



DEBATE: Is an EU Army Possible?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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Q: In recent public comments, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron talked about the possibility of a collective European army. This subject had been raised within Europe even prior to the presidency of Donald Trump, who is skeptical about NATO. In 2015, President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker discussed his intention to work toward this end. Despite the establishment of so-called permanent structured cooperation (PESCO), obstacles and difficulties remain. BESA joins the debate by posing the question: Is an EU army possible?

Respondents: Ted R. Bromund, Elena Lazarou, Sven Biscop, Alon Ben-Meir, Andrey Kortunov, Vassilis Nedos, Mikhel Tamm



Ted R. Bromund, Senior Research Fellow in Anglo-American Relations, Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln asked, "If I should call a sheep's tail a leg, how many legs would it have?" His wise answer: the sheep still has only four legs, "for my calling the tail a leg would not make it so."

So yes, Europe can have an army. But calling a thing an army does not make it one.

An army must draw on a military culture. European cultures are profoundly unmilitary. The title of James Sheehan's magisterial *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?: The Transformation of Modern Europe* (2008) sums up how Europe has changed since 1945. Europe shows no sign of cultural militarization.

An army also needs money. European defense spending is low. Germany must be the core of any European army, and its defense spending is even lower. When the next recession hits, defense spending across Europe will fall again. Europe does not want to pay for an army.

An army must be sent by its national leaders to the battlefield. But Europe was split on the Balkans, Iraq, Libya, Georgia, and Ukraine. When Europe does take action, it is belated, limited, and usually divided. Europe has few core interests in common, so it will not be willing to send an army in common.

An army must be willing to fight. While a few national European armies are willing to fight, most are not. The restrictive rules of engagement that limited European forces in Afghanistan are notorious. European forces are largely limited to peacekeeping and patrolling. Europe does not want to fight.

And finally, if the army is to fight as an effective unit, it must actually think of itself as a unit. But the nations of Europe are very different places. There are no European political parties. Most sports leagues are national. The Champions' League is not enough to make an Italian and a Pole want to kill and die for Europe. There are not enough Europeans who want kill and die for Europe to form an army.

The euro is not an economic currency. It was created for political reasons, and it remains political. As a result — witness Greece — it does not work. Similarly, a European army would not be created for military reasons. It would be created for a political reason: to pull defense away from the nations of Europe and to Brussels. If it is created, it will not work, because it will be a political army, not a real one.

In 1953, Winston Churchill derided the nascent European Defense Community as a "sludgy amalgam." It never came into existence. Churchill was wise then, and his words are still wise today.

Europe can have an army in name if it chooses to create one. But it cannot have an army in reality because it has none of the necessities of an army. If Europe creates an army of illusion, it will be gambling its security in the belief that it needs a political army more than it needs a real one.

That would be a mistake. Mistakes of that kind are always found out. And they are always fatal.



Elena Lazarou, Senior Policy Analyst, External Policies Unit of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), Brussels

The Treaty of Lisbon foresees the progressive framing of a common EU defense policy, potentially leading to common EU defense. In the face of a transforming geopolitical environment and emanating new threats, several of the Treaty's defense-related provisions have been implemented in the past years, yet more remains to be done if the prospect of a truly common defense is to become reality.

Within a scenario of growing geopolitical instability and rapid technological innovation in the defense sector, the EU has engaged consistently in building up its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Some of its achievements so far in the area of defense are: the activation of [permanent structured cooperation](#) (PESCO); the establishment of [military planning and conduct capability](#) (MPCC); the [coordinated annual review on defense](#) (CARD); [preparatory action for defense research](#); the [European defense industrial development program](#) (EDIDP); the new compact for civilian CSDP; plans for [military mobility](#); and a dedicated [European defense fund](#) in the next [multiannual financial framework](#). It has also strengthened its synergy with NATO through two joint declarations in 2016 and 2018 and an extensive list of cooperation areas.

In light of all these developments, one of the most current debates in the field of EU defense is defining the *finalité* – the end objective of the EU defense union.

It is hard to determine a timeline toward an EU defense union or EU army. Moreover, the term “EU army” has been given several definitions, some of which contradict one another. While the term has gained traction recently due to the support it received almost simultaneously from Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, the idea of an EU army had already been mentioned by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. Ever since then, a strong EU defense has been a key objective of the Commission. But the complexity of the concept has led to widespread debate about what it means, including in the context of EU-NATO relations and the attainment of EU strategic autonomy as embodied in the EU Global Strategy. While alarmist voices perceive it as contradictory to NATO, many policy- and lawmakers have hurried to explain their complementary nature.

The Commission's 2017 [reflection paper on the future of European defense](#) may offer one interpretation of the ultimate vision for the EU Defense Union: common financing and procurement supported by the EU budget, sharing of expensive military assets, technological innovation aimed at reducing defense costs, and demanding executive EU-led operations, all designed to complement NATO. Other aspects of an advanced EU Defense Union would be common ownership of military assets and a common EU strategic culture, as well as a possible DG Defense, a full-fledged EP Committee for Security and Defense, and a European Security Council. For the time being, improving the effectiveness of existing CSDP tools, coordinating national actions, and pooling resources more closely – as well as resolving longstanding operational problems (e.g., the deployment of EU battlegroups) – are also priorities. Achieving all these goals will gradually make the EU a more autonomous and effective actor in security and defense.



Sven Biscop, Director of the 'Europe in the World' program, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Brussels, and Professor at the Ghent Institute for International Studies, Ghent University

It sometimes feels as if the EU is spending an awful lot of time explaining what European defense is not, instead of explaining why it must be so ambitious. It is not about creating a European army. It will not encroach on the prerogatives of NATO. One's expectations should not be too high.

These concerns are not groundless. The notion of a European army has become toxic. Presenting current efforts (notably permanent structured cooperation, or PESCO, and the European Defense Fund, or EDF) as steps toward a European army will generate resistance that would not otherwise be there. By being too nuanced about it, however, the EU is at risk of undermining its efforts even before they have really taken off. By setting goals that are too modest in relation to available means and the threats and challenges to Europe's vital interests, the EU risks defeat.

A European army is, in fact, a very good idea. Had the six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community gone through with their plan to create a European Defense Community and merged their armed forces into a single European

force in the 1950s, things would look very different today. It is indeed advisable to avoid the use of the words “European army,” but the EU should stress that the aim of PESCO is to make a real leap forward in European defense. That will not be possible just by stepping up cooperation between the armed forces of member states. It effectively demands European military integration. National combat units must be anchored into permanent multinational formations, with permanent multinational command and control arrangements, supported by permanent multinational enablers. In many areas, multinational structures will have to replace national structures. The low-hanging fruit has already been plucked; now it is time to start chopping off superfluous branches in order for the tree to grow stronger.



Alon Ben-Meir, Professor and Senior Fellow at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs and Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute, New York

Given the fact that nearly four-fifths of the EU member states are also NATO members (22 out of 28), it should be unnecessary to create a parallel EU army. Five countries (Austria, Finland, Ireland, Malta, and Sweden) want to remain neutral. Only Cyprus would theoretically join NATO, but Turkey continues to object. That said, given the recent tension between the Trump administration and the EU, and the fact that several European heads of state, including Angela Merkel, have suggested that the European community should be in a position to handle its own security affairs, the EU should a) increase its defense budget by at least 1% more than GDP, and b) modify NATO’s command and control system to give the EU greater say in major defense issues.

We should keep in mind that even if President Trump’s successor makes supreme efforts to restore close ties with the European community, bilateral relations and mutual confidence are unlikely to be fully restored to the level they were before Trump came to power. Successive American administrations will have to stay the course and demonstrate an unshakable commitment to the alliance.



[Andrey Kortunov](#), Director General, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Moscow

There is no doubt that the EU can put together a modern and powerful army. Europe has more than enough human, financial, industrial, and technological resources to do that. However, if the EU has not yet done this despite continuous discussions, political statements, and even approved programs, it means the incentives to proceed are not strong enough. First, nobody is eager to have a military machine in Europe duplicating NATO or even some of its functions. Such a machine would be expensive, hard to manage, and politically risky for the transatlantic partnership – it might even provoke a US strategic disengagement from Europe. Second, it is not clear how a European army can respond to major EU security concerns.

A large-scale conventional war between the EU and Russia is highly unlikely, and a common European nuclear force looks unrealistic. In order to deal with most of the real security challenges to Europe (terrorism, cyber, illegal immigration, climate change, and so on), the EU needs instruments and tools very different from a traditional 20th-century-type army. In sum, Europe will build its own army only if it is absolutely forced to do it – e.g., if NATO collapses, the US goes isolationist, Europe is dragged into sizeable military operations in the Middle East or in Africa, etc. Right now, such scenarios look very unlikely.



[Vassilis Nedos](#), Diplomatic and Defense correspondent, *Kathimerini*, Athens

Discourse about the possibility of a common European army has largely been confined to the realms of politics and geopolitics, starting from the evident mitigation of the US

military presence on the broader European front and the NATO crisis during the Trump presidency, and continuing into the political fragmentation of EU countries vis-à-vis powers like China or Russia. The apparent reason for this indecision and lack of coordination is the lack of a single political center.

If we look back at the history of the European subcontinent, we discover that rarely has a single political center ever been possible. One such instance was the Roman Empire, which encompassed the Mediterranean Sea and reached the North Sea's shores west of the Rhine. The Eastern Roman Empire and medieval Constantinople was also a political center, as was the Ottoman Empire. In the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, all standing armies of great (or smaller) powers, such as those of Germany, France, and the UK, had the nation-state organization at the core of their structure. So the question is: Can Europe move forward to a transnational army?

Though more than six decades have passed since the Treaty of Rome, the EU has not been able to bolster any of its pillars that would lead to a common foreign or defense policy. The nation-state army remains the key component for every European country. And how could this not be? Germany has an almost complete lack of understanding of the security environment of Greece, while Greeks don't see why the Baltics or Poland think Russia is a security threat. The countries have different realities and priorities. Furthermore, the interests of Northern Europe are profoundly different from those of the South. The lack of coordination between North, South, East, and West can only have minimal results – such as the establishment of a multinational task force, or the enhancement of cooperation between major European defense industries on PESCO items, such as maritime surveillance and UAVs. So no: a European army is a faraway dream, and one that will have to undergo many improvements if it is ever to become a reality.



[Mihkel Tamm](#), in charge of the news department at Ekspress Meedia – responsible for news sections at the Estonian newspapers *Deli* and *Eesti Päevaleht*

I believe an EU army is possible, but the question is, how necessary is it? Viewed from this side of the Atlantic, an EU army looks like a doubling of NATO's function, for which there is no need. But when I visited the US recently and met with policymakers in Washington, DC, I realized I am becoming a PESCO fan.

Support for NATO goes up and down in the US, usually hand in hand with aggressions near NATO borders. Right now I feel there is reason to be worried about the extent to which the US understands NATO's importance in Europe, especially to the US's small allies along the Russian border.

That's why it is sensible to play with the thought that maybe we need an EU army to guarantee our security while developing more and more PESCO. The latter is seen in the US as another reason why it should not make an effort toward NATO – because “it seems Europeans can handle their issues on their own.” The US does not fully understand that our taking steps to bolster European security is a reaction to the fact that it is not clear if we can be sure of NATO's willingness to engage.

An EU army would be possible under certain drastic circumstances, and indeed will happen if the US decides it is no longer interested in NATO or withdraws completely. Then NATO would become a European army anyway.

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