

4th EuroTalk
European strengths and difficulties
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The process of improving the European Defence

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This conference is about European strengths and difficulties. Defence is one of those difficulties.

The reality of the war that the Russian Federation launched against Ukraine, a war, that at the same time is against our values of freedom, democracy, primacy of the Law and human rights, made quite evident the extension of that European weakness.

The problem is even more serious if we add to it two other essential aspects. And I think we must do it. They are not avoidable.

One, corresponds to the existence of other threats to European security coming from the Eastern façade of the Mediterranean Sea, Northern Africa and the Sahel region.

The other, is the fact that to face all these problems and questions, Europe is basically alone, mainly due to the isolationism, and even anti-european positions that we can identify in contemporary USA.

For all these reasons, I will focus my intervention in the major requirements and problems affecting the process of improving the European Defence on those conditions. What can Europe do for itself?

One thing that needs to be said, is that today, the issue of European Defence is not an open question, regulated by “pros” and “cons” and, as such, generating doubts.

Quite the opposite, European Defence, and perhaps we can rename it, as “European self Defence”, is today an imperative question, even if we can, and in fact we should, discuss the “how and when” of its full implementation.

Having success in such process corresponds to increase the European strategic autonomy

For decades we lived under the conventional and nuclear umbrella of the USA, but it is not at all obvious that this protective umbrella continues to exist. In short, the value of NATO’s Article 5th is no longer unquestionable.

And the same goes to the traditional concept of Western World, that is no longer recognized or at least, is suffering a major crisis, in North America.

Thus, we have to develop our own umbrella. This is our very demanding task. To perform it reasonably we need to be competent in identifying the obstacles. What can be done and how to change the prevailing paradigms and mindsets.

Eventually the biggest obstacle, and also the most sensible, is the lack of unity within the European Union.

We are aware of the particular positions of countries such as Hungary, Slovakia and perhaps also the Czech Republic. These three nations, if they are not pro-Putin, they are certainly against liberal governance. They break therefore the unity of the EU, giving room to many voices within the Union that consider that is time to apply them the article 7th of the Lisbon Treaty, that allows the suspension of the membership of states that continuously act against the values of the Union. Others, although fully recognizing the situation, fear that such procedure would open a Pandora Box very difficult to anticipate and control.

In this political environment to draw common defence policies is therefore a very complex exercise.

In addition there are, within the Union, differences of perspectives related to Geography, with the Northern and Eastern nations showing a minor concern with what is going on in the Southern periphery of our continent, and the Southern members some times devaluating the threats that exist in the North and the East.

The only possible assessment of this dual reality is that they are all wrong. The right and constructive position is that all threats have to interest all member states, even if they can value differently each one of those threats.

I don't consider that it will be possible, at least from the outset, to associate all Member States in one single concept to improve European Defence. The EU is aware of that, and the models that are being suggested are mainly coalitions-of-the-willing or reinforced and structured cooperation, in both cases associating only the states that so wish. In any case, it will be extremely important to keep the flexibility needed to allow the association of NATO-non EU members, such as Iceland, Norway, the UK and Turkey, and also of states recognized as candidate states to EU membership.

It is not necessary to recall the high value of the UK and Turkey for the purposes of European Defence.

We will also have to see what may be the interests and requests of Canada...

Regardless of all the negative aspects it has to be said that progress in European Defence matters in the recent decade is far bigger than in all the precedent history of the Union. The Lisbon Treaty, the Trump American policies, and the war in Ukraine were responsible for the recent progress.

There is hope! Personally, I subscribe to this European hope

What are the European key assets that could sustain the development of its Defence?

We may list political will, experience, know-how, financial resources, human resources and technology.

Europe has almost all those assets, except a clear and common political will, and a technological standard comparable to the US or China.

But, even if the respective numbers related to forces, manpower and funds are possible to compare, the operational outcome of the European Defence assets is today much smaller when compared with that of the US. The fundamental reason is European fragmentation. Where the US has one organization, Europe has twenty seven.... This fragmentation is natural, but we have to find ways to overcome it.

And the same applies to armament and equipment. Europe has higher numbers of types of fighter aircrafts, warships, tanks, and so on...In this field with the aggravating factor that European arm producers compete to each other in the global armaments market...

Europe needs commitment, hard work and time to amend and change these negative aspects. And there are many signs that Europe is willing to do so.

Allow me to refer to some positive steps to build up the European defence.

The current European Commission has adopted a geopolitical perspective. Something rarely present in the past. For the first time there is a Commissioner for Defence and Space.

Following the American request, but nevertheless, European States are now allocating more money to defence, understanding the corresponding expenditures as an indispensable investment on their Security, and taking Defence as an essential public policy, in parallel, for instance with Education, Health or Social Security, at the discretion of the national Governments.

European States are aware that for their Defence they have to spend better, to spend more, to spend more jointly, and to spend more European.

Naturally, this very right statement has its limits. The more stringent refers to the idea of buying more European. In the last four years Europe spent more or less 38% buying European. The Commission target is to spend 60% in 2030, what would represent a big jump ahead.

It is abundantly clear that Europe should not buy military hardware from Russia or China. Some of the needed equipments can be found in the Brazilian or South Korean arms markets, but the majority of them is not available in any of those markets.

The implication is that, even if Europe works well and fast, it will maintain a certain level of dependency of the US during eight to ten years.

I consider that some visits of European political leaders (Macron, Starmer or Merz) to the White House have the character of damage control visits, aiming to ensure, among other aspects, the possibility to continue buying American in these eight to ten years timeframe. And we cannot blame the so-called “US industrial and military complex” for that situation...Only us are to be blamed!

An important consideration is that the European Union, and also NATO, through various formulas and mechanisms, are dedicating significant sums of money to help Member States in this process.

Defence can be destroyed very quickly, but it requires a long time to be developed.

This means that improving the European Defence in a robust and credible way, it will take time.

For instance, and as I have suggested, it will take at least eight to ten years of determined work until Europe could aspire to fill by itself its critical capabilities gaps in areas such as space based intelligence, air and missile defense, long range missiles, strategic mobility, artillery, ammunitions and logistics.

And the same applies to catch up with the US and China in the field of the new emerging and disruptive technologies. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, cyber and electronic warfare, strategic enablers and critical infrastructure protection fall in this category.

The difference is that on emerging and disruptive technologies it is possible to say that the task is very much in European hands, perhaps with the exception of quantum computing.

We hear very often references to the need to build up a “European Army”, that is basically a sound bite. Europe doesn’t need a permanent Army. There is no such a thing as a NATO Army...

What Europe really needs, and NATO has, is a European Force Structure, associating all the forces that Member States accept to commit to the Union at different levels of readiness.

But that can only be possible if Europe develops an adequate Defence Planning. Something that for the moment is not performed. Adopting as a model the NATO Defence Planning system or something very similar, would be a fine option, particularly because the NATO method is largely tested and good, and also because 23 nations belong simultaneously to both organizations.

The only exception to such method would be the more or less immediate building up of a European Rapid Reaction Force, with the participation of all, or almost all Member States, having around 5000 military, with an expeditionary character, and able to function as a “show the flag” asset, as a minimum conventional deterrent, and to fight as an entry force when and where necessary.

In another plan it is important to look to the reality of the European nuclear deterrent. Only one Member State, France, is a nuclear power. Theoretically we may add the UK nuclear forces. This situation is leading States such as Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden to consider developing their own nuclear capability, abandoning the regime established in the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, quite likely opening a nuclear weapons race, including in other geographies.

For the good use of its various forces the EU has to have a planning and operational structure. In short, its own military Headquarters, able to plan, command and control military operations at least of medium to high intensity.

Four institutional main changes are also required. First, to bring Defence to the core of EU life, namely by formally creating a political decision body composed by the Ministers of Defence. Second, to value the role of the EU Military Committee. Third, to reinforce the capabilities of the existing EU Military Staff. Fourth, to review the composition and functioning of the European External Action Service, where some components require adjustment, and also to ensure that this Service acts in a comprehensive, coherent and coordinated manner, something that, quite regrettably, is not happening.

Reviewing the European Global Strategy, dated 2016, the Strategic Compass, dated 2022, and many other frame documents is also necessary.

The ongoing debate on the creation of a European Defence Union is, of course, of paramount relevance. Apparently Europe is not yet ready to the corresponding political decision.

It cannot be excluded that Europe will develop for Defense, a kind of shared sovereignty model, participated for all or some of the Member States, having as a potential consequence that the non-participating states will quite likely be put in a second rank within the Union.

Discussions, so far quite abstracts, on questions such as "the europeanization of NATO" or "a European pillar of NATO" will have to be clarified and really understood.

I will stop here. Other aspects could and should be mentioned, but, in my view, these are the more relevant.

You will have noticed that there are many things to be addressed, and there is not a specific order to do so.

Basically they need to be worked simultaneously, what makes the exercise of improving the European Defence in a coordinated way, particularly difficult.

I believe that it is feasible!

Thank you for your kind attention.

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