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Is Europe Ready to Defend Itself?

As Donald Trump's America pulls back and Vladimir Putin's Russia looms, France and Germany are leading a renewed drive for a common European Union military

By *Yaroslav Trofimov*
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The new Republican administration in Washington issued a blunt warning: Unless Europe quickly set up its own unified army, the U.S. would be compelled to undertake an "agonizing reappraisal" of its commitment to defend its European allies.

The year was 1953, and the main target of American ire was France, whose delay in ratifying the European Defense Community treaty, signed the previous year, meant that preparations for a federal European army had to be paused. But the pressure applied by the Eisenhower administration backfired spectacularly: A joyous choir of French lawmakers broke into the "Marseillaise" when France's parliament finally rejected the treaty in August 1954. The idea of a joint European defense policy was shelved for decades.

Today, the push for European autonomy in defense—and even for a common European Union army—is gathering momentum again, in part because of doubts in many European capitals about President Donald Trump's willingness to defend the continent against a renewed threat from Russia. Mr. Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, which prompted Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to resign, has added new urgency to the drive.

This time around, the revival of European defense integration is championed by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, while the American president keeps lobbing angry tweets at the very idea. And inside Europe, the skeptics today aren't in Paris but in the former Soviet vassal-states in the

east that, despite all their misgivings, still view the U.S. as the only credible guarantor of their survival as independent nations.

A historic swing in Europe's public opinion, particularly in Germany—the EU's most powerful state and one where trans-Atlantic cooperation was the bedrock of the political consensus since the end of World War II—has fueled this change.

French President Emmanuel Macron (right) greets soldiers during a French military exercise near Reims, March 1, 2018

PHOTO: BLONDET ELIOT - POOL/SIPA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Trump has described the EU as a "foe" and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as "obsolete," and he has publicly questioned why American soldiers should die for a NATO ally like Montenegro. One recent opinion poll showed that Germans now rank Mr. Trump as the greatest threat to their country. In another, 73% of Germans described their relationship with the U.S. as "bad," and 72% wanted a foreign policy more independent from Washington's.

"The shift in public opinion is due to a mix of disappointment and fear," said Volker Perthes, director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, a think tank that advises the German government and parliament. "There is a fear that the U.S. will be less interested in Europe, and that the security commitments of the U.S. will no longer be reliable."

It was in this political environment that Ms. Merkel told the European Parliament in a landmark speech in November: "The times when we could fully rely on others have

ended.…If we Europeans want to survive as a community, we must make a greater effort to take our destiny into our own hands."

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Achieving such "strategic autonomy" became the EU's official policy in 2016. Though calls by Mr. Macron and Ms. Merkel for a European army are largely rhetorical so far, several concrete initiatives to achieve that goal have been launched since then. Probably most significant is the $15 billion European Defense Fund, which aims to spur Europe's military industry and could limit the influence of American weapons manufacturers. Another new initiative is the so-called Permanent Structured Cooperation system, under which European armies seek to remove the barriers to joint action that stem from fielding so many different—and often incompatible—types of weapons. Addressing a frequently voiced demand of Mr. Trump, European governments have also raised their defense spending to get closer to the NATO target of 2% of each country's GDP.

On the face of it, there is no reason why an economic giant like the EU shouldn't be able to protect itself against Russia even without American help. Setting aside Britain (which seeks to continue to cooperate with the EU on security and defense even after leaving the bloc), the remaining EU's population and defense budgets are roughly three times Russia's size. France, the EU's military powerhouse, spends almost as much as Russia on defense just by itself and operates an independent nuclear arsenal. All those sums, of course, are dwarfed by the U.S., whose military budget is nearly double the defense spending of the EU (minus the departing U.K.) and Russia combined.

President Donald Trump during a news conference at a July 2018 NATO summit in Brussels, which was upended by his attacks on U.S. allies over their defense spending levels. PHOTO: MARLENE AWAAD/BLOOMBERG NEWS

"Europe is addicted to the American security umbrella," said Bruno Tertrais, deputy director of the Foundation for Strategic Research, a think tank that advises the French government. "But if the U.S. weren't there, Europe would have found a way to defend itself."

Yet there is a Catch-22 that makes these aspirations risky. Building up European defenses after seven decades of American protection would take time. Meanwhile, every move that Europe attempts in this direction spurs an American backlash, further undermining NATO's cohesion—and its deterrent capacity against a rapidly militarizing Russia.

"We have to hedge. But it is a very tricky situation: When does the hedge become a wedge?" said François Heisbourg, a veteran French expert who advised Mr. Macron's presidential campaign on security and defense.

"Trump doesn't believe in alliances and doesn't understand what an alliance is," he added. "So if we discover that Plan A — what has happened over the last 70 years — is no longer on offer, we would have been remiss if we had not worked on Plan B. But of course, we do not want to precipitate the end of Plan A by getting Plan B wrong. This is the challenge for every country that is allied with the U.S."

It is a particularly urgent challenge for NATO countries in Eastern and Central Europe. Officials there fret about loose talk of a European army and dislike the very concept of EU "strategic autonomy," fearing that it may needlessly alienate the U.S. After all, if you border on Russia, what you want is more Americans in your neighborhood now, not a pretext for cost-conscious Washington to pull the plug. "Autonomy means autonomy from someone—it's better to use another term, such as a European push forward or European structural strengthening," said Lithuania's defense minister, Raimundas Karoblis.

European Union foreign-policy chief Federica Mogherini talks to reporters during the 'Black Blade' military exercise involving several EU countries, Florennes Air Base, Belgium, Nov. 30, 2016. PHOTO: YVES HERMAN/REUTERS

Poland, another neighbor of Russia, has even offered to pay more than $2 billion to set up a permanent U.S. base on its soil, proposing to call it Fort Trump in a not-so-subtle appeal to the president's vanity. (Washington is still evaluating the proposal, while German officials are lobbying against it, fearing that it would further antagonize Russia.)

"We believe that the United States is indispensable in European security," said Bartosz Cichocki, Poland's deputy foreign minister for security affairs. He held up the November 2018 incident in the Black Sea, where Russia attacked and seized three Ukrainian navy ships, as a sobering example of just how hollow the EU's role in

defending the region's security remains. "Where was Europe? Nowhere. Those who advocate a European army, European self-sufficiency, had a great opportunity to take the lead, to show us the way of how to de-escalate and how to stop Russia," he scoffed.

Such divisions within Europe on security matters make it a much weaker adversary for Russia, which has spent the past decade upgrading its military and is now fielding an entire new tank army on the EU's eastern flank.

The EU is likely dealing with a lasting change in the global security architecture. "In defense and defense industry, it is not Europe, it is 28 European states," said Christian Mölling, deputy director of Germany's DGAP research institute, who co-wrote a recent report outlining the shortfalls in the EU's military muscle. "If you take trade, we are acting as one with a central and single policy, which makes us the biggest trading bloc in the world. But in defense, we are not able to act as a huge force."

Though Mr. Trump's repeated verbal attacks on European allies generated the current sense of crisis, Europe's security predicament is compounded by an isolationist streak that runs through America's political landscape. In fact, European officials say that the EU is likely dealing not with a temporary hurdle but with a lasting change in the global security architecture as the relative size of America's economic and military might declines with the rise of rival powers, most notably China. President Barack Obama wasn't as abrasive as Mr. Trump in his dealings with European allies, but it was his administration that withdrew two of the four U.S. Army brigades deployed on the continent, including all American main battle tanks. "We see Trump as the symptom of the problem, not as the problem," a senior French official said.

U.S. Marines lug gear after landing in Stordal, Norway, Jan. 16, 2017.
PHOTO: NED ALLEY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Paradoxically, Mr. Trump's combative rhetoric has been accompanied, so far, by decisions that have actually strengthened U.S. commitments to European security. The Pentagon under Mr. Mattis deployed 700 Marines to Norway, adding to the rotating armored brigade-size American presence deployed in Poland and Romania in early 2017. Economic sanctions against Russia have been tightened, too, in part due to congressional action.

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"With Trump's presidency, more U.S. soldiers are on European soil than before, under Obama. The U.S. president is fulfilling the commitments of the U.S. one by one. This is appreciated, and we also have to do our part," said senior German lawmaker Jürgen Hardt, the foreign-policy spokesman for Ms. Merkel's faction. "What we are talking about is making the European pillar of NATO more effective, which also means burden-sharing, and this might take responsibility away from U.S. soldiers…. We do not talk about separation in the field of territorial defense of Europe. It is not helpful if some people interpret it that way."

The current debate over Europe's "strategic autonomy," often clouded by misunderstandings within Europe and between European governments and the U.S., goes to the very foundations of the European project—an idea nurtured by Washington after the devastation visited on the continent by World War II.
The seed from which today's European Union sprang up was the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951. By pooling these industries, indispensable for modern warfare, into a single market under a supranational authority, the founding fathers of European integration sought to make another war among Germany, France and Italy impossible.

French Prime Minister René Pleven came up with the plan for a unified European army under a common European defense minister in a speech in 1950, and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower—NATO's first supreme allied commander—quickly became one of the idea's most enthusiastic supporters. The 1952 treaty establishing the European Defense Community, with a headquarters in Paris, also provided for a joint European parliament, laying the foundations of a federal European state.

While most other member-states ratified the treaty, France, embroiled in a bloody colonial war in Vietnam, kept holding out. Once Mr. Eisenhower became president in 1953, his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, repeatedly pushed Paris to act. Washington even threatened to cut off military aid to European countries that remained outside the EDC.

But by then, the alliance between French parties beholden to Moscow and nationalists skeptical of the European project (and of ties with America) was simply too strong—a precursor of sorts to political dynamics in Europe today. The EDC treaty was killed without debate by France's parliament in August 1954. "It is a tragedy that, in one country, nationalism, abetted by communism, has asserted itself so as to endanger the whole of Europe," Mr. Dulles said the following day.

It took more than four decades, until the late 1990s, for the idea of a common European defense policy to rise again, this time with the participation of Britain. By then, the U.S., having won the Cold War, viewed any such European aspirations to strategic autonomy with suspicion. In 1998, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issued her famous "three Ds," warning that any European security initiative should avoid de-linking Europe from NATO, duplicating existing efforts and discriminating against non-EU states.

Belgian army special forces take part in the 'Black Blade' military exercise involving several other EU countries, Florennes Air Base, Belgium, Nov. 30, 2016.
PHOTO: YVES HERMAN/REUTERS

Today, U.S. hostility to European self-reliance in defense is rooted in similar concerns and is shared well beyond Mr. Trump's circle. Mr. Mattis, for one, denounced the idea in a sharply worded confidential letter to France's government in 2018.

"The recent initiative to create a European army, or European combined armed forces, is not a good idea. It will undermine NATO over time and will further the division between the U.S. and our European allies and partners," said retired U.S. Navy Adm. James Stavridis, who served in 2009-13 as one of Eisenhower's successors at the helm of NATO's supreme allied command.

In a rapidly changing world, however, those concerns are misplaced, argued Ivo Daalder, the president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, who served in 2009-13 as U.S. ambassador to NATO.

"After 70 years, there is a legitimate question raised both in the United States and in Europe: When is Europe going to be able to take care of itself? How much more money do they need to make to finally deal with the security challenge that, economically, they should be able to deal with?" Mr. Daalder wondered. "I don't think we should discourage Europe. Anything that strengthens Europe's capacity to defend itself enhances the trans-Atlantic alliance rather than undermining it."

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