




Commentary

European army: a problematic dream?

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Outline

Historical background.....	2
The Plevin Plan and the European Defense Community	2
Renewed efforts towards cooperation in European defence.....	2
Current debates	3
Juncker’s statements in 2015.....	3
Macron vs. Trump	4
Merkel as gamechanger.....	4
Parallel EU military initiatives: EI2 and PESCO.....	5
Advantages and disadvantages of a European army	6
Cons, obstacles and criticism of military integration: is a European army a needed and feasible project?	6
Pros, advantages and assets of military integration: why a European army could be possible now... 	7
Questions regarding the realization of a European army.....	8
Conclusion: A future European army?	9

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The concept of a European army has been widely discussed in the past years and particularly weeks, raising many questions about the possibility of such an idea becoming a reality. Where did the notion of a European army come from, and why is it being debated so intensively in November 2018? Is such an army a feasible project? What are the advantages and disadvantages, the positive assets but also obstacles to its realization?

Historical background

The Pleven Plan and the European Defense Community

The first approach to the idea of European military cooperation goes back to 1948. While the economic cooperation progressed in the continent with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the political cooperation had difficulties in taking shape. Moreover, the Korean War occurred, and the US started to ask the French to a possible controlled rearmament of Germany in order to possibly contribute to the common European defence if there was need. This proposal took the name of “Pleven Plan”.

With the presentation of the Plan, the idea of a European army appeared. Jean Claude Monnet, the original creator of the plan, realised that a European army could be the quickest way to achieve a political and deeper integration between the European countries, having seen the results of ECSC. In 1950, the French Prime Minister Renè Pleven, in response to the American call for Germany’s rearmament and joining of NATO, presented the possibility to form a pan-European defence architecture within the European Defence Community (EDC).

The EDC was supposed to include West Germany, France, Italy and Benelux countries, excluding the US, who then played also the dominant role in NATO. The Plan was to give France the predominant role within the EDC. The EDC envisaged a pan-European supranational military constituted by national components “at the level of the smallest possible unit”¹, under the control of a European Minister of Defence.

Somewhat paradoxically in the light of the current events, the EDC could not enter into force because of the lack of the ratification by the French Parliament. With the change of lead in the French national politics, the fears that the EDC could threaten the national sovereignty spread among French political elites. Moreover, the French communists opposed a plan that would have tied them to the United States. The end of the Korean War and the death of Joseph Stalin also negatively affected the previous push to the constitution of a European army, as the Soviet threat was considered less imminent. Therefore, the lack of ratification by the French National Assembly in 1954 marked the end of such a plan.

Renewed efforts towards cooperation in European defence

Unexpectedly, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the original reason for a common European defence, implied the resurrection of the idea of a European army in Western Europe. An important step was the setting of the Petersberg Tasks in 1992. The Petersberg Declaration of 1992 introduced the Petersberg missions to be carried out under the authority of the Western European Union (WEU). The WEU was the military alliance that succeeded the Western Union (WU) after the 1954 amendment of the 1948 Treaty of Brussels. The aforementioned missions requested a use of the military units of WEU member states for humanitarian, peacekeeping and peacebuilding tasks.

¹ <http://www.fransamalingvongeusau.com/documents/dl2/h6/2.6.1.pdf>

The advent of the Yugoslav internal crisis and the evident need of an US intervention in Kosovo to solve the conflict showed that the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) adopted in 1993 under the Maastricht Treaty lacked coherence and effectiveness: there was a necessity of reforming it.

Therefore, Germany France and United Kingdom started to play leading roles in trying to ensue progress in European defence. The following Franco-German and British-French summit, respectively in Potsdam and Saint Malo (1998), were aimed at developing an autonomous European military capacity. Nevertheless, the St. Malo Declaration of 1998 stressed the need of a European Rapid Reaction Force able to fulfil the Petersberg Tasks, instead of a European army of its own.²

The aforementioned declaration triggered important gains in the EU defence development. France and England decided to launch the defensive component of the CSFP: the European Defence and Security Policy, which was renamed Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP) under the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Nowadays, the CSDP is the main component of the CFSP and enables the Union to intervene, playing the leading role, in peace keeping operations, conflict prevention and in strengthening international security, leading missions all over the world.

Current debates

Juncker's statements in 2015

Since the lack of ratification of the EDC, the plan for a European army had always remained an abstract idea, concretizing in projects partly integrating European defense efforts such as the Petersberg Tasks and the CSDP.

On 8 March 2015, during an interview with the *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper³, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker re-opened the debate about a possible EU army. He made a statement saying that the EU needed its own army to face up Russia and other threats, and to restore the bloc's standing around the world. He argued that NATO was "not enough" because not all the members of such alliance are members of the EU, and that a common European army would send important signals to the world.⁴

"A joint EU army would show the world that there would never again be a war between EU countries," Juncker told the German newspaper. "Such an army would also help us to form common foreign and security policies and allow Europe to take on responsibility in the world."

The Commission President added that a common European army could serve as a deterrent and would have been useful during the Ukraine crisis. Such statements came indeed at a time where the crisis was widely discussed and was causing lively international debates. "With its own army, Europe could react more credibly to the threat to peace in a member state or in a neighboring state," he said. "One wouldn't have a European army to deploy it immediately. But a common European army would convey a clear message to Russia that we are serious about defending our European values."⁵

² https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/12/a-comparative-historical-study-of-the-development-of-a-european-army/#_ftn4

³ <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article138193684/Juncker-Idee-einer-EU-Armee-schwaecht-die-Nato.html>; <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article138169533/Kommissionschef-Juncker-fordert-eine-EU-Armee.html>

⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/juncker-nato-is-not-enough-eu-needs-an-army/>

⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/juncker-nato-is-not-enough-eu-needs-an-army/>

Macron vs. Trump

Three years later, such a stance regarding a EU army was taken up again by French President Emmanuel Macron. On 6 November 2018, he called for a “real European army” to allow Europe to defend itself “against China, Russia and even the United States.”⁶ On the Europe 1 radio station, the President added that Europe needed to emancipate itself from its dependence on the US. “We will not protect Europeans unless we decide to have a true European army,” he added. In another apparent reference to Russia, he insisted that “intrusion attempts in cyberspace and multiple interventions in our democracies” required a united response.⁷

Many pundits argue that such statements were misinterpreted by the journalists, and that in fact Macron only discussed the need for Europe to defend itself against cyber-attacks and espionage, without mentioning any direct competition against the US, but rather the need for Europe to do more for its own security, “in a more sovereign way”.⁸

Macron’s proposal was received by the United States’ President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in two very different ways. On the one hand, the Russian President welcomed the idea and defined it as a positive development, commenting that “Europe is a powerful economic entity, a powerful economic union and it is quite natural that it wants to be independent, self-sufficient and sovereign in matters of defense and security.”⁹

On the other hand, the American President reacted with anger with several tweets mainly directed at Macron. Trump criticized the French idea of a European army as “very offensive” and “insulting” to the US.¹⁰ On Twitter, Trump referred to the World Wars to reiterate the importance of the NATO alliance, saying that French people “were starting to learn German in Paris before the US came along”. Commenting on Macron’s proposal on the EU army, he once again urged Europe to “pay its fair share of NATO, which the U.S. subsidizes greatly,” before building “its own military”.¹¹ The US leader has indeed regularly called for all member countries of NATO, most of which are European, to contribute a minimum of 2% of their GDP towards the cost of the alliance.¹²

On 10 November 2018, during a CNN interview, Macron defined the spat on the European army issue with Trump as a misunderstanding, with both sides agreeing that Europe should spend more on defense. However, he also added that he does not want to see “European countries increasing the budget in defense in order to buy American and other arms or materials coming from” US industries.¹³

Merkel as gamechanger

On 13 November 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made statements regarding the EU army during the Strasbourg European Parliament (EP) plenary, which brought the debate on the EU army idea at its peak at the international level. During her parliamentary speech, Merkel called for the first time for a “real, true European army”, quoting the statements made by European Commission

⁶ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/143372>

⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/macron-calls-for-european-army-to-defend-against-russia-us-china/>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

⁹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/stoltenberg-opposes-eu-defence-duplicating-nato-putin-likes-the-idea/>

¹⁰ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/in-strasbourg-merkel-brings-european-army-one-step-further/>

¹¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/trump-tweet-strafes-macron-as-europe-moves-on-defence-without-us/>

¹² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-emmanuel-macron-eu-army-tweet-world-war-nato-germany-remembrance-day-a8631426.html>

¹³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/trump-tweet-strafes-macron-as-europe-moves-on-defence-without-us/>

President Juncker in 2015. In her view, the EU should work on an army that would not be against NATO but would instead complement the transatlantic alliance. “Nobody wants to question classic connections,” she continued. “It would be a lot easier to cooperate” if an army existed, when there are currently more than 160 different defense, administrative, mentoring and training systems in Europe. With all these different defense frameworks, “we cannot be efficient partners”.

She thus strongly argued for “the common development of armament systems within Europe,” proposing for the army to come under a European Security Council with a rotating presidency. “If we want to use our money efficiently and yet fight for the same goals, [...] to work together and pool our efforts together, then we could work together with NATO with a European army,” she concluded.¹⁴

Therefore, Chancellor Merkel acted as a game changer in the debate concerning EU military integration by sidelining with President Macron and echoing his catch-phrase of a “European army”.¹⁵ She sidelined with the French President also in arguing that the EU should not be dependent on the US anymore, saying that “the days where we can unconditionally rely on others are gone.”¹⁶ The German Chancellor’s intervention is thus very significant because it was France who was the strongest and most vocal proponent of a EU army.¹⁷

The reactions to the speech were mixed. One on the hand, some Eurosceptics such as MEP David Campbell Bannerman defined it “one of the scariest speeches I have heard as a MEP”.¹⁸ On the other hand and surprisingly, other Eurosceptic politicians such as Czech President Milos Zeman and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have instead declared to be in support of the idea of a European army.¹⁹ The European Commission said it is “delighted” that the French and German leaders have backed the creation of an EU army, and “pleased” that the argument for the force seemed to be “going in our direction”.²⁰

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed stronger EU efforts on defense that could strengthen NATO but warned against duplicating the alliance’s work and jeopardizing the strength of the transatlantic relations. “Two World Wars and a Cold War taught us the importance of doing things together,” he said. “The reality is that we need one strong and capable command structure, we can’t divide those resources in two,” Stoltenberg added.²¹

Parallel EU military initiatives: EI2 and PESCO

Notwithstanding the current debate on the concept of European army, there are already a number of projects parallel to and embracing the idea of increased military cooperation and integration within the EU. French President Emmanuel Macron recently launched a military intervention force called European Intervention Initiative (EI2) aiming to anticipate and plan for future military operations. The project was proposed in September 2017 and a Letter of Intent was signed in June 2018. As of now, the Initiative counts the memberships of nine (soon to be ten) European countries, including

¹⁴ https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/debate-on-the-future-of-europe-opening-statement-by-angela-merkel-german-federal-chancellor-1162933-V_rv

¹⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/in-strasbourg-merkel-brings-european-army-one-step-further/>

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/emmanuel-macron-eu-army-european-france-angela-merkel-germany-trump-a8631806.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/emmanuel-macron-eu-army-european-france-angela-merkel-germany-trump-a8631806.html>

¹⁹ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/143372>

²⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/eu-army-angela-merkel-macron-germany-france-military-european-commission-juncker-a8633196.html>

²¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/stoltenberg-opposes-eu-defence-duplicating-nato-putin-likes-the-idea/>

Northern countries such as Estonia and Finland, who is soon going to join. These are indeed countries which are not France's natural military partners, and which are more oriented towards the East than towards missions in the African continent.²² This demonstrates a rapprochement of interests among the European Northern and Southern states, as discussed further below.

The force is to be independent from NATO and aims to be able to rapidly build "a joint military operation, evacuate civilians from a war zone, or provide aid after a natural disaster", i.e. a force ready to react to crises in Europe.²³ European leaders have already started to consider it as a critical force to counter Russian aggression after the Crimea annexation of 2014.²⁴

In 2017, in response to Trump's criticism regarding NATO and the Russian military actions in Ukraine, the EU launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) programme. The initiative is set to promote greater efficiency among the militaries of the EU Member States, and to put more funds jointly into a European Defense Fund to promote European research, development and equipment.²⁵ The PESCO's legislative framework was set up in 2009 and activated in 2017. 25 of the 28 armed forces of the EU Member States are now in the process of stepping up cooperation between their militaries. Denmark, the UK and Malta decided to opt out of the voluntary system.²⁶

Advantages and disadvantages of a European army

Cons, obstacles and criticism of military integration: is a European army a needed and feasible project?

Many are convinced that the EU army idea is "illusory," "counterproductive," or just plain "nonsense." The main criticism to the project is the consequent loss of sovereignty by the part of the Member States. As Chatham House expert Anand Menon commented, "if small European countries pool resources for a joint venture, like an air transport fleet, they lose the ability to use that fleet whenever they want".²⁷ The political authority and legitimacy to send soldiers into a fight still resides firmly within national parliaments, said Guntram Wolff, director of Bruegel.²⁸

A major difficulty would be that of coordinating the forces of 27 Member States, and to implement integrated training and administration capabilities across the continent. Moreover, if the army would not be part of NATO, the project would result to be very costly for member countries as they would have to pay simultaneous contributions for their national army, NATO and the European army. However, if such army would be integrated with NATO, the costs would be similar if not reduced. There would nonetheless be a contribution to be paid for the establishment of the army in itself, and for all the operations that this army would deploy.

Bruno Alomar, a professor at the French War School, said President Macron's vision of an integrated European defense force is very far away. "The idea of creating a common strategic culture is not a bad one," he said. "But there is a massive gap between the European defense that Emmanuel Macron dreams about and the reality of very powerful disagreements between European partners."²⁹

²² <https://euobserver.com/opinion/143372>

²³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/macron-calls-for-european-army-to-defend-against-russia-us-china/>

²⁴ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/macrons-real-european-army-sounds-like-nonsense-wouldnt-work-2018-11?IR=T>

²⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

²⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/emmanuel-macron-eu-army-european-france-angela-merkel-germany-trump-a8631806.html>

²⁷ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/macrons-real-european-army-sounds-like-nonsense-wouldnt-work-2018-11?IR=T>

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

²⁹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/macron-calls-for-european-army-to-defend-against-russia-us-china/>

A crucial difficulty consists in the fact that different actors have different motives behind the intentions of establishing a European army. On the one hand, the European Commission might aim to have a say into the field of defense, which has long been the exclusive domain of the EU countries. Such proposal started recently with the launch of the European Defense Fund (see the EI2 as discussed above). On the other hand, Germany seeks to demonstrate its commitment to European integration, from a political rather than a military point of view. Prague and Budapest have the goal to push the EU to militarize its borders against migrants. For the British proponents of Brexit, the idea of an EU army was used during the campaign to attract voters and scare them away from the EU. For his part, the French President is seeking to emphasize his European commitment a few months before the upcoming EU elections.

Furthermore, defense integration within the EU faces another major obstacle. European countries differ with regard to the threats that they are perceiving. While the Eastern and Northern states focus on the Russian threat, the Southern European countries (including France) are more focused on the Mediterranean and Africa. Indeed, as Pierre Aroche writes, “this East-South dilemma has damaged the cohesion of the EU more than once.” For example, this happened in 2014 when Eastern European countries invoked the Ukraine crisis to refuse sending troops to the mission in the Central African Republic as requested by France.³⁰

Critics such as Chatham House expert Anand Menon argue that each Member State has different goals, and that it is almost impossible that the countries could ever agree on a common objective. Military analyst Franz Stefan-Gady commented that “given divergent national interests, such a force, if created, would certainly almost never be deployed”.³¹

Some have suspected that, behind the project, there is the French and German own interest. As Manon mentioned, “there is a suspicion that the reason why France is so into EU defense cooperation is it allows France to do what it wants to under an EU flag.”³² Others have seen an opportunity for Germany to escape its traditional unease about taking a leadership role in foreign and defense policy by putting such a role in a collective European project.³³

Pros, advantages and assets of military integration: why a European army could be possible now

The main reasoning behind the need for an EU army is that Europe does need NATO for the defense of its alliance - but at the same time, Europe also has its own concerns, security issues and interests that are not always coincident with those of NATO's, on the one hand, and of the United States', on the other. As German Minister of Defence von der Leyen states, “Europe's citizens rightly expect that Europe itself can offer effective protection. To make the vision of a Europe that is independent and able to act in defense matters a reality, action and speed are needed.”³⁴ Therefore, one major argument is that a European army would help giving precedence to European, rather than transatlantic, security interests.

One of the main arguments behind the call for a European army is the fact that it would trigger more cohesiveness within the EU when it comes to the defense area. The European army would connect people across Europe more, when soldiers would be trained as part of one entity, and it would strengthen the currently quite vague concept of the European identity. The project could increase

³⁰ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/143372>

³¹ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/macrons-real-european-army-sounds-like-nonsense-wouldnt-work-2018-11?IR=T>

³² <http://uk.businessinsider.com/macrons-real-european-army-sounds-like-nonsense-wouldnt-work-2018-11?IR=T>

³³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

³⁴ Translation from German original: <http://edition.faz.net/faz-edition/politik/2018-11-16/34ac6a90ad9b1c39ef9c4c36a4f7706c/?GEPC=s9>

coherence of European foreign policy, directing it towards common, specific and more clear-cut objectives.

Moreover, one concrete advantage would be the pooling and sharing of resources of the EU countries at the European level. It would create a situation where all member countries would have to agree to engage in military operations, but that would require a coordination and harmonization of national interests. Furthermore, it would give the EU a bigger voice on the world stage as one single military actor.

One of the main criticisms to the EU army idea is that there is no agreement between the perception of “threats” and focus of foreign policy of Member States. However, President Macron’s statement of November 2018 was groundbreaking in these respects as he justified the concept of a European army by invoking the Russian threat, and not the need to intervene in Africa. This would have instead been the French traditional approach. This should be read as an attempt to come closer to the interests of the Eastern and Northern European partners. The equivalent development seems to be also taking place as Estonia, as Aroche writes, “has clearly demonstrated a willingness to position its strategic culture closer to France’s by sending troops to the Central African Republic and to Mali, as part of Operation Barkhane.”³⁵

There are two developments which are possibly behind a renewed interest in a more forceful European defense capability. First, with President Trump’s criticism about NATO and portrayal as a club in which member countries pay “dues” to the United States, the prospect of a European army initiative has received increased attention.³⁶

Second, there is a shift in international relations which is having an impact on the feasibility of a European army. The growth and rise of China have been causing over the past years a shift of focus of Washington’s foreign policy more towards South Asia. The countries of the latter region are and will indeed be needing more support and security against the increasing power of China, especially in that the region lacks a collective defense treaty similar to NATO. As a consequence, the US might not be able to offer in the same term the same level of resources for European security given that other challenges are rising up in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as in the Persian Gulf. The French and German leaders’ proposal thus comes arguably as a consequence and continuation of this shift in international relations.

Questions regarding the realization of a European army

There are a number of questions to be considered vis-à-vis the possibility of a future EU army.

- How would the army be organized, led or governed? How would it be financed when so many countries cannot even spend 2% of GDP on defense?³⁷
- Which would be the framework that would structure the army? How would the decision-making be fairly shared between the members of the European army?
- Which nations would join the EU army? Would it be open exclusively to EU Member States, or would it include countries that are not part of the EU but are members of NATO (Norway, Turkey), or non-members of NATO (Switzerland), and/or who are associated members of the EU (Western Balkans countries, Ukraine)? What about the UK – how would this reflect on the future non-EU membership of the country?

³⁵ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/143372>

³⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

- Does strategic autonomy mean separation? Some argue that such autonomy simply refers to Europe's own capacity to collectively carry out small-scale operations that NATO does not seek to do.³⁸ The scenarios that are taking shape if a European army is to materialize, with regards to relations with NATO, are two. First, there is a situation of interoperability where the EU army would be part and complementary to NATO, and where all resources would be shared. Second, the possibility would be that of a separate exchange of paradigms, with the EU getting away from the American security umbrella. In this situation, what to do in case of disputes between an EU army and NATO country?
- Would European defense spending be designed to promote European military manufacturers at the expense of American ones?³⁹ What would be the US reaction in terms of American weapon industry?
- Lastly, is there a need for a European army at the moment? If not, would its creation only foment international tensions, and would perhaps countries like Russia feel pressured with a new united military "enemy" across the border? Would this enhance political divisions at the international level?

Conclusion: A future European army?

In conclusion, talks about a European army have been discussed in the realm of the Union already for a long time. Since its inception, it seems that the idea of a European army has been historically argued for in relation to the perceived Russian "threat", or to other incidents, crises or conflicts which have paved the way for the idea of cooperation in the defense area at the heart of the European debate.

The concept has made its comeback thanks to the French and German leaders, and it is likely to be actively debated in the times to come. Although other initiatives have been launched, the idea of an actual army is finding its place at the international level. Despite the many criticisms against the idea, a European army could also have significant advantages for both the member countries and the EU as whole. However, many questions are still to be addressed.

If other EU leaders will rally to President Macron's and Chancellor Merkel's stances, the European army notion would acquire even increased political salience and support. Such wider support at the EU level and among the Member States would increase the chances that would lead to the building of a real, true European army.

³⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

³⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/world/europe/merkel-macron-european-army.html>

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