

Recent EU Strategic Autonomy Advances Threaten the Transatlantic Link

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. and Europe enjoy the close bonds of shared values, including a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and democracy.

Security and stability in Europe remains a vital U.S. interest. NATO should remain the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Europe for the foreseeable future.

U.S. policy in Europe should support NATO's continued primary role in European defense, and policymakers should view EU defense integration with deep skepticism.

Security in Europe remains a critical U.S. national interest. A recent refocusing on the evergreen idea of European strategic autonomy and a flurry of activity with the goal of an independent European (read: European Union) defense force should give U.S. policymakers pause—and be met with a skeptical and discerning eye. Security in the Euro-Atlantic region is too important to the United States to be delegated to the European Union (EU). Not only is the EU ultimately incapable of filling this role, its maladroit attempts at becoming the preeminent security actor in Europe bleed vitality from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), weaken the transatlantic link, and exacerbate existing fractures within Europe.

While undoubtedly the EU maintains competencies that will be necessary and useful for responding to the challenges associated with a return to great power

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competition, it cannot fulfill the security role currently performed by the U.S. and NATO. The U.S. should continue working to ensure that NATO maintains its keystone role in European defense policy. This means maintaining America's leadership role within the alliance, while firmly pushing back against EU defense integration efforts that are not in the interests of the U.S. or NATO.

When it comes to EU strategic autonomy, the U.S. should insist that former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's "3Ds" continue to be respected, namely no decoupling of the U.S. from European security, no duplication of structures or initiatives that already exist within NATO, and no discrimination against non-EU NATO members.

In addition, the U.S. should ask itself the following questions:

- Will this lead to increased defense capabilities in Europe?
- Does this service an EU political goal at the expense of U.S. security interests?
- For operations:
 - Has NATO been given the right of first refusal?
- For procurements:
 - Can the same end be achieved through existing NATO structures?
 - Does this unfairly constrain American or non-EU partner nations from taking part?
- For institutional structures:
 - How could neutral member access to EU-flagged capabilities hamper the effectiveness of deterrence in the future?

U.S. leadership in Europe focused through NATO has helped forge peace and security on the continent that are critical to U.S. national interests and which must be safeguarded. In an evolving threat environment, U.S. policymakers should keep working with the EU on security vectors where there is symmetry, while denoting clear red lines for future defense integration, lately accelerated under the auspices of EU strategic autonomy, which the U.S. regards as too antithetical to its interests or those of NATO.

The Importance of Europe

Over the past century, Americans have sacrificed much blood and treasure to help create a secure and prosperous Europe. This, in turn, has been good for the United States; the economies of the 27 member states of the European Union, along with the United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. In addition, the U.S. and the EU's member countries are each other's principal trading partners and invest heavily in each other's economies, helping to support millions of jobs on both sides of the Atlantic.

In addition to shared economic ties, the U.S. and Europe enjoy familial bonds of shared values, including a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets, and democracy. Recently, former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis succinctly stated for the U.S., "Our greatest strength in the world is our network of alliances."¹ U.S. policymakers must do all in their power to maintain this advantage.

The strength of the transatlantic alliance revolves around the axis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a multilateral organization that has done more to promote democracy, peace, and security in Europe than any other—including the European Union—since its inception in 1949. Far from being outmoded, NATO today is more relevant and crucial for maintaining transatlantic security than it has been since the end of the Cold War. While some in Brussels and across the halls of power in Europe may have dreams of an independent EU Army or an independent EU defensive apparatus capable of replacing NATO and the U.S., true EU "strategic autonomy" in defense is a chimera.

The EU will never be able to provide the peace and stability that NATO—with feet firmly rooted in *both* North America and Europe for the past 70 years—has and will continue to deliver. While EU-led defense initiatives may be able to provide some defense improvements at the margins, the outsized costs include decisions that enervate NATO and severely stress the transatlantic link.

European Defense Autonomy: A Brief History

While the U.S. during the Cold War supported to a certain degree European defense integration,² the idea never gained much traction due to the effectiveness and pervasiveness of the U.S. security umbrella, European national capitals' reticence toward handing over control of defense and security issues, the high cost of social and welfare programs in Europe, and the domestic political and economic considerations of defense industrial production on the continent.

In 1992, the Treaty on the European Union signed in Maastricht (or the Maastricht Treaty) by representatives of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom founded the European Union.³ The second stated objective of the EU as written in the Treaty is “to assert its identity on the international scene, in particular through the implementation of a common foreign and security policy including the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence.”⁴

Only three countries, Denmark, France, and Ireland held public referendums on ratification of the Treaty on the European Union, with Danish voters rejecting ratification. Unanimous ratification was required for the Maastricht Treaty to come into force. As a result, Denmark held a second referendum on ratification in 1993, which passed in large part due to four opt-outs that Denmark had negotiated, including Common Defense. For EU member states, the Maastricht Treaty created a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) overseen by the intergovernmental European Council.⁵

Today, as a result of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, defense and foreign affairs are a shared competency of the member states and the EU Commission.⁶ The Lisbon Treaty also introduced a mutual defense clause, which is strikingly similar to NATO’s Article 5.⁷ Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty states: “If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations charter.”⁸

While the objectives of CFSP outlined in Maastricht make vague references to promoting international cooperation, preserving peace, and strengthening international security; safeguarding the common values, fundamental interests, and independence of the Union; and strengthening the security of the Union and its member states in all ways,⁹ the eventual objective to claim control over European Defense matters lay just below the surface. Article J.4 of the Treaty denotes, “The common foreign and security policy shall include all questions related to the security of the Union, including the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence.”

Subsuming defense under the control of the EU was a founding goal. However, progress towards achieving this end has largely been halting. In December 1998, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair and then-French President Jacques Chirac took a significant step in EU defense integration by signing the St. Malo Declaration, which stated in part, “the Union must

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.”¹⁰

While the St. Malo Declaration states that autonomous EU action must be done, “while acting in conformity with our respective obligations in NATO,”¹¹ the declaration elicited a clear response from the U.S. Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State under President Bill Clinton, who set out what the U.S. regarded as red lines in relation to EU autonomous action and defense integration. While Albright’s 3Ds (no decoupling, no duplication, and no discrimination) remained the de facto framework for U.S. policy on EU defense integration through the George W. Bush Administration, “during the latter half of Bush’s first term and into his second term, U.S. views on Europe took a different focus. Many in Washington at this time were willing to turn a blind eye to EU defense.”¹²

For most of the Obama Administration, Europe was an afterthought. While some, like Defense Secretary Robert Gates, opposed EU defense integration, the President did not take a firm stance either way on the issue and remained preoccupied with other foreign policy priorities. The EU read in the indications coming from Washington policy under President Obama a mistaken belief that Russia no longer posed a threat to Europe, which, combined with a rhetorical pivot to Asia and the U.S. strategy of “leading from behind,” seemed to signal a green light to move forward with defense integration. In 2016, one European analyst wrote, “the recalcitrance of the U.S. to play a forceful role in settling the multitude of crises facing Europe should serve as a dire reminder that Europe needs to fully develop its foreign and security policies.”¹³

What Is “Strategic Autonomy?”

In recent years, the election of President Donald Trump and the decision of the British people to leave the European Union has resulted in Brussels putting its foot on the gas in regard to European defense integration, a development that is *not* in the interest of the United States.

Recent EU moves toward greater defense control have often been framed in the context of a reaction to chaotic U.S. policy following the election of President Trump. “This is not the first time that Europe has conducted a broader political debate about the idea of assuming greater responsibility for its own interests and security. The timing of the current European debate is attributable above all to U.S. President Donald Trump’s rejection of central elements of the liberal international order.”¹⁴

In July 2019, the Körber Stiftung in cooperation with the International Institute for Strategic Studies published a policy paper based on a gaming scenario in which the U.S. withdraws from NATO.¹⁵ Framing EU defense integration as a necessary reaction to a suddenly fickle U.S. may be rhetorically useful to some in Europe, yet the reality of U.S. actions under the Trump Administration undercuts the validity of this argument.

Emotional arguments about the reliability of the U.S. commitment to NATO may be fashionable in many capitals of Europe, yet they hold little grounding in reality. The United States has, since 2014 (under President Obama), begun reinvesting in European defense. Under President Donald Trump, funding for the European Deterrence Initiative has nearly doubled from the final year of the Obama Administration, with more than \$6.5 billion in funding enacted for the initiative in fiscal year 2019.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Trump Administration has continued significant U.S. heel-to-toe troop rotations to the continent, including an armored brigade combat team, aviation brigade combat team, and a 900-strong Sustainment Task Force.

In Poland, the U.S. continues to serve as the framework nation for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence multinational battalion. In June 2019, President Trump and Polish President Andrzej Duda signed an agreement strengthening security cooperation, laying the groundwork for an additional rotational deployment of 1,000 American troops to Poland.¹⁷

The U.S. has beefed up its presence in Norway as well, with continuous rotations of 700 marines to the country beginning in October 2018.¹⁸ An additional, but often underappreciated, area of renewed U.S. engagement has been with Greece. In May 2018, the U.S. began to operate MQ-9 Reaper drones out of Greece's Larisa Air Base in flights that continued through August 2019.¹⁹ The U.S. and Greece are in discussions about possibly using Larisa for KC-135 Stratotanker or unmanned aerial vehicle flights and expanding training at the base.²⁰ In October 2018, Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos raised the possibility that the U.S. might "deploy military assets in Greece on a more permanent basis, not only in Souda Bay but also in Larissa, in Volos, in Alexandroupoli."²¹

In 2018, U.S. European Command conducted more than 100 exercises with approximately 30 countries.²² The U.S. has continued to engage with European allies through valuable training exercises. In April and May 2020, the U.S. Army will host the Defender 2020 exercise, "the U.S. Army's largest exercise in Europe in 25 years, ranging across ten countries and involving 37,000 troops from at least 18 countries, of which 20,000 soldiers will be deployed from the United States to Europe."²³

While some in Europe may believe the post-2017 hysteria, for most, the drive toward a greater role for the EU in defense-related matters is about power consolidation in Brussels through the renewed effort to jump start a stagnant pipe dream—the EU replacing the U.S. and NATO in European defense matters. Indeed, the goal of obtaining “a common EU defense” has formally been in place since the EU’s founding. For many in Europe, the election of President Trump provides a useful straw man for which to juxtapose the need for independent EU defense capabilities. The functional change was the U.K.’s June 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union. Long the brake on greater EU defense autonomy, the U.K. has, since 2016, refrained from blocking EU defense integration initiatives.

The European Union’s 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy states, “The Strategy nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union.”²⁴ While it is fairly clear that the answer to the question “autonomy from whom,” is the U.S., what exactly the EU means by “strategic autonomy” is left intentionally imprecise—allowing a myriad of understandings as to its meaning to be simultaneously correct, while also conferring a level of deniability from member states or outside actors concerned with the EU’s consolidation of control over defense matters or their desire to break free from U.S. defense leadership on the continent.

Some in Europe are less coy about the goals and meaning of EU strategic autonomy: “By encouraging EU member states to enhance their financial and operational investments in defence, the hope is that the EU will be better positioned to undertake military missions and operations without needing to rely on the political and military support of NATO or the US.”²⁵

In November 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron stated in an interview that NATO is experiencing “brain death”²⁶ and characteristically called for more European “strategic autonomy.”²⁷ In this interview President Macron wielded the hackneyed arguments about U.S. commitment to NATO stating, “We should reassess the reality of what NATO is in light of the commitment of the United States.”²⁸

A committed Euro-federalist, President Macron, like many in Europe, views an expanded role for the EU in defense matters as a tool for further EU integration, i.e., a political tool, rather than a means for additional capabilities or defense capacities. Indeed, deeper European defense integration over the past two decades has not resulted in additional military capabilities on the continent—and has often had the exact opposite effect. Defense continues to remain a policy area in which power still remains at the nation-state-level. Stripping defense from national governments

and centering the responsibility and significant power of defense issues in Brussels is viewed as a natural and necessary evolution of the balance of power within Europe, with a technocratic EU bureaucracy seated above the parochial nationalist concerns of national politicians.

President Macron's comments also exemplify European fractures over the nature of the threat from Russia, which will not be rectified any time soon. For many nations in Europe, the continued existential threat posed by Russia necessitates both active U.S. engagement in Europe and a robust NATO. France does not share the same threat perception vis-a-vis Russia, and therefore does not view the U.S. as essential for European security. In September 2019, the Foreign and Defense Ministers of France and Russia met for the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine and illegally annexed Crimea in 2014. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated, "The time has come, the time is right, to work towards reducing the distrust between Russia and Europe, who ought to be partners on a strategic and economic level."²⁹

France views terrorism and instability from the Middle East and North Africa as its preeminent security threat. Downplaying the threat from Russia allows France to focus on what it perceives to be its main security challenges while opening up potential new business opportunities in Russia. Recent French initiatives such as the European Intervention Initiative³⁰ seek assistance in out-of-area operations in the former colonies of Francophone Africa.³¹

An EU Army: Drastically Undercutting European Security

While the idea of an EU army is written off as delusion by some in Europe, for many people in Brussels, Paris, and Berlin, the end goal of defense integration is a common defense policy with a continent-wide EU Army to carry it out. Just recently, former leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Parliamentary Group Guy Verhofstadt called for a 20,000-strong European Army by 2024.³² In November 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron called for a "true, European army."³³ One week later, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated, "We have taken major steps in the field of military cooperation, [sic] this is good and largely supported in this house. But I also have to say, seeing the developments of the recent years that we have to work on a vision to establish a real European army one day."³⁴

The need for unanimity for most Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) decisions presents a stumbling block to further EU defense integration—and a potentially fatal shortfall for the future use of any EU flagged

force. Leaders aware of this problem have suggested ways around this conundrum. In 2018, Chancellor Merkel stated,

The times when we could rely on others are over.... This means nothing less than for us Europeans to take our destiny in our own hands if we want to survive as a Union. This means, in the long run, Europe has to become more capable to act. We have to reconsider our ways of deciding and to renounce the principle of unanimity where the European treaties allow and wherever this is necessary. I proposed a European security council, in which important decisions can be prepared faster.³⁵

The Chancellor's comments unveiled the belief among many in Europe that defense integration is viewed first and foremost as a political project, and one that, in this view, is necessary for the future stability of the European project itself. There is some urgency to the matter: A striking 2019 survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations found that “[i]n every member state except Spain, most respondents thought it likely that the union in its current form would fall apart in the next 10–20 years. In no EU country is the share of voters who hold this belief less than 40 percent.”³⁶

Other stumbling blocks remain to a potential future EU Army. As Jan Techau elucidates, “for real integration in the field of security, large quantities of political trust are needed. But contrary to what most people believe, Europe today is what it has always been: a low-trust political environment.”³⁷ Historical rivalries, differences in threat perception and defense spending, conflicting views of national sovereignty, to say nothing of the five neutral EU member states, may well doom the realization of full-fledged European Army. However, the interim steps being taken to achieve this defense integration have the potential to do lasting damage.

Recognizing that a potential EU Army would weaken NATO and serve to further sever the transatlantic link, in November 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the potential of an EU Army a “a positive process,” saying that it would “strengthen the multipolar world.”³⁸

A frequent argument in favor of autonomous EU defense capabilities is that it would complement NATO, rather than compete against it or detract from it.³⁹ In a 2013 Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, Luke Coffey elucidated the fallacy that EU capabilities would be available for NATO operations:

Proponents of EU defense integration argue that military capabilities developed under the auspices of the CSDP will always be made available to NATO.

For example, an EU Battlegroup could also be on call for NATO operations if, and when, NATO was ever to request the use of it. This may sound good in theory but is unlikely to work in practice.

This is due to the institutional workings of the EU and the composition of its membership. Any time that EU military assets are used, unanimous agreement by all EU members is required. Six veto-wielding EU members are not members of NATO. Of these six countries, five are established neutral countries: Ireland, Austria, Malta, Sweden, and Finland. The other, Cyprus, is politically hostile toward NATO member Turkey and has a track record of blocking NATO-EU cooperation in the past.⁴⁰

Many commentators and analysts have called for a “European pillar” inside NATO,⁴¹ however this premise is based on a mistaken belief that “a stronger EU role in defense matters will encourage European countries to invest more in defense [and] rests on the dubious premise that the EU will somehow be able to achieve what NATO has been unable to do since the end of the Cold War.”⁴²

Further, as Heritage Foundation analysts have written, the European pillar concept relies on the mistaken assumption that European-pillar capabilities inside NATO would always be made available.⁴³ Not only would EU defense capabilities almost certainly not be available for NATO operations, thus far, the EU’s efforts at standing up capabilities for autonomous crisis management action has amounted to little. For instance, EU battlegroups (EUBG), multinational battalions comprising 1,500 personnel, are meant as rapid reaction forces for EU crisis management under the CSDP. Fully operational since 2007, the EU has so far yet to find the political will to use them:

While the EUBG concept supported the transformation of Europe’s militaries from heavy collective defence forces to more agile crisis management structures, the EUBG have so far been unable to meet operational expectations. A number of factors including, crucially, a lack of political will to act in a European context has meant that these forces have never deployed.⁴⁴

Another recent example of Europe’s inability to swiftly tackle security challenges near its border was the series of aggressive attacks and seizures of oil tankers by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz in the summer of 2019. While plans for a “coordinated maritime presence”⁴⁵ of European naval forces were long discussed, for the remainder of the year they amounted to little. A U.S.-led initiative, Operation Sentinel, was launched in June.⁴⁶ Based out

of Bahrain,⁴⁷ the U.S.-led initiative has been joined by contributions from Albania, Australia, the United Kingdom—as well as Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁸ Initially proposed by the U.K. in July 2019,⁴⁹ the now French-led Awareness Strait of Hormuz initiative—initially consisting of French and Dutch naval forces based out of Abu Dhabi—did not become fully operational until February 25.⁵⁰ In addition to its tardiness, the European initiative is duplicative of the U.S.-led coalition and suffers from a lack of regional buy-in that Operation Sentinel enjoys.

Permanent Structured Cooperation

In recent years, the European Union has initiated a series of initiatives to jump-start a realization of strategic autonomy: The most important of these initiatives is the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) launched in December 2017. PESCO is a joint effort of 25 participating member states (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden).⁵¹ PESCO seeks to consolidate European defense industry, streamline procurement, leverage economies of scale to produce competitive armaments, and break down cultural and political barriers on the continent that protect domestic defense industries from outside competition.

Common procurements are sought as a way to lower costs and improve European interoperability. “The ultimate goal is to reduce the multiplicity of complex weapon systems currently in use throughout Europe from roughly 180 to about 30.”⁵² Although ostensibly about coordinating defense procurements and pooling money and military capabilities, PESCO is another step toward the EU wresting even more control of security matters away from individual member states. Of current EU member states, only Denmark, Malta, and the U.K. do not take part in PESCO.

PESCO was born of big promises and loud fanfare. However, it is unlikely to produce much in the way of additional military capability.⁵³ The arrangement will not lead to an increase in defense spending for European nations. Decades of EU defense initiatives have failed to meaningfully move the needle on European defense spending, and there is no reason to believe current initiatives will lead to a different result. Thus far, there is sparse evidence that the initiation of PESCO has sparked a renewed interest in investing in research and development across the European Union. According to a European Defense Agency Report, in 2018, only four EU member

states spent more than 1 percent of their total defense budgets on research and technology.⁵⁴ In addition, four member states accounted for 85 percent of research and technology investment, and eight states combined accounted for 96 percent.⁵⁵

Indeed, there is a risk that some European governments may decide to spend *less* on defense if they believe that EU funding through the European Defense Fund (EDF) can supplement defense procurements and research and development. A 2019 report from the European Court of Auditors regarding the EDF warned, “Another risk is that EU financial incentives might replace rather than complement national funding.”⁵⁶

PESCO is highly unlikely to produce the high-end capabilities in which U.S. allies in Europe are most deficient, while, at the same time, competing for funding at a nation-state level with those capabilities that NATO prioritizes. One analyst remarked, “Regardless of the fact that high-level voices from both EU and NATO have stated time and time again that PESCO has ‘not set such a goal’ as to compete against NATO, it is highly likely that it will do just that. The funds EU countries are willing to allocate to defense spending are limited, which makes prioritization between purchasing different types of defense equipment problematic.”⁵⁷ Additionally, some in NATO fear PESCO duplicates planning and procurement coordination efforts already undertaken through NATO’s defense investment division.⁵⁸

Within Europe, PESCO has the potential to further exacerbate fractures regarding the future of defense on the continent—all the while contributing little towards buttressing the defense of sovereign territory in Europe from outside aggressors. One researcher noted that “PESCO is a balancing act between divergent European policy visions, security policy necessities, and alliance policy preferences. Not only are PESCO’s objectives ambitious, ambiguously defined, and partly contradictory—actors also tend to interpret and prioritize them as they please.”⁵⁹

Worryingly, PESCO, is likely to serve as a political tool to deepen EU defense integration. Former EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker (in office at the time of PESCO’s creation) glowingly tweeted, “She is awake, the Sleeping Beauty of the Lisbon Treaty: Permanent Structured Cooperation is happening. I welcome the operational steps taken today by Member States to lay the foundations of a European #DefenceUnion. Our security cannot be outsourced.”⁶⁰

One analyst notes:

In practice, strategic autonomy is to be promoted through constant deepening of technological and institutional interoperability amongst heretofore

predominantly nationally organized armament markets and armed forces. In principle, both dimensions of interoperability can be conceived as practical-technical issues, to be managed at the interdepartmental and industrial level. The more ambitious the entire project becomes, however, the more political significance it acquires.⁶¹

Another analyst stated more succinctly, “To assume a stronger defense posture, Europe needs more political and economic integration.”⁶²

Currently, 47 projects are being pursued under the auspices of PESCO. The first 17 projects were announced in March 2018, with a second set of 17 added in November 2018.⁶³ In May 2019, the EU called for a third set of proposals for PESCO to be submitted; these were announced in November 2019. PESCO projects are almost uniformly on the low end of the capability spectrum. PESCO projects are unlikely to add significant capabilities that will be of service to NATO. One analysis of PESCO stated, “Projects are on the low-end of the capability spectrum and are unlikely to significantly reduce shortfalls by themselves.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, “Moving to the highest end of the spectrum may be challenging.... As things stand today, it seems rather unlikely for those states to use such a recently-established framework with no track record of successful delivery to procure the most strategic capabilities that constitute large political and industrial endeavors.”⁶⁵

While PESCO-procured capabilities will still be owned by member states, there is no uniform understanding within the EU about the purpose of capabilities produced through PESCO. “PESCO is part of the CSDP, which is an integral part of the common foreign and security policy of the EU. CSDP covers both civilian and military missions and operations for peace-keeping, conflict prevention, and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter.”⁶⁶

Most participating nations have an understanding that PESCO-produced capabilities will be utilized primarily for crisis management. Indeed, in the initial round of 34 PESCO projects, only the Greek upgrade of a maritime surveillance project explicitly mentioned safeguarding territorial integrity as a task.⁶⁷ That PESCO projects are not envisioned as capabilities in support of territorial defense undercuts a frequent claim that the U.S. has asked Europe to do more for its own defense—and that PESCO is helping to achieve that end. Then-German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen in May 2019 stated that Europeans “are doing what our American friends have been demanding we do for years. Our task now is to convince our allies that Nato [sic] will only profit from the efforts to create a European Defence Union.”⁶⁸

While some PESCO projects, such as the Dutch-led military mobility project, if fully implemented, will have ancillary benefits for NATO and territorial defense, the overwhelming majority of PESCO projects will do little to bolster needed capabilities within NATO to fight a war against a near-peer adversary. An analysis of the 34 initial PESCO projects found that even if fully implemented, “many shortfalls would still persist, as would Europe’s dependency on the United States for critical military capability.”⁶⁹

The need for real investment in capabilities on the highest end of the spectrum in Europe is evident.

In addition to failing to fulfill gaps in needed high-end capabilities in many European nations, it remains to be seen whether PESCO can deliver upon proposed projects. While proposing projects is one thing, bringing those projects to fruition is another, and “a majority of projects at this stage do not appear to have credible plans and timelines.”⁷⁰ For instance, EU budget negotiations as of the end of February have damped hope of success for the military mobility project. According to reports, “the proposed funding for military mobility has dropped from €6.5 billion under the initial Commission proposal, to €2.5 billion under the Finnish presidency negotiating box, to €1.5 billion under Council president Charles Michel’s proposal, to potentially zero funding in the Commission’s latest technical document.”⁷¹ In addition, the projects that show the greatest potential to produce results are those that were underway prior to PESCO’s adoption, which have been largely or entirely funded by the lead nations’ domestic defense budgets—and which already achieved significant progress before being rebranded as a PESCO project.⁷²

While it remains plausible that PESCO produces some low-spectrum results that could add value, it remains chiefly a political initiative, which was readily apparent at its birth, when a more inclusive German approach won out over the French-supported exclusivity arrangement. While the long-term outcomes of PESCO remain to be seen, it is already clear that the initiative, while helpful in delivering low-end capabilities, will *not* alleviate gaps in crucial high-end military capabilities in Europe—and may instead become a venue for individual nations to secure supplementary EU funding for pet projects, while the EU leverages PESCO in support of more overt and dangerous political goals.

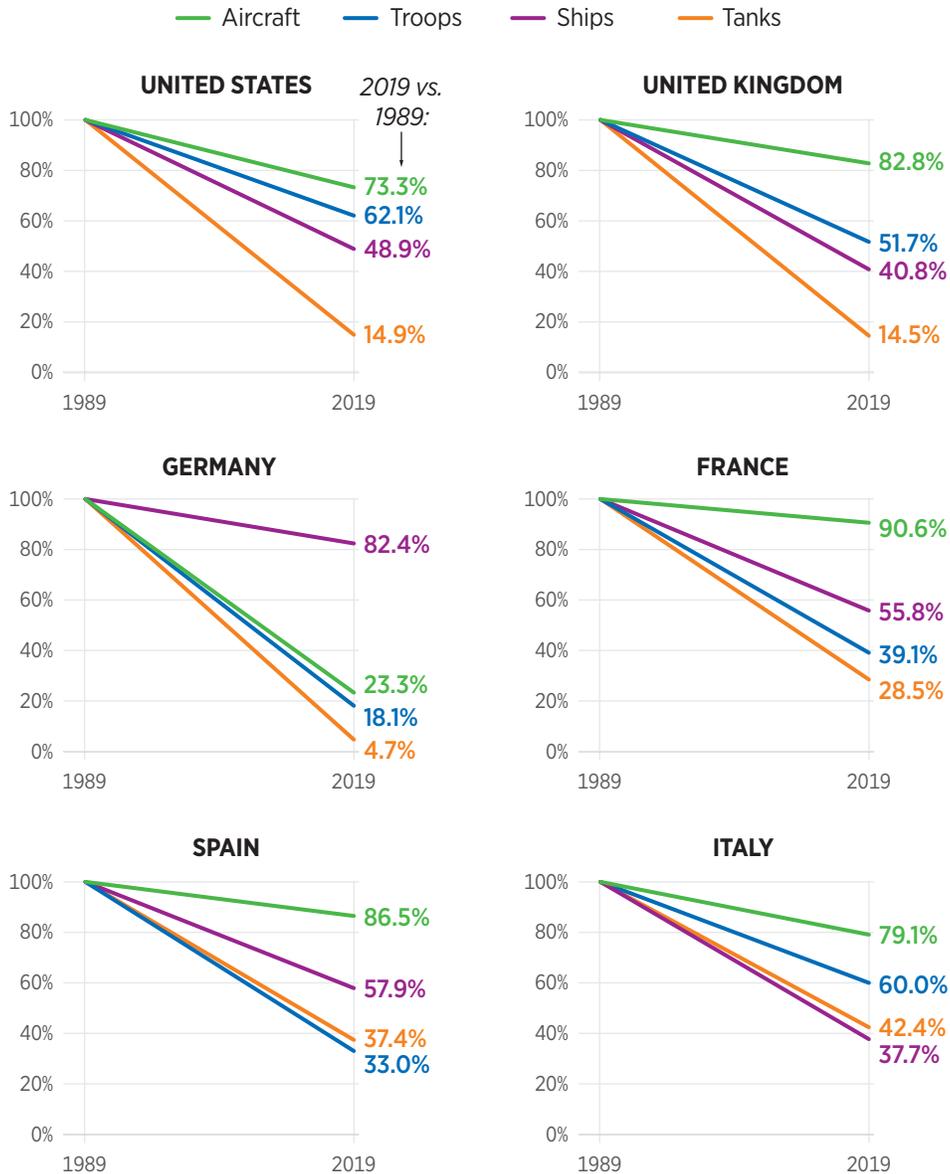
The European Defense Fund

Proposed in 2016 and launched in June 2017, the EDF seeks to spur European defense industrial integration while allowing the EU a greater

CHART 1

The Decline of NATO Militaries

Gaps in high-end capabilities in many European nations call into question the feasibility of proposed Permanent Structured Cooperation projects.



SOURCES: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1989–1990* (London: Brassey's, 1989), and The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019* (London: Routledge, 2019).

say in European defense. The EDF consists of funding for research (€90 million through the end of 2019, and €500 million per year after 2020),⁷³ as well as joint development and acquisitions (€500 million total for 2019 and 2020, and €1 billion per year after 2020). The EU Commission states that “the European Defence Fund can quickly become the engine powering the development of the European Security and Defence Union that citizens expect.”⁷⁴

A large number of PESCO projects are receiving EDF funding.⁷⁵ The EU Commission proposed a total of €13 billion for EDF in the 2021–2027 EU budget, €4.1 billion to fund “competitive and collaborative research projects,” and €8.9 billion to help co-finance “the costs for prototype development and the ensuing certification and testing requirements.”⁷⁶

The EU Commission, through the EDF, is seeking to parlay its role in formulating the EU budget into a greater role in European defense matters. As a recent report notes, “If successfully implemented, the EDF is expected to increase the European Commission’s agenda-setting power in the field of security and defense.”⁷⁷ The European Commission recently created a new Directorate General for Defense Industry and Space, whose key role will be implementation of the EDF.⁷⁸ Reporting to the Commissioner for the Internal Market,⁷⁹ the “decision to set up the Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space is a political signal that indicates that the defence policy is becoming an increasingly important field of activity of both the European Commission and the entire EU.”⁸⁰ Via the EDF vehicle, the EU Commission has successfully utilized its non-defense competencies to garner more supranational control over defense matters in Europe.⁸¹

While the Commission continues to take on a more muscular role in European defense matters, it remains important to note that EU defense spending “accounts for less than 2% of the Member States’ overall military spending.”⁸² The political willingness of individual nation-states to invest in defense as well as their own needs and threat perceptions will, for the foreseeable future, continue to drive investments.

The U.S. has expressed wariness about the EDF and PESCO, in particular expressing serious concerns over the stonewalling of U.S. defense companies from taking part. In a May 2019 letter to Federica Mogherini, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ellen Lord, U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, expressed “deep concern” that EDF and PESCO would “produce duplication, non-interoperable military systems, diversion of scarce defence resources and unnecessary competition between NATO and the EU.”⁸³ In addition, Lord decried potential “poison pills,” limiting the involvement

of U.S. companies in PESCO projects, stating these would amount to “a dramatic reversal of the last three decades of increased integration of the transatlantic defense sector.”⁸⁴

The reaction from some corners of Europe to the Undersecretary Lord’s letter was to say the letter showcased “misunderstanding of how the European Union works.”⁸⁵ Indeed, U.S. criticisms of European defense integration efforts are oftentimes met with derision that the U.S. misunderstands the EU’s motives, with the undercurrent assumption that any criticism of EU defense integration must necessarily be misplaced or ill-informed.

In June 2019, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Michael Murphy told European policymakers that restrictive EU rules “risk delinking the North American and European defense sectors after decades of hard work to increase our integration” and “would only help our adversaries and create a new irritant in trans-Atlantic relations.”⁸⁶

The EU’s draft rules on EDF-funded PESCO projects run afoul of U.S. policy that any EU defense projects should not discriminate against non-EU members. As currently conceived, EU draft rules would allow for collaboration with defense firms in non-EU nations “as long as their involvement does not put the Union’s security interests at risk—they will have no access to sensitive information, nor will they be able to control ownership of intellectual property, which under the new EU rules cannot be transferred outside the Union or associated countries.”⁸⁷

Restrictive EU rules that limit or greatly hamper the involvement of non-EU defense firms from taking part in PESCO projects would not only hinder cooperation and interoperability with the United States, but also with non-EU NATO members such as Canada, Norway, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.⁸⁸ As an October House of Commons Report notes, “Only participating Member States will have decision making rights regarding PESCO. Those States that remain outside of the mechanism, will have no powers or voting rights over current projects or its future strategic direction.”⁸⁹ The EU continues to seek rules to assuage the U.S., however, efforts thus far seem to have fallen short, with proposed rules currently being circulated very unlikely to resolve U.S. concerns.⁹⁰

Military Planning and Conduct Capability: Framework for a Future EU Operational Headquarters

On June 8, 2017, the European Council approved the creation of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) to oversee all EU “non-executive military missions,”⁹¹ or training missions, including their

operational planning. Today, the MPCC oversees EU training missions in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Somalia.⁹² The creation of the MPCC is a significant step to the eventual creation of a permanent EU Operational Headquarters (OHQ). Long blocked by the U.K.,⁹³ the MPCC establishment broke, in the words of one European analyst, a “taboo.”⁹⁴ It is likely to have created a framework from which the EU will build out an OHQ.

The process of expanding the MPCC has already begun. In November 2018, the European Council expanded the MPCC’s purview to include “the objective to be ready by the end of 2020 to also take responsibility for the operational planning and conduct of one executive military CSDP operation, limited to EU battlegroup size.”⁹⁵

As Heritage Foundation analysts have written:

An EU OHQ is a needless and expensive proposal that is more about planting the EU flag than it is about increasing Europe’s military capability. The EU already has access to the full range of NATO’s military headquarters at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) under the Berlin-Plus arrangement. Furthermore, the EU has access to five national headquarters for use for EU-led military missions.⁹⁶

The MPCC is currently undergoing a review, which will likely conclude the necessity of further expanding its role.⁹⁷

The U.S. should be leery of the duplication of existing structures the MPCC represents. The MPCC will have a permanent staff of 60 people, with a possibility for 94 additional “augmentees”⁹⁸ to support a potential executive military operation. As the MPCC continues to envelop additional responsibilities, one can expect its staffing to increase, along with a ballooning of its budgetary burden.

While the MPCC may represent an unnecessary financial burden, even more destructively, it is a future permanent EU OHQ currently being constructed in plain sight. As the MPCC comes up for further review, the U.S. should make clear its opposition to any further expansion of its role—and work with like-minded European nations to block the creation of an EU OHQ.

The Way Forward for U.S. Defense Policy in Europe

Security and stability in Europe remain in the United States’ national interest. Economically, culturally, diplomatically, and politically, Europe is home to America’s closest allies. It remains a critical partner in tackling

a host of global security challenges. The importance and power of a united U.S.–European front in standing up against the threats posed by China and Russia in an era of great power competition should not be underestimated.

Europe must choose to stand resolutely shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. rather than pursuing the phantasm that it can stand as a third way between competing great powers. Instead, a robust transatlantic link will be essential for pushing back against a revanchist Russia, an increasingly abrasive and expansive China, a belligerent Iran, and the continuing threat posed by radical Islamists.

NATO is—and should remain—the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Europe for the foreseeable future. The alliance has helped safeguard the security and prosperity of member states for 70 years. NATO not only remains the most effective and sole security alliance capable of deterring Russian and Chinese threats to Europe, but also affords the United States a level of influence that its contribution to Europe’s security, which, from a financial as well as a manpower standpoint, it deserves.

The EU has a role to play in tackling some of the continent’s security challenges. By dint of its competencies, the EU must be a key player in addressing threats from terrorism, Chinese technology and investment in Europe, energy security, and instability brought on by mass migration. The EU, however, cannot replace the security role played in tandem by the United States and NATO. In fact, the U.S. and NATO have long provided the security umbrella under which the EU was able to take hold, grow, and expand. NATO would exist without the EU; the same cannot be said of the reverse.

In April 2019, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte succinctly stated the obvious when speaking about Europe, saying, “We cannot guarantee our own security.”⁹⁹ Recognition of this reality makes it all the more unfortunate that the EU has continued its drive towards “strategic autonomy.” Partly underlying this drive are economic concerns (desire for cost saving joint procurements) and military interests (EU flagged forces to deploy in crisis management situations apart from the U.S.); the swift undercurrent remains the desire of many in Europe to finally and firmly place defense under the supranational purview of the EU bureaucracy in Brussels.

Road Map for U.S. Policymakers

U.S. policy in Europe should aim to maintain NATO’s primary role in European defense, and continue its leadership role within the alliance. The U.S. should view EU defense integration with deep skepticism, seeking to mitigate the worst impacts of strategic autonomy while setting red lines

for the EU that the U.S. would consider detrimental to its interests and regional security.

To carry out a constructive pathway forward, the U.S. should:

- **Refuse to back further EU defense integration.** Decades of tacit support for EU defense integration efforts have resulted in little or no additional European capability. Rather, these efforts have given false credence to policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic who believe the U.S. can and should disengage from European security. The reality, which Western adversaries clearly know, is that EU defense is a paper tiger that will not be rectified through defense integration. Rather, a robust U.S.-led NATO alliance is the only true guarantor of transatlantic security.
- **Voice consistent and strident opposition to the creation of an EU army.** Although there is not currently an EU army, the creation of one is clearly the goal of many in Europe, whether outwardly or by stealth. It is not in the interest of the U.S. or NATO to have a European army under the control of unelected European bureaucrats—and the U.S. should be clear that this is a red line the EU should not cross.
- **Avoid decoupling the U.S. from European security.** Transatlantic security is vital to U.S. security. The U.S. should challenge notions that the U.S. is disengaging from the continent and forcefully push back against initiatives such as EU strategic autonomy, which would serve to decouple the U.S. from Europe.
- **Reaffirm NATO's lead security role in upcoming review.** At the London Heads of State Meeting, the leaders agreed that “Taking into account the evolving strategic environment, we invite the Secretary General to present to Foreign Ministers a Council-agreed proposal for a forward-looking reflection process under his auspices, drawing on relevant expertise, to further strengthen NATO's political dimension including consultation.”¹⁰⁰ The U.S. should work to ensure that this process reaffirms NATO's central and indispensable role in European security.
- **Leverage the U.S.–U.K. special relationship.** With the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, some of NATO's and the United States' most important European allies will not be EU members. The U.S. and the U.K. should maintain a united front in advancing a transatlantic security agenda with NATO at its core.

- **Insist on NATO's right of first refusal for all European security operations.** The U.S. should insist that NATO be given the right of first refusal for all European security operations before any European Union coordinated operations.
- **Ensure U.S. defense manufacturers are not locked out of future PESCO procurements.** The U.S. should applaud efforts to mitigate waste and employ economies of scale in defense procurements. However, the U.S. must vigilantly work to ensure American companies are not unfairly locked out of lucrative and important future European defense procurements—either outright or through onerous caveats, requirements, or poison pills.
- **Push back against discrimination in PESCO projects.** Restrictive EU rules that limit or greatly hamper the involvement of non-EU defense firms from taking part in PESCO projects would not only hinder cooperation and interoperability with the United States, but also non-EU NATO members such as Canada, Norway, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, running afoul of U.S. policy that EU defense initiatives not discriminate against non-EU NATO member states.
- **Resist any duplication of NATO planning and procurement coordination responsibilities.** NATO has significant resources and structures dedicated to coordination procurements and ensuring interoperability through shared standards. The U.S. must work to ensure new EU initiatives do not duplicate work already done through NATO.
- **Work with like-minded allies to constrain further expansion of the MPCC.** The MPCC is a significant step to the eventual creation of a permanent EU OHQ. The MPCC is unnecessary and duplicative of existing structures, quickly expanding its purview and staffing, and is likely to be bestowed new powers when it comes up for further review. The U.S. should make clear its opposition to any further expansion of the role of the MPCC and work with like-minded EU nations to block the eventual efforts to transition the MPCC to an EU OHQ.
- **Focus cooperation with the EU on non-defense security vectors.** While the U.S. should be crystal clear that it does not support EU defense integration or the creation of an EU army, the EU has an

important security role to play based on its competencies. The U.S. policy should focus its cooperation with the EU on security vectors in which the EU can play a constructive role, including counterterrorism, energy security, investment screenings, and military mobility.

Conclusion

Security in the Euro-Atlantic region remains firmly in the national interest of the United States. A renewed focus in Europe on strategic autonomy and increased efforts to foster European defense integration by and large undermine U.S. interests in Europe by eroding the transatlantic link and undermining NATO. U.S. policymakers should seek to ensure EU initiatives do not decouple the U.S. from Europe, do not discriminate against non-EU NATO members, and do not duplicate existing capabilities or structures that already exist in NATO.

At an important crossroads, keeping the “3Ds” in mind will help the U.S. foster a NATO-focused security architecture in Europe, working with the EU on non-defense security vectors, while dissuading European allies from decisions that undermine long-term security in service of political goals.

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