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THE PROCESS OF IMPROVING THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE¹

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Reinforcing European defence is currently an imperative, considering the extremely challenging international context. However, success in this endeavour would amount to strengthening European strategic autonomy, overcoming the lack of unity within the European Union and other political challenges, as well as increasing the operational effectiveness of European defence capabilities.

This article examines Europe's strengths and vulnerabilities. Defence is one of those vulnerabilities.

The war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine – a war that is simultaneously an assault on the values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights – has made the extent of this European weakness abundantly clear.

The problem becomes even more serious when two additional and unavoidable factors are taken into account. The first corresponds to the existence of further threats to European security coming from the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and the Sahel region. The second is the fact that, in addressing these challenges, Europe is largely on its own, mainly due to the isolationist – and at times anti-European – positions observable in contemporary United States (US).

For all these reasons, the article focuses on the main requirements and obstacles affecting the process of strengthening European defence under these conditions.

What can Europe do for itself?

Today, European defence is no longer an open question to be weighed in terms of “pros” and “cons”, nor a matter that generates hesitation. On the contrary, European defence – perhaps better described as “European self-defence” – has become an imperative, even if the “how” and “when” of its full implementation remains open to discussion.

Success in this endeavour would amount to strengthening European strategic autonomy. For decades, Europe lived under the conventional and nuclear umbrella of the US, yet it is no longer self-evident that this protection continues to exist. In short, the value of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is no longer unquestionable. The same applies

to the traditional concept of the “Western world”, which is either no longer recognised or is undergoing a major crisis in North America.

Europe must therefore develop its own protective umbrella – an exceptionally demanding task. To do so effectively, it must be capable of identifying the obstacles, determining what can be done, and reshaping prevailing paradigms and mindsets.

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Perhaps the greatest and most sensible obstacle is the lack of unity within the European Union (EU). The particular positions of countries such as Hungary, Slovakia and possibly Czechia should be noted. If these nations cannot be described as pro-Putin, they are certainly critical of liberal governance. In doing so, they weaken EU unity and give rise to voices advocating the activation of Article 7 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which provides for the suspension of the membership of certain membership rights of states that persistently act against the values of the Union. Others, while fully aware of the situation, fear that such a procedure

would open a Pandora's Box whose consequences would be difficult to anticipate and control. In such a political environment, developing common defence policies is an exceptionally complex exercise. Furthermore, geographic perspectives differ within the Union. Northern and Eastern Member States often display limited concern regarding developments in the Southern periphery of the continent, while Southern members may underestimate threats in the North and East. The only reasonable conclusion is that both positions are misguided. All threats should concern all Member States, even if they assign different degrees of priority to each threat.

It will likely prove impossible, at least from the outset, to involve all Member States in a single concept for strengthening European Defence. The EU is aware of this reality, and the models under consideration include coalitions of the willing or forms of reinforced and structured cooperation, involving only those states prepared to participate. In any case, flexibility will be essential to allow the participation of NATO members that are not EU members, such as Iceland, Norway, the United Kingdom (UK) and Turkey, as well as candidate countries. The strategic value of the UK and Turkey for European defence is clear, while Canada's interests and potential role remain to be clarified.

Positive steps and remaining challenges

Despite the many challenges, progress in European Defence over the past decade has exceeded what was achieved in all previous phases of European integration. The Treaty of Lisbon, the US policies under the Trump administration, and the war in Ukraine have all contributed to this momentum.

What key assets does Europe possess to support the development of its defence



capabilities? Political will, experience, expertise, financial resources, human capital and technology are all crucial elements. Europe has most of these assets, though it lacks a fully shared political will and a technological base comparable to that of the US or China. Moreover, while numerical comparisons of personnel and expenditures are possible, the operational effectiveness of European Defence capabilities remains significantly lower than that of the US. The fundamental reason is fragmentation: where the US has one defence organisation, Europe has twenty-seven. While such fragmentation is understandable, mechanisms to mitigate its effects must be sought and implemented. The same applies to armament and equipment. Europe operates a far greater diversity of fighter aircraft, warships and tanks than the US. This is compounded by competition among European defence industries in the global arms market.

Europe needs commitment, sustained effort and time to address these shortcomings. There are, however, encouraging signs. The current European Commission has adopted a geopolitical outlook – something rarely seen in the past – and for the first time there is a Commissioner for Defence and Space.

Following the US request, European states are now allocating increased funding to defence, recognising such expenditure as an indispensable investment in their security and treating defence as a core public policy area, alongside education, health and social security, at the discretion of national governments. There is growing awareness that Europe must spend better, spend more, spend more jointly, and spend more European.

This principle, however, has limits. The most significant concerns the objective of purchasing more European equipment. Over the past four years, approximately 38% of defence spending was directed towards European suppliers. The Commission's target is to reach 60% in 2030 – a substantial increase.

Calls for the creation of a “European army” are basically sound bites. Europe does not need a permanent army, as there is also no such thing as a NATO army. What Europe really needs, and NATO has, is a European Force Structure, incorporating national forces committed by Member States at varying levels of readiness.

It is evident that Europe should not procure military equipment from Russia or China. Some necessary systems may be available in arms markets such as Brazil or South Korea, but most are not. Consequently, even under favourable conditions, Europe will likely remain dependent on the US to a certain extent for the next eight to ten years.

In this context, some visits by European political leaders such as Macron, Starmer or Merz to the White House can be understood as damage control visits, partly

aimed at ensuring continued access to US defence equipment during this transitional period. The so-called “US industrial and military complex” should not be blamed for that situation, as responsibility for this dependency lies primarily with Europe itself.

Both the EU and NATO are allocating substantial financial resources, through various mechanisms, to assist Member States in strengthening their defence capabilities. These can be dismantled rapidly, but require considerable time to be developed. This means that improving European defence in a robust and credible way will take time. Estimates suggest that at least eight to ten years of determined work will be necessary for Europe to close critical capabilities gaps in areas such as space-based intelligence, air and missile defence, long-range strike capabilities, strategic mobility, artillery, munitions and logistics. The same time frame applies to narrowing the technological gap with the US and China in emerging and disruptive technologies, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, cyber and electronic warfare, strategic enablers and critical infrastructure protection. The difference is that on this domain the task is very much in European hands, perhaps with the exception of quantum computing.

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However, that will only be feasible if Europe develops an adequate Defence Planning, something that is currently underdeveloped at EU level. Adopting a model similar to the NATO Defence Planning system would be a sensible option, particularly given that the NATO system is well tested and that twenty-three nations belong to both organisations.

The only exception would be the relatively rapid establishment of a European Rapid Reaction Force of approximately 5000 military personnel, with expeditionary capabilities. Such a force could function as a “show the flag” asset, a minimum conventional deterrent and, if necessary, an initial entry force.

At the strategic level, it is important to

TABLE 1. THE “FRAGMENTATION” OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE. NUMBER OF ARM SYSTEMS EXISTING IN EUROPE AND IN THE USA (2023)

Source: Chin *et al* (2024).

	Europe	USA
Tanks	19	1
Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicles	23	3
Howitzers 15.2 and 15.5	28	2
Tactical Combat Aircrafts	20	7
Attack Helicopters	4	2
Anti-ship Missiles	12	5
Air-to-air Missiles	13	3
Frigates and Destroyers	27	4
Torpedoes	17	2
Conventional Submarines	10	–
Nuclear Submarines	6	4
COMPARISON	179	33

**BOX 1.****MISSIONS FOR A EUROPEAN RAPID REACTION FORCE (APPROX. 5000)**

- “show the flag” at the political and strategic levels
- provide a minimum conventional deterrent
- fight as an “entry force” when and where necessary

CONDITIONS FOR THE APPRECIATION OF THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE TECHNOLOGICAL AND INDUSTRIAL BASE

In order to be competitive, to have scale, to ensure a technological edge and to strengthen the European harmony, cohesion and unity, the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) should associate “European Champions” (*Airbus, Rheinmetall, Thales*, etc.) with Start-ups and SMEs.

look at the reality of the European nuclear deterrent. Within the EU, only France is a nuclear power, although theoretically the UK’s nuclear forces may also be relevant in a broader European context. This situation has prompted countries such as Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden to consider developing their own nuclear capabilities, abandoning the regime established in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and potentially triggering a broader nuclear arms race.

For the effective employment of its forces, the EU requires a coherent planning and operational structure – in essence, its own military headquarters capable of planning, commanding and controlling military operations of at least medium to high intensity.

Four institutional reforms are also required. First, defence should be placed at the core of EU governance, namely through the formal establishment of decision-making body composed of Ministers of Defence. Second, the role of the EU Military Committee should be strengthened. Third, the capabilities of the EU Military Staff should be reinforced. Fourth, the composition and functioning of the European External Action Service should be reviewed to ensure greater coherence and coordination – something that is not happening. Updating key strategic documents, including the European Global Strategy (2016) and the Strategic Compass (2022), is likewise essential.

The ongoing debate on the creation of a European Defence Union is of paramount relevance. Europe does not yet appear ready to take the corresponding political decision.

It is conceivable that Europe may eventually adopt a kind of shared sovereignty model for defence, involving some or all Member States. This could, however, result in non-participating states occupying a secondary position within the Union. Discussions, so far quite abstract, concerning the “Europeanisation of NATO” or the development of a “European pillar” within NATO will have to be clarified and concretely defined.

In sum, numerous issues must be addressed, and in no specific order. They must be tackled simultaneously, making the task of strengthening European defence in a coordinated manner particularly demanding – yet nevertheless necessary and feasible. ●

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Note

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