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DEFENCE FORCES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: PROSPECTS AND AMBITIONS

Abstract:

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 caused significant changes as far as international order is concerned. Sudden realization of security threat made the European Union's leaders acknowledge the importance of efficient defence strategy and military independency. In order to assess the possible effects of newly implemented European defence initiatives, it is necessary to examine the issues regarding current condition of the E.U. security. The aim of this paper is to analyse European military potential, European military issues, as well as selected defence programs being a result of the dynamic changes in the security system.

Key words:

European Union, EDIRPA, Military forces, Versailles Declaration

INTRODUCTION

Confronted with growing instability, strategic competition and security threats, we decided to take more responsibility for our security and take further decisive steps towards building our European sovereignty, reducing our dependencies and designing a new growth and investment model (...) ¹

– The Versailles Declaration, March 2022

¹ Council of the European Union, *The Versailles Declaration*, March 2022, p. 3.

The whole world has recently experienced the end of the end of history, yet it is Europe which is the most impacted by the outbreak of war in Ukraine, in social, economic, and political aspects. The Europeans got used to simple peacekeeping within the union. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced a confrontation between the leaders of the European Union and uncomfortable reality – now it seems clear that the European security had been, in fact, neglected for the last few decades. The E.U. policy focused mostly on democracy and prosperity, while the issues regarding security did not appear to be a concern of the European leaders, as military cover was provided by the United States, through its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The armed conflict, which happens to take place right behind the European's Union eastern border, however, appears to bring impact on the leaders' attitude and significantly increase desire to conceptualize new defence strategy after decades of security decline. Not only have the Europeans provided weapons and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but also announced, in several cases, noteworthy expansion of national defence budgets. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether these actions will extend to larger reforms of the European Union's almost infamously uncoordinated military structures². Formation of a new defence initiative, such as an E.U. army, would stand a demanding and risky challenge for the whole union, yet it would also create the possibility for Europe's independent and more secure future.

THE POTENTIAL, THE HETEROGENITY

There is no doubt about the E.U. military potential – the level of Europe's defence spending and the size of its collective forces in uniform should make it a global military power. The twenty-seven member states of the union have over 1,3 million active-duty military personnel, which makes its capacity comparable to the armed forces of the United States. The

² V. I. Herr and M. Speer, *The European Union needs its own army*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/18/european-union-army-ukraine/?fbclid=IwAR2mDZF3P01-C3egsAuBZ6z9PUvn71G3TLzYywBWdA1D14jIjDbAM--wuE4> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

combined military expenditure of twenty-six states within the union (as Denmark withdrew from the all the E.U. military projects) is as high as 200 billion euros³, yet Europe does not act as one on defence – due to the fragmentation and the lack of proper coordination and effective planning, the number does not translate to neither to Europe’s strength, nor to convincingness as far as security is concerned. Its military strength today is far weaker than the sum of its parts – the current problems plaguing European defence are structural and regard fragmentation, as each European country has its own distinct national military, leading to inefficiency⁴.

Centralization, as a product of further European integration, would seem like a solution to the European Union’s security issues. Moreover, the establishment of autonomous European army would enhance the continent’s sovereignty, not only in the military, but also political context and would be the step towards the E.U. independence from Washington, as currently NATO remains the only reliable safety guarantor. Overdependency on the Western ally precludes Europe’s growth of importance in the international arena as a geopolitical actor and, in some ways, prevents pan-European trends among the continent’s leaders. It also raises a question about European identity, as well as the future of its development – the pride of European leaders and citizens has its fundamentals in widely understood heterogeneity, hence the transnational integration stands a challenging procedure in regards of multi-level governance. However, striving for political homogeneity seems to be a solution for improving the condition of Europe security, as well as its stance in international relations. The diversity impacts European political consciousness, therefore it appears to be the cause of military fragmentation, especially if the differences between the state members’ strategic cultures are taken under consideration. To quote an analyst Ester Sabatino, “there is the desire to protect

³ R. Emmott, *Record EU defence spending masks failure to collaborate, report says*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/record-eu-defence-spending-masks-failure-collaborate-report-says-2021-12-06/> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

⁴ M. Bergmann, J. Lamond, et. al., *The Case for EU Defense. A New Way Forward for Trans-Atlantic Security Relations*, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/case-eu-defense/?fbclid=IwAR2gDfnFuVSEVLaD7vK2-DKSAU_Snqlae_gQPbA-PwfE0ardqhg7idc2EEQ [accessed: 25.11.2022].

national defence industries and champions. There is the temptation to spend money on off-the-shelf products that are at the cutting-edge of technology. And there is the impulse to cement defence partnerships beyond the E.U. These factors contribute to the current situation”⁵. Moreover, Europeans consider themselves, first, citizens of their country, then citizens of the European Union⁶. However, according to Eurobarometer, “77% of Europeans are in favour of a common defence and security policy among E.U. Member States, with a majority in favour of such a policy in each Member State, according to this Standard Eurobarometer survey, conducted between 18 January and 14 February 2022”. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, it has been also reported that there is increased trust of citizens in the E.U., and continued support for the European Union’s response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Yet, defence acquisitions still mainly occur at the national level and joint procurement represented only 11 percent of the total armament acquisition of E.U. member states in 2020⁷.

THE ACTIONS

When Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, defence budgets started to rise across the E.U. member states. The E.U. member states opinions on security matter differ significantly from one another on security matter⁸, nevertheless, some measures have already been taken within the union policy since last February. In March 2022, the European leaders adopted the Versailles declaration treating about the E.U.’s responsibilities to protect its citizens, values and democracies and the European model. It also reaffirms the leaders’ commitment to take more responsibility for the union's

⁵ B. Giegerich, E. Sabatino, *The (Sorry) State of EU Defense Cooperation*, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88104?fbclid=IwAR1r2hVE3WzofuL9rCZkz5v44XwSJ69YPIbjFj-7DBsRG1ug64lAupjI4SQ> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

⁶ See: Eurobarometer, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

⁷ See: European Defence Agency, *Defence Data 2019-2020: Key findings and analysis*.

⁸ E. Braw, *Is an EU Army Coming?*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/20/is-an-eu-army-coming/?fbclid=IwAR1DCV6HjZ5DB5jTis8rWjfnlCreTiKvjwmgQJMa1wJj83Nb22pueF-UWQ> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

own security, as well as to pursue a strategic course of action in defence, while highlighting the autonomy of decision-making and addressing three dimensions: (i) bolstering defence capabilities; (ii) reducing our energy dependencies; and (iii) building a more robust economic base⁹. Although the importance of NATO was still emphasized in the declaration, as we read, it was “decided that the European Union would take more responsibility for its own security and, in the field of defence, pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously. The transatlantic relationship and E.U.–NATO cooperation, in full respect of the principles set out in the Treaties and those agreed by the European Council, including the principles of inclusiveness, reciprocity and decision-making autonomy of the E.U., are key to our overall security. A stronger and more capable E.U. in the field of security and defence will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members”¹⁰.

On the 21st of March, the Council formally approved the Strategic Compass, which gives the European Union a plan of action for strengthening the E.U.'s security and defence policy by the year of 2030¹¹. The first version of the Strategic Compass was tabled by the High Representative already in November last year, based on the first ever threat analysis to which the intelligence services of the member states contributed. Its objective is to make the union a stronger and more capable security provider. The Compass consists of four pillars – (i) act; (ii) invest; (iii) partner; and (iv) secure. The priority actions involve commitment in terms of, *inter alia*, establishing rapid deployment capacity up to 5000 troops, enhancing military mobility, boosting intelligence analysis capacity, developing security strategy within the union, as well as strengthening cooperation with strategic partners such as NATO, the UN and regional partners, including the OSCE, AU

⁹ Council of the European Union, *The Versailles Declaration*, March 2022, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

and ASEAN¹². Later that month, the E.U. leaders held a strategic debate on security and defence, endorsed the Strategic Compass and invited the Council to start implementing it¹³.

On the 17th of May, the E.U. Defence Innovation Scheme and the Hub for European Defence Innovation has been established by EDA Defence Ministers. This decision came after the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence which had called for the creation of such a Hub in 2022. HEDI objective is to operate “at the intersection of EDA’s already existing innovation activities, serving as a catalyst and amplifier”, while being based on three pillars: (i) identification of innovative ideas and innovators; (ii) implementation of these ideas; (iii) outreach to increase the awareness of the solutions produced and their application to the defence domain . It is worth noticing, that the E.U. Defence Innovation Scheme and the Hub for European Defence Innovation would also stand a great unit for technology and industry innovation development.

In June 2022, Council adopted conclusions on a framework for a coordinated E.U. response to hybrid campaigns. The objective of it was to endorse the Strategic Compass and to develop the E.U. Hybrid Toolbox. The toolbox is supposed to bring together “all relevant actors, policies and instruments to counter the impact of hybrid threats in a more coordinated manner.” In July, the European Commission announced the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIPRA), which aims at reducing barriers to cooperation and providing incentives for joint procurement through cost saving and financial support¹⁴. It was declared that by the end of 2022, the Commission will also present the E.U. Defence Investment Programme (EDIP)

¹² See: Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, March 2022.

¹³ *Timeline: EU cooperation on security and defence*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-security/defence-security-timeline/?fbclid=IwAR3cOm6YnMKTG4nuYbkYD1K0hNnK0177i2h-myVj4fbcTMG9kxN7Lsqa-SM> [accessed: 25.11.2022].

¹⁴ B. Giegerich, E. Sabatino, *op. cit.*

regulation that should further reduce forementioned barriers through a VAT exemption¹⁵.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, above mentioned European initiatives are likely to change the perspective on the union's defence strategy, yet it is necessary to notice that they all require a certain level of member states' commitment regarding shared responsibility of the implementation. The E.U. policy makers' tendency of making exceptions does not create a potential for maintaining the intended effects. Unanimity and unity in regards of security seems vital in the times of crisis, however, such phenomena appear as a rarity within a state, let alone a heterogeneous union. Strengthening European defence capacity is now depending on addressing the continuing fragmentation. For now, however, it seems like further integration of the union has not been the most concerning issue for the European leaders, who hope to achieve satisfactory security capacity by expanding the budget and industrial technology innovation development instead of working on unifying various strategic cultures of the state members into one political narration which seems necessary to implement long-lasting defence policy.

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¹⁵ *Defence industry: EU to reinforce the European defence industry through common procurement with a €500 million instrument*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4491 [accessed: 29.11.2022].

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