



Strengthening the Alliance's European Pillar

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Summary

Strengthening European defence and the European pillar of the Alliance at the same time has become a matter of urgency. Whatever the outcome of the American elections and whatever the final outcome of the war in Ukraine and the temporary conditions of a ceasefire, the European Union must invest more and better in creating own deterrence and credibility vis-à-vis Putin. It is suggested that the European allies engage in a dialogue with the United States after the recent NATO Summit in Washington to gain their full support for this urgent and much-needed endeavour?

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Analysis

Strengthening European defence and the European pillar of the Alliance at the same time has become a matter of urgency. It has never been more important and is an absolute must! But, why should all European NATO members agree? Will the new Commission help make it happen? Will the US support it?

And why is that?

Putin has simultaneously awakened both NATO and Europe; and Trump's provocative, transactional and irresponsible statements have added a nightmarish dimension to Putin's acts of war, with his deadly war on Ukraine and his unconventional aggressions and nuclear threats against the "global West" becoming more pronounced. So far, Putin, who claims to define both his and our red lines, has achieved only one undeniable success: he has become the master of the world clock, influencing the agendas of all the world's players: Europe, of course, but also China and the United States.

The cursor of the decisive shift in US foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region is moving back more than a little towards a genuine concern for transatlantic security. This is, of course, of paramount importance in itself, if only in terms of America's own credibility vis-à-vis China. The tempting worst-case scenario of an aggressive move by Beijing against the status quo in Taiwan is clearly affected. And so is Trump's personal agenda! In the context of the US presidential elections, he simply had no choice but to allow half of the Republicans in the House of Representatives to join the Democrats in voting in favour of funding Ukraine with 61 billion US dollars! To appear as 'THE' American culprit in Putin's victory over Ukraine was simply too great a political risk!

Today, most European powers see Ukraine as their first line of conventional defence. This is clearly challenged by Putin. Against this background, it is absolutely essential to strengthen the European pillar of the Alliance. This is fully supported even by non-EU NATO members such as the United Kingdom, Norway and even Turkey.

In the US, the Biden administration has publicly affirmed that a stronger and more capable European defence would contribute to transatlantic and global security. In a joint statement in October, Presidents Biden and Macron said that "it is important to have strong defence industrial bases in Europe and the United States, characterised by their interoperability, which will make it possible to improve military capabilities in the interests of the Alliance". This statement was reaffirmed in the Franco-American roadmap of 8 June 2024: "The leaders reaffirmed the importance of strengthening the NATO-EU strategic partnership and promoting a stronger and more capable European defence, which underpins the European pillar of transatlantic security and contributes positively to collective security."

Even Trump will find this hard to resist. It is hard to imagine him depriving the US of the remarkable instruments of influence (as soft power in peacetime) that NATO represents as a politico-military organisation.

It is hard to imagine him giving in to Putin's continuing imperialist ambitions over Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and even the Baltic states and Poland. Since we cannot bet on this, whatever the outcome of the American elections and whatever the final outcome of the war in Ukraine and the temporary conditions of a ceasefire, we as Europeans must invest more and better in creating our own deterrence and credibility vis-à-vis Putin.



If necessity prevails, the question becomes one of feasibility: building a capable, operational European military force and a European defence and technological industrial base. So far, we have continued to spend too little and spend it inappropriately.

The fragmentation of supply and demand is a waste of resources that are already inadequate. The implementation of the instruments set up by Europe, such as the European Defence Agency, to overcome the structural drift towards national procurement practices, has not yet worked.

Our commonly agreed target of spending 2% of GDP on defence was a reasonable figure before the Russian aggression in Ukraine. It is still not fully met everywhere in Europe. And it's clearly not enough in the face of Russian and other global challenges. The European Defence Industry Strategy/European Defence Industry Programme (EDIS/EDIP) prepared by the EU Commission proposes to start by mobilising €1.5 billion from the European budget for the EDIP, as if this would be enough to finance all our shortcomings! In fact, if Russia spends 6%, Poland 4% and the US almost 3.5% of their respective GDP, the European Member States probably need no less than an additional 200 billion euros per year to ensure the reconstruction and sustainability of their defence industries, to reach the 3% of their GDP threshold and to synergize their defence efforts.

Europeans also need to improve their procurement. The practice of national and, if not American, preference denies existing European (and even party-national, partly European) alternatives, as recently demonstrated by the German European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI).

So far, the EU Commission has undermined the urgently needed European industrial consolidation. This means that cooperation programmes, integration and exports have deliberately suffered. Will a basically identical EU administration be able to stimulate more systematic cooperation programmes to meet harmonised operational requirements, deeper integration through these programmes and a good chance of exporting the products of these cooperations? The much-needed competitive, independent European supply chain is simply unthinkable without strong European champions with global critical mass.

VAT exemptions - as rightly proposed by the Commission - are an important first step in the right direction. Clearly, we need to introduce an EUMS system for projects developed in European cooperation, equivalent to the US FMS (Foreign Military Sales), to facilitate government-to-government purchases between Europeans and strategic partnerships abroad. Indeed, as recently proposed by the Commission, it must reverse its previous policy, with its underlying military-averse affection, and unleash the European banking system to finance a defence industry so vital to our sustainable future.

As stated in the conclusions of the Franco-German Defence and Security Council of 29 May 2024, "France and Germany are committed to further convergence of their security and defence objectives and strategies and to intensify their consultations on strategic analysis and cooperation decisions, including in the trilateral format of the Chancellery/Elysée, Foreign and Defence Ministries". Shouldn't such a crucial issue as the shared commitment to strengthen the European pillar of the Alliance be addressed immediately in this new, powerful format? Shouldn't we - together with our other European allies - engage in a dialogue with the United States after the latest NATO Summit in Washington to gain their full support for this urgent and much-needed endeavour?

Remarks: The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.

About the Authors of this Issue

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