European defence: background, facts and prospects

European countries can no longer afford to reason purely in terms of national defence.

After 1945, the idea of national defence was gradually superseded by the concept of a common European defence, individual European countries no longer being able to keep the very real threats menacing their security, notably that of the Red Army, at bay. The concept was based on the principle of a union of those European countries not controlled by the USSR under the terms of the Yalta Agreement that shared the same democratic values. But when it became apparent that defence involving this group of countries alone would not suffice, they sought support from across the Atlantic and a guarantee of security from the United States via NATO (1949 Washington Treaty).

This convenient arrangement continued into the 90s with the Europeans still preferring to depend on the USA rather than on each other for their security. Such was particularly the case during the Balkan crises, where it was the USA and NATO that provided solutions in Bosnia and Kosovo, despite these countries being part of Europe.

In today's globalised world dominated by "continent nations" (USA, China, India, Brazil, etc.), the Europeans, whose power is on the decline, are increasingly unable to adopt purely national policies. With the resurgence of nationalisms, especially in autocracies, power dynamics have taken over from international law. War has returned to Europe and exposed the continent’s inability to engage in high-intensity operations on its own (without American back-up). At a time of escalating, increasingly diverse threats, simply juxtaposing 27 weak national armies cannot make for strong European defence.

At present, European countries have no alternative to NATO to defend their vital security interests, a state of affairs that is fraught with danger.

Nearly all European countries are members of NATO, which owes much of its strength to American military power and leadership. But this dependency on the USA comes at a price. While, on paper, all members carry equal weight in the decision-making process (1 country = 1 vote), the fact is that the Americans have the upper hand. In exchange for being guaranteed security, Europe has to toe the American foreign policy line and allow the US defence industry (F35, Patriots, MLRS, etc.) privileged access to its markets. NATO earned its credibility stripes during the Cold War and has recently confirmed that it is a force to be reckoned with since the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine. It is effectively Europe’s only means of defence against major threats but its credibility is entirely dependent on United States involvement. There are no other options, not least because of past UK opposition.

NATO is therefore both the Europeans main line of defence and the key reason for their collective lack of common military power. Plans for a European pillar in
NATO, repeatedly mooted since the end of the Cold War (1994 Brussels Summit), have constantly failed to materialise. No one in their right mind would want NATO to be disbanded as things stand today in European defence terms, but its position of exclusivity is a real risk for the Old Continent.

The majority of the security issues that have emerged in Europe in recent years have demonstrated that, when American and European strategic interests diverge, Europe’s security is not assured:

- four years of war in Bosnia before NATO finally intervened in 1995;
- non-intervention in Georgia (2008);
- benevolent neutrality in the face of Turkish aggression against Greece and Europe;
- “Leadership from behind” in Libya (2011);
- limited support for operations in the Sahel region, etc.

During the Trump presidency, it was blatantly apparent that it was the US administration alone that decided whether or not America would step in to defend Europe and that its support could be withdrawn at the drop of a hat. Its unilateral decisions not to intervene in Syria even when Bashar al-Assad crossed the red line on chemical weapons, to withdraw from the Middle East and later from Afghanistan, go to show how little importance Americans attach to their allies, when they decide to change their policy with regard to their engagement in an operation.

In the war between Russia and Ukraine, American military support is decisive. This is what has made it possible for European and, more generally, Western democracies not to succumb to the Russian President’s diktat. It is, however, another example of Europe’s heavy dependency on the Americans and its inability to control its own destiny on its own territory, for want of credible military capabilities.

NATO is the main focus of transatlantic cooperation. While it may be vital and should be protected, the Alliance’s exclusive status is dangerous as it absolves European countries from their national defence responsibilities. In the words of editorialist Luc de Barochez: “Europe has to stop being completely reliant on an increasingly troubled United States”.

**Developing common European operational capabilities is the only alternative to remaining subservient to America. This solution is what is the urgently needed and perfectly feasible.**

This proposal from the European Council is realistic, has the support of Europe’s citizens and is well within Europe’s reach.

The need for strategic autonomy has been frequently repeated during European Council meetings since 2013. In December 2016, the goal was set of achieving strategic autonomy enabling Europe to deter, to react to and to protect itself against threats⁴. This objective cannot be attained without military capabilities.

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⁴ “Europeans need to be better equipped, trained and organised to be able to act more independently when necessary; maintaining peace outside and inside European Union borders while respecting NATO’s
Furthermore, the annual Eurobarometer surveys conducted by the European Commission have always shown that citizens from all European Union member states are in favour of Europe ensuring its own defence. The June 2022 survey revealed that the vast majority of EU citizens (81%) were in favour of a defence and security policy common to all EU member states – a view expressed by at least two thirds of respondents in the individual countries. In addition, 93% of these respondents were of the opinion that member states should join forces in defending EU territory and 85% thought that defence cooperation within the EU should be further extended.

It is also true that Europe has the necessary resources and capacities. The defence budget of all 27 EU member states put together was 240 billion euros in 2021 (before the start of the war in Ukraine), a figure 4 times higher than that of Russia (65 billion euros).

Common European defence is, therefore, not a pipedream. The problem, however, is that in the current political situation i.e., without a centralised and democratic European political authority, common defence remains a non-starter. Nevertheless, European defence by Europeans is conceivable under two conditions: firstly, that this is what the Europeans really want and are prepared to organise themselves accordingly, and secondly, that the Americans back this endeavour.

As long as the EU remains an intergovernmental organisation with regard to defence, it will only be able to engage in operations through coalitions of national armies. But the limits imposed by diverging national interests and uncertainties over the type of involvement are only too familiar. These difficulties can, however, be overcome if Europeans prove their commitment to solidarity by planning ahead for the different possible types of intervention. In March 2022, the EU Heads of State and Government unanimously approved the first draft of a European White Paper on security and defence codenamed the “Strategic Compass”, which identifies the main threats common to the 27 and sets out the means and resources that the Europeans will require to counter these. This first step should form the basis for defining actual operational scenarios, so that the organisational arrangements, structures and military forces member states would need to provide in each case can be worked out in advance, together with alternative options.

In fact, this is exactly what, under SACEUR authority, NATO did during the Cold War, in order to be in a position to respond almost instantly in the event of a Soviet offensive beyond the border between the two Germanies. Troop requirements per country, areas of deployment and modes of operation were planned in advance and validated through exercises. In due course, it will be interesting to consider the ways in which the Europeans could have organised themselves to counter the Russian hostilities of 24 February, if the Americans had decided not to intervene. However, it would be impossible to develop European military capabilities without the support of the United States. The security context has changed since the 90s when Madeleine Albright (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs) took a dim view of the emergence of an autonomous European defence policy. Today it
is in the interests of our major ally to have a European partner that is more capable of independent military action to supplement or support its operations, given the priority it currently attaches to the Indo-Pacific region and to competition with China. It should not be that difficult to convince the Americans that strengthening European operational capabilities will not weaken but strengthen NATO.

To sum up, in the face of growing security threats and emerging visibly stronger powers, the Europeans can no longer rely solely on their individual national defence systems. As things stand, in the event of major threat such as the recent Russian aggression in Ukraine, they have no choice but to turn to NATO, i.e., the United States. But there may be situations where the Americans cannot or will not respond to Europe’s cries for help. Today, NATO is the only realistic option, but it cannot be counted on and there is currently no alternative. The dangers of such complete dependency are legion and ought to spur the Europeans into developing common operational capabilities deployable independently or within the Atlantic Alliance. Strategically, this is where their interests lie and is something well within their reach. There is a middle ground between a utopian European army and a total absence of operational capabilities!

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