Donald Trump took office in 2017 not only as a strategic reorientation (which started earlier), but as a redefinition of the underlying assumptions and



therefore of the transatlantic relationship as such.<sup>9</sup> The United States now relies less, or increasingly selectively, on multilateralism and multilateral institutions, which European countries tend to cherish, including NATO. The Trump administration's focus on sovereign states as key actors includes the willingness to engage in limited coordinated bilateralism, potentially at the expense of multilateral frameworks, as the recent decision to station U.S. troops in Poland seems to express.<sup>10</sup> There is also a reinterpretation by the United States of the value of international treaties and regulations, with some of them (such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran) being seen more limiting than helpful. Besides, the Trump administration identifies in its official statements (such as its National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy) great-power competition as the new leitmotif, with China being the long-term strategic priority.

Many Europeans fear that the United States is disengaging—at least selectively—from its role as a European power because it thinks this is no longer in its interest. Hence, Washington might not maintain its commitment to Europe and its neighborhood, simply because it is no longer a priority, while other worldwide commitments and capable adversaries are more pressing. This changes the framework and scope of transatlantic cooperation. The external pressure on European countries to address security and defense issues on their own meets the internal European ambition to acquire the “appropriate level of . . . strategic autonomy” outlined in the EU's Global Strategy.

## THE SCOPE OF THE EU INITIATIVES

While the current EU defense initiatives were launched before the transatlantic relationship came under pressure from Trump, they are now increasingly called to offer solutions to the problems arising from this pressure. Yet,

the expectations might be too high. The objectives of the initiatives and their timelines are not made to offer a quick fix. Besides, EU and non-EU defense initiatives coexist often without being coordinated. European states also struggle to agree on a joint capability agenda, given that they assess neither the changes in the transatlantic relationship nor in the international environment, from Russia to Iran, in the same way.

Moreover, the EU initiatives were launched not only to foster defense cooperation but also to show in a moment of crisis—after the 2016 Brexit referendum, the migration peak, and in view of growing euroskepticism—that the union can still progress. The initiatives were hence not only about defense, but also about creating political cohesion to keep the European house intact.<sup>11</sup> Most of the non-EU initiatives, like the French European Intervention Initiative or the German-launched Framework Nations Concept, are more exclusive and potentially more result-driven.

Yet, the EU initiatives—mainly PESCO, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD), and the European Defense Fund (EDF)—have received most of the attention. Launched in December 2017, PESCO offers a framework to improve capabilities and deepen cooperation. Only Denmark, Malta, and the United Kingdom do not participate in it. Member states accepted binding commitments, subject to annual assessment, in the areas of defense investment, harmonizing defense systems, deployability of forces, capability shortfalls, and European equipment programs.

CARD aims to give an overview of military capabilities in Europe, report on the progress of defense cooperation, and identify future cooperation opportunities and trends in national defense spending. The first CARD report was completed in the autumn of 2018, and the first full CARD cycle started in autumn 2019. Yet, like

PESCO, CARD follows an intergovernmental logic and functions on a voluntary basis: states decide what data to share for the report and how to implement outcomes and recommendations.

The EDF has the potential to change this traditional cooperation pattern. It follows a supranational logic and brings in the European Commission as an actor in defense, which is a revolutionary shift compared to the past. With the EDF, the commission aims to foster the global competitiveness, efficiency, and innovation capacity of the European defense technological and industrial base as well as to strengthen an open single defense market in the EU.<sup>12</sup>

With the EDF, the EU offers a budget for defense for the first time. Yet, this will only start with the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). A sum of €13 billion (over seven years) is planned for the EDF, but this depends on the overall agreement on the MFF. Under the current EU budget, defense cooperation is incentivized with €590 million in the Preparatory Action on Defense Research and the European Defense Industrial Development Program.

Ensuring the EDF's implementation was a major reason behind the decision to create a new Directorate General for Defense Industry and Space, as announced by Ursula von der Leyen in September 2019. Under the commissioner for internal market, the new directorate general will be tasked with implementing the EDF, ensuring an open and competitive European defense-equipment market and enforcing EU procurement rules on defense, implementing the Action Plan on Military Mobility, fostering an innovative space industry, and implementing the future space program.<sup>13</sup>

Although the new directorate general will be comparatively small and there will be no commissioner for defense, it is a clear signal that the European

Commission aims to shape defense policy by focusing on its areas of competences (the economy) and by using the tools it has to enhance innovation and competition. Von der Leyen expressed her political ambition with her call for a defense union, but many EU members remain reluctant to see the European Commission increasing its competences in defense. Some, such as France and Germany, prefer intergovernmental approaches. Or, they fear (like France) that their national industries might suffer. Others like Poland and the Baltic countries are worried it might undermine NATO, the transatlantic relationship, and the United States' commitment to Europe. Thus, it remains to be seen how powerful the new directorate general will be—how its mandate is implemented will define its results; and whether the commission's involvement in defense is a success.

## IMPLEMENTATION: RIGHT DIRECTION, BUT LITTLE RESULTS SO FAR

While the three EU initiatives have received much political attention, their military results have so far been limited. This is partly due to timelines; it is too early to assess capability improvements after less than two years. CARD just finished its trial run, and the funding for the EDF is not yet allocated. There has not yet been time to implement the interconnected process that links the EU's Capability Development Plan (CDP)—an EU document that defines capabilities needs<sup>14</sup>—CARD, PESCO, and the EDF. In theory, the CDP defines capability priorities, CARD identifies cooperation opportunities to deliver these priorities, PESCO supports a cooperative solution, and the EDF offers financial incentives for cooperation—but this has not yet happened.<sup>15</sup>

In March, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini



submitted the first annual report on PESCO to the European Council. Based on it, the council in May adopted recommendations for improvement.<sup>16</sup> While indicating success, the report clearly outlines space for improvement. Member states have just started using these new tools, it says, calling on them to make “significant progress to address capability shortcomings” and stating the need for better information.<sup>17</sup>

The limited (military) success of the EU initiatives is also due to the functioning of PESCO and CARD. Both follow the traditional logic of bottom-up commitment. If member states do not submit meaningful projects, PESCO cannot deliver meaningful results. Hence, its launch allowed the EU to show much-needed political cohesion and energized the union—which is a remarkable political success and a precondition for joint action. But PESCO has not yet satisfyingly delivered in terms of capabilities. Current projects address some of the capability shortfalls outlined in the revised 2018 CDP and the EU Capability Development Priorities.<sup>18</sup> There are promising projects in areas like enhanced logistics and cyber security, but many shortfalls persist.<sup>19</sup> Many projects are at the low end of the capability spectrum; for example, proposing training or education. Several projects, such as indirect fire support, that member states had previously proposed in other formats, like the European Defense Agency or the Framework Nations Concept, have been relabeled as PESCO projects. Thus, many of the two initial rounds of PESCO projects in March and November 2018 consisted of what member states were able to offer, not necessarily what Europe needed. Particularly, the parameters that influence successful implementation, like realistic timelines and financial commitments, remain weak.<sup>20</sup> For example, a recent study underlines that many projects rely on the European Defense Industrial Development Program and (the not yet finalized) EDF for funding.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, while many PESCO projects are certainly useful, they are unlikely to substantially change Europe’s capability landscape. The EU’s May PESCO assessment

therefore stated that the next call for projects would take place in 2021 in order to ensure better coherence and synchronization of the defense initiatives and to focus on “more substantiated projects.”<sup>22</sup>

However, the EU initiatives were not the only attempts by European states to improve their capacity to act. There are various other formats: political frameworks like the Franco-British Lancaster House treaties, management agencies like Organization for Joint Armament Cooperation, and concrete projects like the European Air Transport Command. European countries are also taking part in NATO capability initiatives like the new surveillance aircrafts AWACS. Most of these have not met the policy objectives initially set and will only partly mitigate capability shortfalls. This is mainly due to the persistence of old cooperation habits. New promising projects, such as the German-Norwegian submarine cooperation, are under way but need time to be implemented.

An exception is the French European Intervention Initiative (EI2), launched in 2017.<sup>23</sup> However, it explicitly does not aim to develop capabilities but to strengthen operational readiness. For France, the EI2 should enable European states that are politically willing and militarily able to act independently from existing institutions, whether the EU or NATO. While they might compete for political attention, the EI2 and the EU initiatives are complementary regarding their content. The latter would develop the capabilities that could be used in an operation prepared by or carried out within the EI2.

Assessing these initiatives points to a broader question: how to coordinate the various cooperation formats so they reinforce rather than undermine each other. This is to a certain extent something that CARD aims at, yet its voluntary nature makes it questionable whether EU member states accept that coordinating role. Moreover, it does not include non-EU countries.



## THE NECESSARY REWIRING OF EUROPEAN AND EU DEFENSE

There is a great temptation to only talk about EU defense when the topic should be European defense. To do so is misleading and incomplete. Many recent developments, political agreements, operations, and capability cooperation have started outside institutions like NATO and the EU in smaller formats, with states often involved in institutions only at a later stage. Institutions can enable cooperation, offer a frame, and create political clout, but they can also be constraining, and states may not buy in. Talking about European defense thus requires thinking beyond institutional boxes. Brexit suggests the complexity of European defense: losing the UK means the EU will lose a considerable amount of its military power to act but will potentially gain in political capacity to agree without the UK's skeptical positions on EU defense.

Recent years have witnessed a general tendency by European countries to use smaller formats. The reference point has not always been the EU or NATO, but a coalition of states. By only looking at what the EU is doing, it is easy to overestimate the results of recent developments. Most recent crisis-management operations (to remain at the EU's level of ambition), particularly at the higher end, started nationally or as coalitions of the willing, and only later received an EU or NATO label, like the operation against the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Also, a great deal of defense cooperation still takes place outside the EU and NATO, such as the U.K.-led Joint Expeditionary Force or the German-Norwegian submarine cooperation. France and Germany launched the Future Combat Air System outside the EU, a project that—if successful—is likely to define the future structure of the defense industry in Europe.

There is progress in Europe as a whole, not only in the EU. In political terms, Brexit forces European countries to think about the continent's institutional rewiring. How will the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), a driving force in foreign policy in Europe, relate to the EU after Brexit? France's President Emmanuel Macron has proposed a European Security Council outside the EU, while Germany prefers an EU format.

## EUROPEAN SECURITY TODAY: OVER-INSTITUTIONALIZED, UNDER-EQUIPPED, AND STRATEGICALLY DIVIDED

The current state of and outlook for European defense capabilities remain poor. The EU is only able to achieve 30 percent of its self-declared level of ambition, according to one study.<sup>24</sup> The discourse about strategic autonomy, at least in defense, appears to be from a parallel world. And, without the United States, European NATO states currently would not be able to defend Europe in a traditional scenario, such as securing the global sea lines of communication.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, besides filling the current gaps, the capability development of EU or European countries in their various frameworks would have to credibly take into account the changing U.S. policy. It would oblige European countries to develop not only the capabilities required to address the tasks outlined in the EU's Global Strategy, but also ones clearly beyond it, with the objective to also deliver collective defense. If the United States were to reduce its commitment to European defense, European capabilities would need to address three key tasks: deterrence, defense, and crisis management, with the most critical one being deterrence.



The challenge, however, would be to not only conceive of European capability development as solely reactive to what the United States is doing (or not doing anymore) but rather to develop an independent level of ambition. This can arrive as a political definition (what European countries want to achieve, building, for example, on the EU Global Strategy) or as an analytical definition (what they need to achieve, seeking inspiration, for example, in this year's NATO Political Guidance). Independently from the conventional and nuclear capability gaps that the European countries would need to fill if the United States were to fundamentally change its role, the question of who fills the U.S. political leadership role also would arise.

The redefinition of the transatlantic relationship forces the EU to more consciously consider how to meet its own treaty provisions when it comes to the solidarity and the mutual defense clause. It also forces European countries to think about how to link EU and European defense. This gives another institutional answer for the continent's defense: a European one, even if it's within old structures like NATO.

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