

**EUROPE, STRATEGY,  
SECURITY  
PROGRAMME**

# **WHY DO WE NEED A EUROPEAN ARMY?**

(1/5)

BY **FRÉDÉRIC MAURO**

LAWYER AT THE PARIS AND BRUSSELS BARS, ASSOCIATED RESEARCHER AT IRIS

& **OLIVIER JEHIN**

INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST, CONTRIBUTOR TO THE BRUXELLES 2 (B2) BLOG

APRIL 2019

*Series of five insights published by IRIS and GRIP  
on the concept of European army.*

**ANALYSIS #1**



**B**efore every action comes the inspiration for it. So, what inspired the President of the French Republic and the German Chancellor to make a joint proclamation in November 2018 on the need for a European army, and then the Spanish head of government to join them a few weeks later? Did all three suddenly take leave of their senses? Is this not just so much pie in the sky, a delusion to divert attention away from the realities of what is going on at the moment? Or is it a project that will, admittedly, be difficult to bring to fruition, but one that is absolutely vital?

As is often the case, the conformists and the Eurosceptics were the first to react. Never ones to stint on sarcasm, they lined up hysterical counter-truths. The most deceitful of these is that there cannot be a European army unless there is a European nation or a “European identity”. But history shows that the reverse is true: it is almost always armed forces and warfare that have forged nations. These nations, moreover, are not themselves immutable: like identities, they are built over time and they evolve in relation to others. The truth lies elsewhere: people are afraid of the idea of a European army. As a synonym for autonomy, it disturbs Donald Trump and many Americans. And because it involves integration, it terrifies all those within the EU who believe that they can build European defence without integration. This is particularly true in France, where there are many people clinging onto the great illusion of an exemplary nation that can make it on its own, with a little cooperation from time to time.

Yet on the face of it, the idea of a European army is a popular one. According to Eurobarometer, an average of 75% of Europeans are in favour of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), a sort of proto-European army. In 2017, as many as 79% wanted this CSDP to be more “autonomous” from the Americans. It is a great shame that the question has not been asked again since then, as the concept of strategic autonomy is flourishing. As for the French, if one of the very few surveys on the subject is to be believed<sup>1</sup>, 80% of them would be in favour of creating a “European army”. This may lie in the simple fact that everybody can understand the words “European army”, unlike the acronyms of European defence that make up the vocabulary of an obscure language that only insiders can make sense of.

---

<sup>1</sup> Online survey by the French magazine Le Point published on 2 December 2018 - in response to the question: "is there a need to create a European army?", 31,665 people replied "yes" (80.8%) and 7513 replied "no" (19.2%).

So, before writing off the idea on the grounds that it would be impossible to implement, let us look at whether it would be desirable. What reasons that did not previously exist would justify a European army today?

This European army could not be a Franco-German super-brigade or another collection of showcase ornaments, as specific as they are useless, destined to clutter up the display cases of history. It can be understood only as an autonomous and integrated capability for action in the military field, harking back to the spirit of the Saint-Malo declaration of 1998.

## **THE EUROPEAN NATIONS ARE NO LONGER CAPABLE OF THEIR OWN DEFENCE**

---

The national European armies that still exist are the heritage, to greater or lesser degrees of glory, of bygone days in which nation states, in possession of resources proportionate to their sizes but identical in conception, faced each other across a battlefield that was already familiar to them. The critical mass effect together with the element of surprise and ability to manoeuvre may have been enough for Napoleon, Joffre and Rommel. Back then, every European power was capable of rallying, equipping and manoeuvring troops. The situation today has changed radically. Even if they had the political will to do so, which is by no means the case, European states are no longer able to put together a capability for action on their own in the five areas of warfare that are land, sea, air, space and cyber.

The first reason for this has to do with the fact that critical military capability and the technologies that make them effective are now beyond the reach of European states. The more sophisticated the armaments, the higher the research and development costs necessary to produce them. To be able to amortise these non-recurrent costs over long production series, there are only three options: have a vast national market, create the equivalent through cooperation, or, finally, do a lot of exporting. It is an indisputable economic fact that producing small numbers of highly sophisticated equipment is prohibitively expensive. Only mass production makes it affordable. Let us note that when they buy American military equipment, European leaders are punishing the European industry twice: firstly, by not buying their equipment, and then a second time by condemning them to ultimate failure through an erosion of their margins and therefore of their ability to pay for costly research. Ultimately, all Europeans will lose out, since once there is no longer any competition, the American industry will be in a situation of monopoly and able to set its own prices.

The second reason is falling defence budgets. This is a well-documented phenomenon (see illustration). In a world of unending arms races and increasing proliferation of all categories of weaponry, the Europeans have consistently disarmed. The sweeping cuts that have been made to their defence budgets have been reflected in considerable reductions of formats of armies, equipment being used well beyond its service life, platforms not being replaced or being reduced in number, capabilities being abandoned and chronic under-investment in research and technology, causing skills and autonomy to be lost.

Yet the states are facing a diversification of threats in terms not only of protagonists, but also their forms and the technological backdrops against which they are set. Although a conventional type of conflict cannot be ruled out with complete certainty, hybrid warfare, terrorism, exploitation of cyber-space, the proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles and, someday soon, autonomous weaponry, call for new skills and extra financial resources. This diversification of threats requires states with few resources to spread their efforts more thinly, which leads to “bonsai armies” or acceptance of capability gaps, and hence undermines operational autonomy. This is particularly the case with the two most powerful European armies. France will not be able to afford to modernise the nuclear deterrent, acquire a second aircraft carrier, adopt an ambitious space policy, retain top-flight special forces or build a new fighter aircraft and the system that goes with it. 2% of GDP earmarked for defence will not be enough to do all this; it will take at least 3%. The situation is even worse for the British, who will have to bear the costs of F35s, their two aircraft carriers, their deterrent and managing cyber-threats, all under the greatest budgetary constraints.

Higher costs, fewer resources, efforts being spread more thinly: these three long-term trends come together to explain the powerlessness of the European nations to defend themselves on their own and effectively in the 21st century. With threats on the increase since 2014, European nations have done what all weak nations do: they have rediscovered the benefits of an alliance. The only problem is that NATO has ceased to be an alliance and has become a protectorate.

## **NATO IS NO LONGER AN ALLIANCE, BUT A PROTECTORATE**

---

For the entire duration of the Cold War, NATO operated to the sole benefit of the Europeans. There is no shame in admitting it; it was the shield that prevented Soviet powers from pushing their territorial conquest further and extending their brutal

dominion over the peoples of central Europe. The Americans built a solid and comfortable house, so solid and so comfortable that all the states of Western Europe wanted to stay on after the Soviet empire collapsed and that despite the promises that were made to Russia, the states of Eastern Europe wanted to come and live there, too.

But after the Berlin wall fell, NATO had to look for a new *raison d'être*. It initially thought it had found this in supporting its partners, and then in crisis management, and finally in structuring the European armies. By teaching them to master defence planning, with the NATO Defence Planning Process, the Americans taught the Europeans how to wage war American-style and, to a considerable degree, with American equipment and logistics. Even so, the very existence of NATO was becoming questionable and Donald Trump was no doubt reflecting the views of many in the US when he felt quite free to say, with no risk to his presidential campaign, that it had become "obsolete".

The fact is that even before Trump got involved, the vast majority of Americans were already firmly – and quite wrongly – of the opinion that NATO was a European matter and that if the Europeans were not spending enough on their own defence, it was not up to the US to bail them out. Yet the Alliance also – or possibly mainly – serves American interests. Even disregarding the fact that the only time the collective defence clause has been applied was to benefit the Americans for the war in Afghanistan in 2001, NATO, like any other alliance, is a multiplier of power for the party running the show and provides the American defence industry with a ready pool of customers.

For their part, the Europeans are well aware that their defence rests solely on American guarantees and resources. But for that very reason, they feel that NATO is an American matter and that the Americans will always be there. They may have that wrong; they could be underestimating the influence of domestic politics on the attitude of the President of the United States. From this point of view, Donald Trump has done no more than to continue a tendency that began years before he came along, in particular with George W Bush and, even more so, Barack Obama, under whose presidency the Americans became aware that their greatest strategic rival was China.

But at the same time, Trump has made a breakaway: under him, NATO works as a protectorate. We have evolved, *mutatis mutandis*, from the Delian League – an alliance between peers – to the Athenian Empire, in which an ultra-dominant hegemon offers protection, but demands payment in return. From being a benevolent, seductive and generous ally, the US has become the dominant, selfish and brutal master charging for its protection, which it exploits to obtain commercial advantages. It's not even 'America first'.

It's 'America only'. Its President is leveraging the military guarantee, which he is threatening to withdraw, to counteract the economic power of the European Union and bring pressure to bear on its leaders. Like Julius Caesar facing the tribes of Gaul, his strategy is to divide and rule, declaring that the United Kingdom will not get a satisfactory deal with him unless it burns all its bridges with the EU whilst flattering some and reprimanding others, declaring the EU a "foe (...) for what they do to us in trade" or dealing it a diplomatic blow by downgrading its ambassador, with, at the same time, absolutely no scruples or restraint in getting involved in European affairs.

## **EUROPEAN UNION NEEDS MILITARY AUTONOMY TO DEFEND ITS INTERESTS IN A BRUTAL, DANGEROUS WORLD**

---

If defence is an instrument of power, then it is equally true to say that its absence is synonymous with powerlessness. In a world that looks a bit more like Jurassic Park and a bit less like Disney World every day, in which the occupant of the White House has no qualms about treading on his allies' toes, the Russian President assaults his neighbours and orders attacks abroad, the King of Saudi Arabia has his enemies murdered, a world in which leaders and international organisations disappear, the European Union can no longer act like one big Switzerland, peaceful and neutral. When you're old, rich, defenceless and surrounded by aggressive neighbours, pacifism is no panacea.

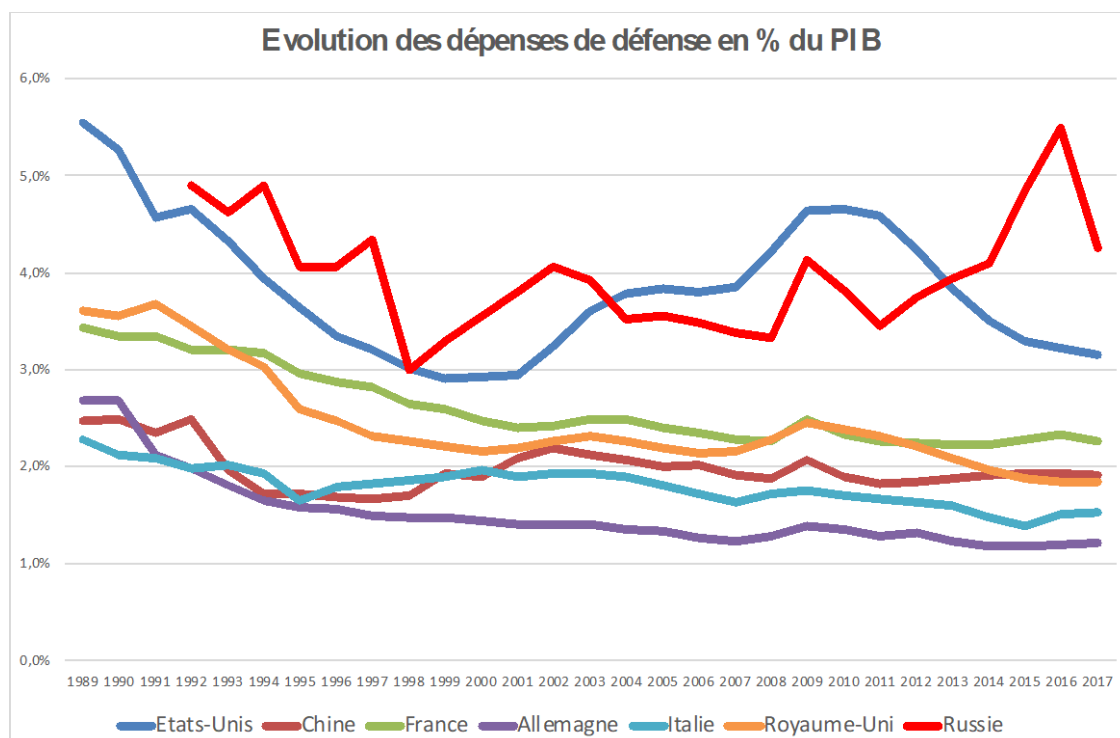
Europe has tried hard to obviate the need to get its house in order without depending too much on the Americans by multiplying military and industrial cooperation projects. The whole "Europe of the Defence" business has seen an increasing number of programmes, projects, funds and institutions, whilst maintaining the sovereignty of the member states. But the fact remains that twenty years after Saint-Malo, Europe is incapable of acquiring military equipment in sufficient numbers and of adequate quality to tackle the threats it faces. It is more dependent on American support than ever.

If European defence is at deadlock, it is because it has twenty-seven brains and just one arm, and a withered one at that: the common security and defence policy. It will never work. Not now, not in a hundred years' time. We need to change tack. If we quake with fear at Russia, when its GDP is less than Italy's and we, collectively, spend three times more than it on defence, then it is most assuredly in the structure of our spending rather than the level of it that there is a problem.

In the absence of proper integration, which would require common defence planning, a common budget, common acquisitions and common support, industrial cooperation is in

actual fact more costly and time-consuming than if all European states did everything themselves. Unfortunately, not all states attach the same importance to strategic autonomy and some of them are more than satisfied with the American protection exercised from afar, which they consider preferable to virtual domination by large European states exercised from close by.

Sadly, until Europe has completed its union in the political field and has common defence in the same way it already has a common currency, it will remain far too easy for non-European powers to play on our divisions. If the famous saying "United we stand, divided we fall"<sup>2</sup> applies to the United States, then it applies even more so to Europe. The European Union needs an army to defend itself and to remain united. It is not an option. It is a necessity. ■



Source: SIPRI - China and Russia, these are estimates

[captions: Evolution in defence expenditure in % of GDP  
United States; China; France; Germany; Italy; United Kingdom; Russia]

<sup>2</sup> Founding Father Patrick Henry

**ANALYSIS #1**

**WHY DO WE NEED A EUROPEAN ARMY? (1/5)**

BY **FRÉDÉRIC MAURO**

LAWYER AT THE PARIS AND BRUSSELS BARS, ASSOCIATED RESEARCHER AT IRIS

& **OLIVIER JEHIN**

INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST, CONTRIBUTOR TO BRUXELLES 2 (B2) BLOG

APRIL 2019

*Series of five insights published by IRIS and GRIP on the concept of European army.*

**EUROPE, STRATEGY, SECURITY PROGRAMME**

Under the supervision of Olivier de France, research director at IRIS

[defrance@iris-france.org](mailto:defrance@iris-france.org)

and Jean-Pierre Maulny, deputy director of IRIS

[jpmaulny@iris-france.org](mailto:jpmaulny@iris-france.org)

© IRIS

All rights reserved

INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

[contact@iris-france.org](mailto:contact@iris-france.org)

@InstitutIRIS

[www.iris-france.org](http://www.iris-france.org)