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The real choice: European or national rearmament, supranational or intergovernmental European defence?

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Ed - I



Abstract

The debate on European defence seems confused. This is due to the fact that when member states cannot deal with a supranational problem, which requires at least European, if not global, solutions, two proposals usually are put forward. On the one hand a federalist one, aiming at creating a truly supranational policy to deal with the issue. On the other hand an intergovernmental one, aiming at creating a European answer which remains entirely within the control of national government.

Keywords

EU defence, Readiness 2030, European Defence Mechanism, PESCO



The debate about European defence is as confused as ever. Often it is even ideological, and hides the real alternatives on the ground. Europe does not have the necessary military capabilities to defend itself and to exercise effective deterrence. Therefore, the choice is not between rearmament or not, but between European and national rearmament. Likewise, the choice will be between a European defence with supranational characteristics and mere military cooperation between the member states through a coalition of the willing on an intergovernmental basis.

The EU must face the withdrawal of the American guarantee on European security. Ursula von der Leyen reacted promptly. The Commission's initial proposal could have been better. The name RearmEU was a mistake and a boomerang. Indeed, it spurred a backlash across European citizens, public opinion, political parties and national governments. And eventually, the name was changed too. But at least the Commission has shown initiative in the face of an appalling silence from national governments, and pointed the way to greater defence integration as the only way forward.

The Conclusions of the European Council of 6 March, as well as the Commission's own White Paper, drafted under the direction of Commissioner Kubilius, the first Defence Commissioner, corrected the course and the name of the proposal. They strengthened the cooperative, transnational characters of the proposals, and changed the name into Readiness 2030.

However, there is still no legislative proposal. That is, we are still at the stage of outlining the contents, and therefore the debate is still vague, as there are no details of the proposal to negotiate on. This is normal as the new German Government is still not formally in office. And it is difficult to start a negotiations on such a crucial issues without the German government.

Compared to what has been initially outlined, we can identify a number of positive elements. All supporters of Eurobonds should welcome the fact that the Commission formally proposed the Security Action for Europe (SAFE). There is a formal legal proposal to endow SAFE with the ability to raise 150 billion of debt. This enshrines the principle that the EU can make common debt to finance European public goods, overcoming the one-off of the Next Generation EU. And SAFE is the real main proposal, with regards to the financing of an EU defence. The limit in the current debate is that SAFE is envisaged as a



tool to provide cheap loans to the member states, rather than to finance the acquisition of enablers and necessary technology by the EU as such.

Much attention has been given to the potential 650 billion of the escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact. But this amount is entirely theoretical, to be reached if all 27 member states use it to its full capacity. However, only Germany, Poland and the Baltic states are probably willing to use that clause, and not necessarily to its full capacity. Therefore, its overall potential is much limited.

Furthermore, it is important that the escape clause is to be used in a coordinated manner, and on the basis of National Defence Plans to be approved at European level. This means that member states cannot decide for themselves how to spend the funds borrowed. They will have to invest in military capabilities that complement those of others within the framework of building a European defence system. It would be absurd if all 27 were to start producing drones - which are needed - but none were to take care of the means for the anti-aircraft shield or cyber-security. We would continue to multiply the same expenses by 27, increasing costs without producing anything in terms of overall security.

The proposals can still be improved. It would be appropriate to decide that the 150 billion SAFE should be spent at European level to build an EU military capability. And that the escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact should only apply to national contributions to the European defence, not to the national ones. For example through contributions to the existing European instruments, such as the European Defence Agency, the European Defence Fund, the European Peace Facility, the European Defence Investment Policy, current and future Permanent Structured Cooperation on Defence (PESCO) projects. A similar choice was made in the past, when national contributions to the European Strategic Investment Fund (Juncker Plan), were to be decuted from the calculation of the structural deficit. Such a choice would create a huge financial incentive for member states to focus on European defence instead of national ones.

Similarly, states that really want to move towards a European defence can use PESCO, which can be activated by qualified majority voting, in a creative and ambitious way. For example PESCO can be used to bring all existing bilateral and multilateral military cooperation, such as the Eurocorps, the Franco-German Brigade, the Baltic Naval Squadron, etc., under the Union so as to make them bricks in a common edifice: the European defence



system within the framework of the European Union, the supranational institutions of which could then be used.

All this, can be envisaged as the development of the European pillar of NATO, within the framework of the Berlin Plus agreement between the EU and NATO. This is necessary and urgent, considering that the Madrid NATO Summit on July 2024 approved a new doctrine in case of a military attack on Europe that foresee the mobilization of 300.000 European troops in a month, before any US troops is called upon. Therefore, the European shall at least reach that capacity. The creation of an EU defence system can thus help member states reach that threshold, and exploit the NATO current capabilities in terms of a command and control structure (SHAPE). At the same time, Europeans shall start to substitute Americans in the key roles necessary for SHAPE to work, as the US commitment to NATO and European security is in doubt.

Faced with a defence crisis, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the loss of the American guarantee on European security, two different initiatives are being prepared, the details of which are not yet known, but whose political significance is clear. On the one hand there is the Commission's initiative, which will have at least some supranational characteristics and will aim to strengthen the European dimension - i.e. the EU's competences and powers - in defence. On the other hand, there will be the coalition of the willing, led by France and the United Kingdom, which re-proposes the bilateral Franco-British cooperation as Europe's military guide, and which will remain strictly within an intergovernmental horizon.

This second option may include the proposal for a European Defence Mechanism put forward by the Bruegel Think Tank on the model of the European Stability Mechanism, so as to also include the United Kingdom. Bruegel proposal has some useful features, like the idea that the EDM should own military equipment and then devolve it to member states in a sort of leasing, to reduce and spread over the years the impact of the military expenditures on the Member states budget. This power however could be attributed to one or another of the EU existing instruments managed by the Commission.

As has often been the case in the past, a compromise and a mixture of the various options is likely. But it is clear that the preference should go to the solution that strengthens the supranational European dimension, and not the purely intergovernmental one. If a European defence is created, the EU will be able to cooperate with the United Kingdom within NATO.



If the intergovernmental cooperation led by France and the UK advances, there will be no European defence. And we will still remain powerless.

We are witnessing fierce criticism of the Commission and the EU by people who call themselves pro-European and pacifists. Some of them refer to the Ventotene Manifesto; probably without having read it, because it explicitly calls for the creation of a European army! Consciously or unconsciously, they take the side of nationalist conservation. Because the alternative to a European defence and rearmament is national rearmament and intergovernmental military cooperation, not irenicism.

Spinelli knew that a small step forward is better than no step at all. He criticised the EEC as the “mockery of the common market”; and the Single Act derived from the Draft Treaty of European Union, as “the mountain gave birth to the mouse”, wishing that at least it was not a dead mouse. But he did not call for their non-ratification. Because each step forward allows to conduct the next battle from a more advanced position. The same was true with the European Monetary System with respect to the goal of the single currency.

Those who criticise the Commission's proposal outline pretend not to know that the alternative is mere national rearmament. No member state government so far is proposing a more advanced European defence proposal. In the current international context, dominated by the return of imperialism and power politics, the choice is not between rearmament or pacifism, but between a much more costly national rearmament and a much more effective European rearmament within the framework of the construction of a European defence system.

If and when the construction of a European military capability will start, the question of who will lead it will have to be addressed. There cannot be any military capacity, without a democratic government in charge of deciding when, where and how to use it. The same issue arose after the signing of the European Defence Community. And thanks to Spinelli and De Gasperi it brought to the Ad Hoc Assembly and the Treaty establishing the European Political Community, which eventually collapsed together with the EDC in the French National Assembly in August 1954.

Those who say they are pro-European or refer to Spinelli cannot have doubts about the need to support the creation of a supranational European defence.

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