



Shaping an Ambitious and Realistic Approach to EU Defense Cooperation and Transatlantic Security

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European defense cooperation has made unprecedented strides since 2014 and will remain high on the European political agenda under the new European Commission. In particular, new EU defense initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund (EDF), though still nascent, are potential game changers.

Driving these developments are a combination of several internal and external factors. Among them is a more challenging security environment in Europe, the disruptive impact of Brexit and the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, demands for deeper EU integration in the wake of the eurocrisis, and defense industrial rationales. However, these drivers do not necessarily produce a coherent agenda as the different motivations may push European defense integration into mutually exclusive directions.

To be successful, new European defense schemes will have to have the right level of ambition, be successfully implemented, and contribute to strengthening both European and transatlantic security. Ultimately, EU security and the transatlantic link are mutually reinforcing. A deeper EU defense dimension will increase burden-sharing and provide for a stronger partner for the United States. A new transatlantic balance for the twenty-first century would see Europe take more responsibility for its own security in return for continued U.S. commitment to European security.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

1. Avoid automatically criticizing European defense initiatives: Washington should calibrate its message on European defense, resisting knee-jerk criticisms and instead being more willing to take a step back. This includes pursuing a compromise with the EU on the role of third-party participation and intellectual property rights (IPR) as part of PESCO and EDF projects.

2. Encourage greater European collaboration on practical, feasible scales: Rather than merely criticizing European efforts, the U.S. goal should be to channel European

momentum toward outcomes that strengthen transatlantic security. In particular, the United States should work with its like-minded allies in Europe to make sure that new armaments projects address real capability shortfalls, adhere to NATO technical standards, and deliver real capabilities.

3. Work with the EU to step up defense against nontraditional threats: The United States should encourage the EU to focus on elements of defense that NATO does not have the mandate to cover such as cyber, hybrid, and critical infrastructure protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EUROPE

1. Avoid polarizing terminology and

narratives: European leaders must be mindful that certain terms like European “strategic autonomy” and “sovereignty” can give rise to misunderstandings and trigger unnecessary divisions. Emphasizing more neutral expressions like “burden-sharing,” “strategic responsibility,” and a “European pillar” within NATO when describing EU defense cooperation can help avoid some of the worst pitfalls and keep expectations in check.

2. Clarify the scope of strategic autonomy:

The conversation in Europe must more realistically reflect the military level of ambition the EU is capable of aiming for, and there is a need to better spell out the tasks and geographical scope of future independent EU military action.

3. Start talking defense at the highest levels in Europe:

The EU should establish a regular forum for member state defense ministers to meet in Brussels. They should also agree on a defense white paper that sets out EU ambitions and more clearly defines strategic autonomy, and regularly review progress in meeting military ambitions.

4. Lock the United Kingdom into EU policies and missions:

Ensuring continued close cooperation on security and defense matters with United Kingdom as part of a new UK-EU special partnership after Brexit will be essential to avoid widening its existing capability shortfalls.

5. Focus PESCO on overcoming the disconnect between ambitions and capabilities:

EU defense initiatives should focus on delivering tangible output and adding value to NATO’s capability needs. A key determinant of PESCO success is whether collaboration makes the EU as a whole more militarily capable. This is achieved through making PESCO as attractive of a platform as possible for member states.

6. Focus EDF implementation on effectiveness:

The EDF should be both industry- and military-driven, and strongly connected with PESCO. The European Commission should report yearly on projects to show that their cooperative efforts reflect member states’ interests, particularly their

military needs. The commission should also prioritize high-end spectrum projects and harness the innovative and disruptive potential in the civil tech sector. The next multiannual financial framework should provide sustained, ambitious funding levels for the EDF.

7. Allow meaningful third-party access:

The potential exclusion of key, non-EU NATO allies from PESCO and the EDF risk producing suboptimal results in terms of capabilities. The goal should be on generating open, flexible project formats wherein non-EU entities are allowed to compete.

8. Clarify the connections among defense projects in Europe:

It is crucial to ensure coherence and linkage between the various bilateral, regional, and EU-level defense initiatives and manage divisions between member states. The EU and member states should attempt to ensure that various efforts are more closely coordinated and do not contribute to further duplication. In this regard, the new Directorate General for Defense Industry and Space could help provide a single point of contact for defense issues in the EU.

9. Invest in strategic partnerships: The EU needs to further develop its key security and defense partnerships with key partners. Chief among these is EU-NATO relations where the focus must be on implementing the seventy-four action items while continuing to strengthen interaction and coordination. Moreover, there is an opportunity to strengthen bilateral EU-U.S. security and defense cooperation, especially on issues such as export control, resilience, hybrid warfare, energy security, security in Africa, and military mobility.

10. Clarify the EU's mutual defense responsibilities:

For strategic autonomy to ever become a reality, the EU must promote a more genuine European strategic culture and a common European defense policy. EU leaders need to offer more clarity on how Article 42(7) of the Lisbon Treaty relates to NATO’s Article 5 on mutual assistance, what type of scenarios might be relevant for it to be triggered, and how to train for them.



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These recommendations are based on the paper “EU Defense Cooperation: Progress Amid Transatlantic Concerns.”