

# The European Security and Defence Union

**Quo vadis Europe?  
A strategic compass for  
the EU's path to the future**



**The German EU Presidency:  
a critical view from the  
European Parliament**

Nicola Beer MEP,  
Vice-President European Parliament,  
Brussels/Strasbourg



**A European war college,  
an opportunity for  
European defence?**

Brig Gen Jean-Marc Vigilant,  
Commander War College,  
Paris

The idea of a European army remains... an idea

# European defence forces versus European army



photo: Eurocorps

by Frédéric Mauro, Associate Research Fellow at IRIS, Lawyer at the bar of Brussels

The need for a common defence of the European Union has been acknowledged since the early 1990s, when European leaders realised that they were unable to stop a genocide “two hours by plane from Paris”. Since the Treaty of Nice in 2001, the “progressive framing” of this common defence became so necessary that it was introduced under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the Union’s positive law. The necessity for such a defence became so obvious in the mid-2010s, with the increase of threats and the questioning of the solidity of the transatlantic alliance, that the concept of a European strategic autonomy was pushed into the spotlight. Can the Union – as a commercial superpower – survive without being able to defend itself in the face of great powers playing Member States against each other, as Julius Caesar did with the Celtic tribes?

## The EU is unable to defend itself

So, Member States agree on the principle of a common defence, whether they like it or not, but until now they have all decided that it could only be an aggregation of the European (national) defence forces. That is why the Treaty of Lisbon mentions an intriguing “operational capacity drawing on civilian and military assets” (article 42.1 TEU), being made clear that those assets “shall be made available to the Union by the Member States” (article 42.3). It is worth noting that the words “operational capacity” echo the “capacity for autonomous action” of the Franco-British declaration of Saint-Malo (1999) and have been carefully chosen to avoid mentioning

a European army, explicitly stated in Nice in December 2000: “developing this autonomous capacity (...) does not involve the establishment of a European army”.<sup>1</sup>

22 years after Saint-Malo, the fact is that the EU, as such, does not have any military capacity for autonomous action in the field of crisis management, not to speak of collective defence. In 2016, in the wake of the Global Strategy, European leaders agreed on a common “military level of ambition asserting that the Union must be able to protect itself and its citizens”. Today, we know unequivocally that the EU is unable to defend itself.<sup>2</sup> The headline goals agreed at the Helsinki summit in 1999 for the EU to be able to assemble and project a military force of 60,000 troops (an army corps) is still unachieved. The Member States enrol 1,5 million men and women in national uniforms and thus it would be reasonable to increase the ambition from battle groups to brigades.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays, the EU would be unable to launch successful crisis management operations such as Concordia and Artemis as it did in 2003.

## European army – words in the wind

This blatant failure led Juncker and others (Merkel and Macron in 2018) to call for a “European army” in 2015, finding some resonance with public opinion if we give credit to the polls that suggest, one after the other, massive support of European citizens in favour of the idea. The problem is that this idea remains... an idea; nothing more than words in the wind. National establishments, intermediary bodies and all individuals with a vested interest – military, diplomats, industrialists, politicians – are in their vast majority against this idea for all sorts of reasons including sheer nationalism, unmanly conformism

and blunt pecuniary benefit under the dogma of inter-governmentalism. The differences between the chiefs and the intermediary bodies is particularly patent in France.<sup>4</sup> The only piece of European legislation that could have led to some sort of convergence, through a capability process modelled on the eurozone concept is the “permanent structured cooperation” better known as PESCO – three words to hide the unutterable one: integration ending up in a “framework” for defence cooperation, “modular” and “inclusive”, strictly redundant with the European Defence Agency.

The real problem is that the debate on European defence forces versus European army should not be addressed at this stage. A common defence – or call it collective “strategic autonomy” – will only emerge if two elements are coalesced in the right sequence: the “ability to decide” and the “capacity to act”.<sup>2</sup> The question of the forces – be they national or integrated – belongs to the second component. Yet, the “ability to decide” comes first: how do we bring Member States in capacity to decide to wage war (or not) without switching to federalism?

### Equation with five unknowns

This is an equation with five unknowns. The first is a legitimate and enduring arbitration body where decisions shall be made. The idea of an **EU security council** proposed at the Franco-German summit of Meseberg in June 2018 is the most promising. Yet, the form remains unclear. Would it be some sort of a select committee of the European Council with only participating Members in this common defence taking part in the votes? That is the solution encompassed by the treaty for PESCO. It does not require treaty change and needs nothing else than political will to be triggered. However, another possibility seems to be supported by the French government: an ad hoc council based on a multilateral agreement.<sup>6</sup> That is to allow bringing the British in again, who have always been the fiercest opponents of a common European defence, remaining highly dependent on the US for all their strategic decisions! The second unknown is **a common strategic culture**, which is the goal pursued through the European Intervention Initiative (E21) launched by Emmanuel Macron in 2017. It is important not only to agree on the range of threats that the Union is facing, but also to understand why it might be necessary to send forces on a battlefield. Sharing a common culture is about having the same picture and implementing a decision. It could lead to the loss of lives, although one could disagree with this decision. If Member States are not convinced of being a part of it, they will inevitably be tempted to foil decisions with which they disagree and in doing so, ruin the entire strategy. This leads us to the third unknown: **the majority rule**. This idea, also floated at the Meseberg summit, is slowly but surely making its way up to the top of the Union’s agenda and delineates the last frontier of European defence. For the time being, very few Member States, if any, accept to surrender their veto.

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Photo: private

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But veto is a power to block, not a power to build. And it is the very reason why the CSDP is inefficient. Nevertheless, as 90 % of the decisions having defence implications do not relate to sending troops on mission, one solution might be to restrict the use of the veto to these very few decisions.

The fourth unknown is **a common budget**. As always money is the sinew of war. The haunting debate within NATO around the 2% metrics, however biased it might be, clearly shows that each Member State is expected to pay its fair share to the common pot. Obviously, this share cannot depend solely on goodwill and astral conjunctions. It must be provided by the European budget itself or, failing that, by an ad hoc budgetary instrument like the European Peace Facility.

Finally, a common defence would need **a genuine military chain of command** under the EU security council. In this regard the present organisation with the EU Military Committee and the EU Military Staff must be completely overhauled in order to provide the Union with a military operational headquarters and an efficient defence planning organisation. But this is a well-known unknown that might find a solution with the departure of the British.

Solving this equation is a tremendous challenge. It is nonetheless a prerequisite for the question to be worth asking: European defence forces or European army?

1 Presidency report on the European Security and defence policy – annex VI of the Presidency Conclusions – Nice European Council meeting 7, 8 and 9 December 2000.

2 Frédéric Mauro and Pablo Fernandez-Cras (2020): Is Europe really unable to defend itself? IRIS

3 Sven Biscop (2020) Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence, Survival, 62:5, 105-118, DOI:

4 Marc Endeweld – “Qui pilote vraiment le Quai d’Orsay ? Emmanuel Macron et l’Etat profond” – Le Monde diplomatique September 2020 pages 1, 20 and 21

5 Suzana Anghel et al – “On the path to ‘strategic autonomy’ – the EU in an evolving geopolitical environment” – European Parliamentary Research Service – September 2020

6 Clément Beaune – French Secretary of State for European Affairs – “L’Europe par delà le Covid-19” Politique étrangère – IFRI Autumn 2020.