

Can Europe Defend Itself: The Illusion of Security in a Fragmented World

Henri N. Klein

School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs, IE University, Madrid, Spain

Dual Degree in Business Administration and International Relations

E-mail: hklein.ieu2023@student.ie.edu

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Abstract

Through a nuanced analysis, this piece explores the multifaceted threats posed by Russia's assertive military strategies, and the ambiguous stance of the United States, whose oscillating commitment has spurred Europe's quest for a more autonomous security and defense identity. Simultaneously, the article scrutinizes the internal mechanisms and initiatives Europe has put in place—ranging from NATO, PESCO and the European Defense Fund to cybersecurity frameworks and energy diversification efforts—aimed at bolstering its strategic posture.

Keywords: Russia, Military Strategy, United States, European Security, NATO

I. Introduction

In recent years, Europe's security landscape has become subject to rapid transformations, driven by a confluence of internal dynamics and external pressures. Following the ease and relative calmness of the post-Cold War period, Europe's security environment now finds itself fragmented and uncertain. Domestically, the European Union is plagued by challenges to effective multilateralism, such as Brexit and growing nationalist movements questioning the value of multilateralism, crucial for Europe as a whole.

At the same time, external actors such as Russia, China, and – to some extent – the United States foreign policy stance under different administrations, have further complicated Europe's calculus. Those factors collectively threaten the stability which Europe as a whole enjoyed in previous decades thus calling for a reassessment of multilateral defense and security strategies by European countries.

Europe possesses a robust set of tools and frameworks aimed to defend its interests and maintain its stability. Yet, the effectiveness of said instances depends on

increased cooperation among EU member states, strategic investments in defense and technology, and a balanced approach to relations with other global powers. To respond to current, multifaceted challenges, this paper argues that for Europe to maintain its ability to defend its interests domestically and abroad, and to maintain its stability, a level of commitment to reinvigorate collective defense and strategic autonomy is required.

Research Question: Is Europe able to prove itself as a relevant multilateral power, to secure its interests domestically and abroad, functioning as a multilateral actor through various institutions and frameworks effectively, and if not, which steps must be taken to ensure readiness as soon as possible in domains of military hard power strength, economic relevance, and cybersecurity?

2. Europe's Security Architecture

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remains to be the cornerstone of Europe's collective defense. It provides a framework for military cooperation and deterrence extending beyond the European Union. Each member state committed to allocating 2 percent of its GDP to NATO and national defense, yet of its 30 partners, 11 states fulfilled this promise (World Population Review 2024), in 2022, only 7 member states did so. Under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, it is stated that an attack on one member is an attack on all. U.S reaffirmation of this is

crucial for Europe's security, as the U.S is investing more in its military than the next nine contributing countries combined. However, the reliability of this commitment has been questioned, particularly with a decrease in enthusiasm from recent U.S. administrations for the alliance. The Obama administration made a notable shift of focus towards the Asia-Pacific region, calling European NATO members "reluctant allies" (Petersson 2016). Trump described NATO as 'obsolete' (Kaufman 2017) and hinted at a desire for NATO to take on a greater role in the Middle East, implying an expectation for European allies to increase their involvement in global security matters (Smetana, Onderco, and Etienne 2021). Although Biden reestablished more traditional U.S. foreign policy, reaffirming support for NATO, the outcome of the 2024 presidential election will be followed cautiously by European leaders. It is essential for Europe to enhance its own defense and strategic capabilities, reducing over-reliance on U.S. military support while managing strong bilateral relations. The EU must pursue greater strategic autonomy.

3. European Union's defense initiatives

The European Union, however, also employs domestic security frameworks with a deeper integration among Member States which is aimed at enhancing defense effectiveness and addressing security challenges.

- The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), – launched in 2017 – signifies a commitment to more

binding collaborations by enhancing the operational readiness (interoperability) of military mobility and cyber defense sectors (Vilém 2018); (Dorosh and Romanyk 2020). The aim of PESCO is to streamline defense efforts among EU Member states, already creating frameworks which allow inter-continental mobilization of national forces to be able to rapidly act and utilize each state's systems to full potential.

In their academic paper *PESCO: A Force for Positive Integration in EU Defense*, Blockmans and Crosson argue PESCO to be the most significant innovation in EU defense policy since the Cold War era (Blockmans and Crosson 2021). Funded through the European Defense Fund (EDF) by EU member states with a budget of "nearly 8 billion EUR" for the period of 2021-2028,

3.1 PESCO Critical Defense Capabilities:

Critical Seabed Infrastructure Protection (CSIP)

Description: Aims to increase the operational efficiency of the EU in protecting key marine infrastructure. Anticipated agreement on common procurement in 2028. Timetable until 2024.

Participating Member States: Sweden Germany, Spain, France, Portugal, Italy

Project Timeline: Initial project timetable until 2024. Potential agreement on common procurement in 2028.

Next Generation Medium Helicopter (NGMH):

Description: Establishes a forum to address operational needs for upgrading existing fleets and developing European Next Generation Rotorcraft. Ensures fleet availability and suitability until 2040. Launch year: 2023.

Participating Member States: France, Italy, Finland, Sweden

Project Timeline: Project launch and execution in 2023. Ensures availability and suitability of EU helicopter fleets until 2040. Prepares for European Next Generation Rotorcraft.

Counter Battery Sensors (CoBaS):

Description: Aims to develop a common concept for next-generation counter-battery capability for EU armed forces. Facilitates future common procurement of counter-artillery means.

Participating Member States: France, Netherlands

Project Timeline: Developing next-generation counter-battery capability. Facilitating common procurement for counter-artillery means. Delivering capabilities by 2030-2035.

Additional Projects:

Includes: European Defense Airlift Training Academy (EDA-TA), Anti-Torpedo Torpedo (ATT), Future Short-Range Air to Air Missile (FSRM), Integrated Unmanned Ground Systems 2 (iUGS2), Integrated Multi-Layer Air and Missile Defense system

(IMLAMD), Arctic Command & Control Effector and Sensor System (ACCESS), Robust Communication Infrastructure and Networks (ROCOMIN), ROLE 2F

- *Information from - (PESCO 2024)*

However, these initiatives are now being challenged by critics who remain skeptical of the extent to which PESCO can avoid the dilemma of competing national interests – and the ineffective and confrontational trade-offs that result from defining common defense activities.

Lavallée describes the European defense market as an arena of power struggles and strategic competition between a range of state and non-state actors operating under the European defense and security umbrella; and insists that competition from within might even come to undermine the goals of the proposed PESCO (Lavallée 2012).

Keskin, emphasizes the difficulty of collective action at the member-state level, indicating that collective action in security matters between EU member states is more difficult than between EU member states on other matters, which affects PESCO's possibilities (Keskin 2018).

These initiatives, however, are being challenged by critics who believe in PESCO inability to overcome the

complex web of national interests – and thus, inefficiencies and conflict within the context of common defense initiatives.

Member states must try to overcome national priorities and commit to sovereignty-pooling and substantial investments in defense for PESCO to be effective.

4. Bilateral and multilateral relations

Bilateral and multilateral relations serve as a cornerstone for ensuring stability and security throughout Europe.

Symbolizing the importance of classical state-based relations, the Franco-German alliance stands as the most important commitment for European (military) initiatives, and is arguably crucial for European security, revealing complex interdependence in world politics. Through close economic ties, integrated foreign policies, and military cooperation, France and Germany created a relationship where the cost of conflict outweighs the benefits of cooperation¹ Their partnership is pivotal and leading European defense. Together, France and Germany have started several joint military projects, including the development of a European fighter jet and combined military overseas missions (Lewis 2016). The alliance and cooperation

¹ "Complex Interdependence is a theory which stresses the complex ways in which as a result of growing ties, the transnational actors become mutually dependent, vulnerable to each other's actions and sensitive to each other's needs" (Modi 2024).

have also expanded to linguistic and educational institutions, creating a new youth generation that understands the costs of conflict and the benefits of unity in European defense.

Bilateral and multilateral cooperation is a strategic necessity for Europe, as none of the member states can ensure that their defense is agile, responsive, and networked across the continent. Not only are these agreements exemplary of the drive to safeguard better and advance common interests, but they're crucial to securing Europe's strategic autonomy in the face of the growing geopolitical competition. By pooling together resources, sharing intelligence and coordinating defense policies, the EU and its members can leverage comparative advantages, while increasing their collective holding power in the face of growing and diversified security challenges. The invocation of cooperation at the expense of conflict in all these agreements not only underlines the connection between stronger defense and stronger peace and stability but also encourages and cultivates cooperation over confrontation.

5. The Franco-German alliance

It symbolizes the importance of traditional state relations. The alliance between France and Germany is a key driver for European (military) initiatives and substantial for European security. It demonstrates the concept of complex interdependence in international

relations. The partnership has initiated joint military projects, such as the development of a European fighter jet, and combined efforts in overseas military missions (Lewis 2016). The alliance has also promoted student exchange, fostering a new generation that understands the importance of unity in European defense.

6. The Nordic Defense Cooperation

Another instructive case is how Nordic countries have taken steps towards creating common defense capabilities through a regional cooperative framework. The Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEF) is the regional cooperative framework between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, which has been established to improve defense efficiency and operational cooperation in areas including joint military exercises, defense materiel cooperation, and harmonization of capabilities (Kenneth Winter 2020).

The cultivation of these multilateral relationships is a strategic essentiality for Europe's defense, which is dynamic, responsive, and intermeshed, across the continent. These obligations represent how 'we' – not some faceless body – come in defense of 'us', and that is incontestably essential for Europe's strategic autonomy, whether it's PESCO or any other agreement. Cooperation over conflict – that is the gist of what these agreements are all about.

7. External Threats and Challenges

7.1 *A wake-up call from Russia*

Russia's aggressive military measures, its multiple and multifaceted hybrid warfare arsenal, and the self-assertion of its world have significantly influenced Europe's security dilemma. Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its "special military operation" (others might say invasion) of parts of Ukraine in February of 2022 have intensified tensions and showcased Russia's readiness to exert its authority over its former – now sovereign – territories and challenge the established European security framework. As such, Putin's action can be seen as a clear demonstration of his willingness to disrupt European security order. Russia's sophisticated cyber warfare, from concerted political interference to industrial espionage and disinformation, has significantly affected the security picture in many European countries. It has prevented the closing of loopholes and has destabilized the democratic quality and integrity of many European states (Biersack and O'Lear 2014).

Vladimir Putin's attempts to restore the influence of the Russian empire are also seen in his attention to the Baltic States and Central Asia (Shinar 2017). Putin's strategy mixes 'soft power',² economic pressure, and nationalism to extend Russia's influence that strives to re-create the imperial spatial and territorial reach of the

² "Power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers, and that can be accomplished by coercion, payment, or attraction and persuasion" (Nye 2017).

tsars in the 19th century, Chaim Shinar in his recent book on Putin and the ideal of empire even calls the re-creation of the Russian empire itself. The regions have long been seen by Russia as strategic areas of interest, and Putin's policies seek to reintegrate these areas into Russia's sphere of influence, or at least prevent them from being drawn into Western entities, using historic ties, practices of dependency on Russian energy supplies, and Russian-speaking populations as part of the strategy.

Illustration 1: Map of Eastern Europe and Russia



Note: Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The aerial map above shows the locations of NATO member states (currently hosting Enhanced Forward Presence troops), deployed as part of the enhanced deterrence strategy in the Baltic States and Poland before the current war in Ukraine.

7.2 *Early military response*

NATO states reacted to Russian plans to maintain strategic areas with enhanced deterrence in its eastern

region, by sending in a combat force from 2016 onwards. This initially meant reinforcing its existing infrastructure and commitments to defend NATO member states extending its eastern flank, including the three small Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which joined NATO in 2004, amidst controversial rows about the future direction of Europe, especially Poland (Veebel 2018). At the Brussels Summit in 2014 (in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea), NATO began preparations for developing an enhanced forward presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, especially alongside NATO's eastern member states. The command and coordination of EFP forces (the 'Enhanced Forward Presence' of NATO) are seated at the NATO HQ in Brussels. EFP is a multinational battle group deployed as a forward presence in the combat zone. This force was formally launched in 2016 at the NATO Summit in Warsaw to 'deter adversaries and reassure allies.

The EFP consists of four multinational battalion-sized battle groups stationed in the following countries:

Estonia

Lead Nation: United Kingdom

Contributing Nations: Denmark, Iceland, and several other NATO members

Troop Numbers: 1,000 to 1,500

Latvia

Lead Nation: Canada

Contributing Nations: Albania, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and others

Troop Numbers: 1,000 to 1,500

Lithuania

Lead Nation: Germany

Contributing Nations: Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and others

Troop Numbers: 1,000 to 1,500

Poland

Lead Nation: United States

Contributing Nations: Romania, United Kingdom, and others

Troop Numbers: 1,000 to 1,500

Critics see certain issues as unaddressed leaving Europe vulnerable. Independent NATO states dislike sovereignty pooling.³ According to NATO the four battle groups are "under NATO command, as part of the Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters in Szczecin, Poland" (NATO 2023). Yet the EFP battlegroups are embedded within host-nation command-and-force structures, claim autonomy, and do not fall under NATO command (Stanton et al.

³ "Pooling sovereignty means, in practice, that the Member States delegate some of their decision-making powers to shared institutions they have created, so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at European level" (Eurostat 2013).

2015). NATO militaries are, however, used to dealing with this. Yet, this reflects a lack of clarity over who is in control of units of the EFP, and which military authority can overrule the other (Deni 2019).

8. Post-Ukrainian Actions

Some have withheld judgment on whether the EFP battlegroups are big enough to send the kind of deterrent signal that can convince Russia not to threaten the alliance; NATO deployments would be unlikely to convince Moscow that the alliance was willing to pay the price to shift Russian gains back over time (Furgacz 2020). Speculation and analysis have abounded on the likely rapidity with which Russian forces could overrun the four NATO EFP stations in the Baltic states and Poland in the event of a sudden attack. The conventional force available to NATO is a formidable deterrent, even though several analysts argue that under most plausible scenarios, in an imaginary hypothetical scenario, Russia could make a rapid penetration and could give NATO forces significant problems in their quick reaction capabilities (Ming-Jer Chen and Miller, n.d.); (Deni 2019).

Olaf Scholz, Federal Chancellor of Germany responded to the recent shift in Europe's security landscape by announcing to accelerate Europe's defense initiatives by taking a pivotal role within both NATO and PESCO. The '*Zweitenwende*'— a turning point – incorporates a €100 billion fund that is

supposed to modernize German military capabilities – clearly needed – as Germany is argued to be at least 30 years behind on technical standards compared to the US (Tallis 2023).

Boris Pistorius, German Defense Minister, and his Lithuanian colleague, Arvydas Anušauskas – as part of the €100 Billion fund – agreed to update the German-led base to facilitate 4,800 German troops plus 200 civilians in Lithuania. The brigade will receive newly built Leopard 2 tanks and personnel. With those actions, scheduled to be ready by 2028, Europe plans on securing its eastern territories (Larson 2023).

According to the non-profit organization RAND, this deterrence is not sufficient as Russia would still hold much more relative power.⁴ Military strategists around Europe believe that the EFP battlegroups in the Baltic region could not hold the position for more than four days in the case of direct intense conflict - which is a strategic problem since heavy European reinforcement would take about seven days to be mobilized (Farley 2021).

Further, this action conflicts with previous NATO agreements and the *1997 NATO-Russia Foundation Act*, aiming at preventing a permanent stronghold of military forces which only intensify and fuel and cause a security dilemma. (Salerno-Garthwaite 2023).⁵

⁴ "Relative power refers to the ability of one person or group to control or influence another person or group" (LSData 2024).

⁵ "Security dilemma, in political science, a situation in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which in turn

Another action taken by Pistorius was to reconsider the German *Wehrpflicht*, or military conscription, which was suspended in 2011 (Glucroft 2024). Yet, in a recent survey, only 1 in 20 Germans aged 15-35 say they are willing to fight for Germany (Kriez 2023).

While the effectiveness of relative power of NATO, PESCO and individual states in a hypothetical warfare against Russia remain uncertain, a war-game by NATO states referred to as STEADFAST Defender 2024 aims to showcase the readiness and interoperability of allied forces. As “NATO’s largest military exercise since the Cold War”, with a deployment of over 90.000 troops from 32 NATO allies, it aims to show its “commitment to protect each other from any threat”. While an aggressor is not named, the operation from Jan to May 2024 spans from Greece to Norway spotlights a possible aggression from the east.

9. Digital battlefield

Europe has found itself increasingly subject to Russian cyberoperations, such as the notorious hacks of the German Bundestag at the end of 2015, in which cybersecurity engineers found a superior piece of malware that infiltrated the Bundestag’s network, exfiltrated a considerable quantity of sensitive information and exposed vulnerabilities in security

standards for governmental cyberspace (Cerulus 2020). Ukraine’s power grid has also been a recent target, as has the global release of the malware NotPetya, which even though its intended target was Ukraine caused havoc, hampering many European companies and services (Greenberg 2018).

To these threats, the European Union has responded with several coordinated, robust cybersecurity initiatives. The Network and Information Security (NIS) Directive requires critical service operators in EU member states to maintain a high level of network and information security (Markopoulou, Papakonstantinou, and de Hert 2019). The new European Union Cybersecurity Act extends the role of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) in coordinating crisis responses among member states. This represents Europe’s robust approach to resilience, deterrence, and defense of its critical digital infrastructure. The creation of the European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) tackles foreign information manipulation (ibid.).

Yet, obstacles remain: IT talent is scarce in Europe, particularly in the cybersecurity space – and talent that does exist is especially reluctant to go work for governmental or security organizations, following monetary incentives by the private sector (Nobles

lead to a decrease rather than an increase in the original state’s security” (Britannica 2024).

2018). This brain drain⁶ is a challenge for our critical digital infrastructure as well as developing robust defense strategies against the ever-evolving cyber threat. Recruiting and retaining cybersecurity experts in governmental agencies to be able to counter new and evolving cyber threats is crucial to improving Europe's cyber resilience in the long run.

10. Energy Security and Dependence

Further, European energy dependence on Russia, particularly natural gas, has long been a notable setback due to a substantial misstep in its security architecture, and the forgotten sabotage of Nord Stream the year before highlighted the vulnerabilities involved in these dependencies. Resilience and investment in alternative energy infrastructure, including new Liquefied natural gas infrastructure (LNG) and interconnectors, and reservations for new supplies of non-Russian gas, have rushed to fill in gaps in Europe's energy dependency (European Commission 2024a). The European Green Deal, and the EU's energy system integration strategy, emphasize improving energy efficiency, investing in new renewable energy sources, and reducing dependency on non-European suppliers to promote the EU's self-sufficiency.

Just like the EU's rather two-faced policy towards Russia, combining dialogue on shared matters of

concern – ranging from climate change to Arctic governance – with determination to stand up against violations of international law, Europe's foreign policy generally balances assertiveness with diplomacy. On the one hand, NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups in eastern Europe amount to a moderately coherent deterrence strategy; on the other hand, the EU has hardened its digital defense and stepped up its fight against disinformation.

11. Preparations for decreasing US interest

Limited United States strategic interest in Europe – while not a direct issue for Europe's security landscape – is starting to become an indirect issue. In recent years, the US decided to withdraw approximately 12,000 more troops from Germany (Stewart 2020). These decisions unquestionably raise concerns about Europe's ability to defend itself if US strategic interest and attention to Europe continue to decrease. The US inventory consideration to withdraw nuclear warheads from Europe further represents a destabilizing of deterrence (Karnitschnig 2024). More importantly, Europe is critically dependent on US system manufacturers not only for procurement but also for ammunition. This raises the question of whether Europe can defend itself and be more strategically independent of the United States if the US is no longer willing or able to supply ammunition.

⁶ "The loss suffered by a country as a result of the emigration of a (highly) qualified person" (European Commission 2024b).

Regardless, right now, this dependency only increases: As part of the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) – launched in 2022 – Germany decided to purchase the American and Israeli *Close Air Defense System (LVS NNbS)*, while French President Emmanuel Macron tries to convince European leaders to sign contracts with the bloc's industry (Kayali 2023). Macron's intention discusses the essence of Europe's ability to maintain its autonomy. Irrespectively, Pistorius, German Defense Minister responded: "What matters to us is to have a shield over Europe as fast as possible" (Kayali 2023). For now, Europe must not fear America to fall on its back. For 70 years, Europe has developed a constant and almost uninterrupted dependency on the United States. This transatlantic dependency is likely to remain relevant for another 30 or 40 years (Bazzano 2023). Europe has the time to catch up on Research and Development, to build up its troop stocks and train for the same on the ground in the military realm as well as in cyberspace, and to increase sheer military power size.

12. Conclusion

As this paper has shown, it is a time of deep contestation and challenge, with a mix of internal and external pressures on European security. Europe's defense projects, from the PESCO treaty to the European Defense Fund to its myriad of bilateral and multilateral defense projects, show a strong defensive policy meant to consolidate European capabilities.

That policy is tested continuously and is still tested, by the unpredictability of Moscow's belligerence as well as the fluid US commitment to European security. Through these complex dynamics, Europe has been on a clear path to move ahead, with a wise combination of deterrence, diplomacy, and an effort to build up capabilities at home. Europe is not yet strategically autonomous. It has remembered that it remains dependent on US deterrent strength and that its energetic independence is still based on foreign supplies.

Thus, this paper argues that Europe is not fully able to prove itself as a relevant, independent multilateral power, to secure its interests domestically and abroad, functioning as a multilateral actor through various institutions and frameworks effectively. Further, this paper argues that various steps must be taken to ensure readiness as soon as possible in domains of military hard power strength, economic relevance, and cybersecurity. Europe looks to have woken up from its post-Conflict-era illusions and is now actively building military capabilities, from research to investment and sheer bulk; but that all takes age, and this is where the weakness of Europe in the face of pre-emptive attacks lies.

Looking forward, the extent to which Europe can adjust its security and defense policies to the evolving dynamics in the emerging global architecture will be an

important test case. In particular, the emergence of cyber and hybrid threats to complement the more traditional military threats in security challenges, all of which define the new security environment, suggest the urgent necessity of forward-looking thinking in security policies and capabilities that encompass new threats. It means that Europe should prudently invest in cyber defenses, in innovation in defense technologies, and in making its energy infrastructure more resilient to reduce dependencies. The much-touted concept of strategic autonomy should evolve from a mere declaratory intent to an actual set of policies and capabilities enabling Europe to push

and pursue its interests on the global stage independently. Strategic autonomy doesn't imply cutting off relationships with the United States or NATO. On the contrary, Europe's capacity for defense would be strengthened, leaving Europe as a more equal partner in the transatlantic alliance, sharing the burden of defense expenses while contributing to global stability.

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