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# Security Policy **IN FOCUS**

The Case for a Postmodern  
EU Defence Architecture

March 2017

## Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

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It is widely believed that Britain's decision to leave the EU and Donald Trump's election to the White House have strengthened both the case for and the possibility of an ambitious EU defence policy—perhaps even of an EU army. This short paper argues that, contrary to widespread fears, the EU can become a powerful security and defence policy player without adopting the hierarchical structures of traditional states and while maintaining decentralised defence responsibilities and a pluralist institutional framework. Two relevant historical examples—the Holy Roman Empire and the Hanseatic League—are presented to draw general lessons on how the EU could accomplish this, thus becoming an effective 'post-modern power'.

**Keywords** EU Security and Defence Policy – EU army– Postmodern power – Holy Roman Empire – Hanseatic League

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the thorough comments provided by Michael Benhamou and Roland Freudenstein.



# Introduction

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Since its inception the European integration project has included an attempt to forge a common European defence policy. The boldest integration initiative ever taken in Europe was the 1952 plan to create a European army as a prelude to a European federation or confederation.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since the Maastricht Treaty the coordination of national foreign and defence policies has been institutionalised, and a European Security and Defence Policy has been put in place.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, however, discussions on significant defence integration have intensified. In March 2015, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker spoke publicly in favour of ‘a joint EU army’.<sup>4</sup> The UK vote in June 2016 to leave the EU has emboldened supporters of ambitious integration initiatives in the field of defence. Shortly after the vote, the case for further integration was strengthened by developments on the other side of the Atlantic, where President Donald Trump urged Europeans to stop free-riding on American protection and to take their defence seriously.

This short paper will not try to solve the complex operational and political dilemmas we will face in trying to develop an effective defence policy for Europe. It will instead look briefly at the histories of two peculiar polities—the Holy Roman Empire and the Hanseatic League—from which the EU can perhaps learn some lessons in its attempt to upgrade its common defence policy.

Like the EU, both polities were complex unions made up of many autonomous entities. Both tried to develop powerful defence and military capabilities while maintaining their institutional plurality and without adopting the centralised structures of states. Both succeeded. More than to unitary states or even federal states—which usually have very centralised foreign and defence policies that seem politically unachiev-

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<sup>2</sup> The English text of the European Defence Community Treaty can be found at <http://aei.pitt.edu/5201/1/5201.pdf>. It provides useful information on the topics discussed in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> It was renamed the Common Security and Defence Policy by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *Euractiv.com* and *Reuters*, ‘Juncker: NATO Is Not Enough, EU Needs an Army’, updated 15 June 2016, accessed at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/juncker-nato-is-not-enough-eu-needs-an-army/> on 11 January 2017.



able in today's Europe—it is to these models that the EU could look to become a powerful defence and military player.

## **The EU as a security and defence player: not a state, but a union of states**

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Supporters of an ambitious EU defence policy have identified the basic problem of the existing policies in their predominantly intergovernmental nature. They find it problematic that the EU does not act in these fields as a state and lacks the powers of command and political direction that are considered quintessential to these functions. They see no other solution than for the EU to acquire these powers and create an army that would 'back soft power with hard power', as the common expression goes. Therefore, it is generally accepted that, while the EU may be able to successfully deploy civilian and peacekeeping missions, a real defence policy will require its transformation into a more state-like entity.

Eurosceptics differ in their conclusions, but they reach them based on similar state-centred arguments. In their widespread mockery of EU defence policies, they assume that only states can have fully developed and effective policies in this field. The EU not being a state and not having the slightest chance of becoming one, its ambition to have a credible defence role is simply wishful thinking. In a similar vein, many Eurosceptics believe that NATO, as an alliance of sovereign states, is and will remain the only credible framework for collective defence on the Old Continent.

These approaches are misguided. For while it is probably true that for the foreseeable future the EU has no real chance of becoming a state, it does not have to become one to have an effective foreign and defence policy. History shows that numerous non-state polities managed to be powers to be reckoned with while retaining institutional plurality and decentralised decision-making. Their experience offers interesting and innovative ways of thinking about the future of EU defence.



# The security and defence policy of unions of states: two historical examples

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The historical cases presented here illustrate how unions of states can develop successful defence and military policies without adopting the unitary command structures of nation states.<sup>5</sup> In both cases the expression ‘union of states’ is perhaps inappropriate and anachronistic. It has been adopted as a simple shortcut to identify polities made up of many diverse entities that retain their autonomy and prerogatives.

## Holy Roman Empire

Nowadays the Holy Roman Empire is mostly forgotten, and few would seriously claim that we might have something to learn from it. But it was the longest-lasting polity in Europe’s history, having survived for over a thousand years (800–1806).

Historians of the Empire have long been familiar with the curious phenomenon that political scientists call ‘governance’ and have applied most notably to understanding the EU. ‘Government’, one of the most noted wrote, ‘implies a centralized, institutionalized state with a clear chain of command and responsibility. Modern politics are largely about determining who controls such states and what policies they should pursue. “Governance” more commonly denotes auto-politics and self-regulation, both of which are closer to the Empire’s *regimen* of a broadly inclusive system relying more on consensus than command.’<sup>6</sup> Governance, as opposed to government, is the hallmark of unions of states. This is true of security and military policy as it is of most other policy areas.

Even though it was not a unitary state, the Empire was able to deploy troops and fight effectively on several fronts at once. This it did until well into the eighteenth century, when internal strife among competing

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<sup>5</sup> Other historical examples (e.g. the Swiss and American Confederations) would have been equally suitable for this analysis. However, the two cases presented here seem sufficient to drive home the main lessons for the EU.

<sup>6</sup> P. H. Wilson, *Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 295.



territorial princes, most notably the ruthless Frederick II of Prussia, destroyed its internal cohesion and hollowed out its institutions for good. The Empire as a whole never possessed a permanent army, but many of its constituent entities did. Early in its modern history, the Empire developed a mechanism for mobilising—and financing—these decentralised forces under an umbrella structure whenever this was necessary for collective defence and internal peace enforcement.

The supreme overarching institution, the Emperor, could take the initiative, but the *Reichstag*—the imperial parliament—had to authorise mobilisation on behalf of the Empire as a whole. Repeated moves towards funding a permanent defence cadre in peacetime were rejected out of fear that they might open the way to imperial centralisation, thus swamping decentralised liberties and identities. Financial burdens were apportioned among the principalities by means of a quota system. Funding could also be raised through ad hoc financial initiatives, in addition to the regular contributions that made up the imperial budget. Territorial princes, not the imperial authorities, were responsible for raising, equipping, training and maintaining their troops.

One of the most interesting aspects of imperial security and defence was the formalisation of autonomous regional decision-making structures, albeit under an imperial umbrella. The various territorial rulers—we would now say ‘states’—were grouped on a regional basis in ‘Imperial Circles’ (*Reichskreise*). These Circles proved unexpectedly pivotal in maintaining the cohesion of the Empire, especially where centrifugal tendencies had gone the furthest. Individual Circles had their own administration, archive, treasury and enforcement agencies. These, in turn, had a wide range of responsibilities, including imperial taxation, coinage and roads.

Moreover, the assemblies of these Circles could authorise a mobilisation limited to their regions, as the imperial parliament could do for the Empire as a whole. This is why the Circles proved surprisingly effective when it came to organising defence, for example in the great wars against France in 1680–1700. In this period the western regions of the Empire were the most directly threatened and the readiest to act, but they needed the support of the whole. The flexible and decentralised structure of imperial defence allowed the Empire to find the right balance for this problem.



A comparable situation exists in the EU, where threats are often regional or perceived differently by different regions, as in the case of Russia. Although individual princes occasionally had aggressive external policies, the Empire as a whole never did and never could. Overwhelming external threats such as the Ottoman Empire or the France of Louis XIV were the only causes behind which its constituent members could unite. Thus the Empire could only be a benign arbiter of internal disputes and a defender of its states' territory and integrity when these were threatened by external powers. Collective defence remained anchored in the ideal of a defensive war, since only this was likely to secure the necessary approval of the imperial parliament.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that the Empire could not withstand the assault of revolutionary and Napoleonic France, the first modern, centralised state. The strain on its internal cohesion and limited resources was too strong, and the Empire collapsed in 1806. In fact, this is no doubt the fundamental weakness of all composite unions in security and defence policy: when confronted with an imminent danger, they are less able to quickly mobilise significant human and economic resources under a centralised command.

However, the importance of such a handicap should not be overestimated in the present context—where traditional wars have become ever rarer; new forms of asymmetric, hybrid and cyberwarfare are becoming the rule; and standing armies have largely come to play a deterrent role. In this new context, flexible and polycentric structures could actually represent an advantage. Besides, our experience with NATO proves that effective chains of command for rapid defence action can be put in place even in an alliance of sovereign states. Without a doubt, a union of states with strong central institutions could do even better in this regard.

## Hanseatic League

The Hanseatic League is a polity even more lost in the fog of history than the Holy Roman Empire, but it is equally interesting in the context of Europe's search for 'unity in diversity' in security and defence. The reason is that the Hanseatic League 'was to fight and negotiate, often on all fronts at once, over long periods, and with remarkable resilience and success. . . .

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<sup>7</sup> The details on imperial defence presented here, along with many other points, can be found in *ibid.*, 454–62, and in P. H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495–1806* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 85–93.



It could put armies in the field. . . . And it could deal, on more than equal terms, with sovereign states.’<sup>8</sup>

While the EU is a league of states that is trying to develop effective foreign and defence policies, the Hanseatic League was a union of trading cities created for this very purpose in the middle of the fourteenth century. Made up of 77 core members and over 100 associates—all very jealous of their autonomy—one might expect it to have had worse coordination problems than the 28-member EU. In fact, the League was able to develop an effective form of confederal decision-making with significant decentralisation, in this way becoming a power to be reckoned with.

On all internal matters, member towns exercised their own jurisdictions in full autonomy from common institutions. Through these overarching institutions they regulated interactions between themselves and, most importantly, relations between the League and external players. The most important organ—also on matters of foreign relations, security and defence—was the Diet. Here all member towns were represented, each having one vote. Decisions were taken by a simple majority of those present. The Diet decided issues that affected all towns, including membership, a wide range of economic matters, external representation and military issues. Like the states making up the EU, the League’s members had rather diverse legal codes, interests and sizes, with towns such as Lübeck and Hamburg being incomparably richer, bigger and more influential than the smaller members.

As with the EU, the main problem was collective action: how to get all members to act collectively on affairs that might interest only some of them. An important mitigating factor was that all members shared a strategic priority: defending the towns’ autonomy against the claims of territorial lords. Enforcement mechanisms included levying purpose-specific fees on individual towns, excluding towns from specific benefits or, as a last resort, threatening to expel towns. In the absence of a strong central enforcer, big towns also played a crucial role in ensuring that the smaller ones fell into line with common decisions.

As in the Holy Roman Empire, however, the explicit institutionalisation of diversity that enabled decision-making on a regional level

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in H. Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 109.



proved crucial to ensuring cohesion and effectiveness. It allowed various subgroups of towns that were bound together by geographic proximity and similar interests to undertake foreign policy and defence initiatives without directly involving other members, provided that such initiatives did not jeopardise the common interests and purposes of the League. It was also possible for the League to delegate collective actions to ad hoc groups of willing towns.

To finance military and other expenses, the League—like the EU—did not have the power to impose direct taxes. But it could levy fees for specific purposes, including the financing of actions undertaken by a subgroup of cities on behalf of the whole League.<sup>9</sup> These mechanisms of institutionalised diversity allowed the League to raise armies and conduct foreign policy while preserving the autonomy of its cities and without developing fully centralised and hierarchical structures.

## Lessons for EU security and defence policy

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This brief sketch of two historical cases allows us to draw a number of general lessons that could be useful when trying to develop EU security and defence policy in the post-Brexit and post-Trump environment.

1. *The EU defence system should be organised in such a way that it is effective for what the EU is: a union of states, as opposed to a state.* While history shows this can be accomplished, it also teaches that such policies should be organised differently than analogous state policies. In particular, in a union of states the preservation of diversity and autonomous identities is a value in itself and cannot be sacrificed to the efficiency needs of centralised decision-making. As a consequence, forms of decentralised decision-making are not only advisable, but vital.
2. *The most Eurosceptic and ‘Euro-reluctant’ countries have long accepted the mistaken equation between a strong common EU defence system—the much dreaded ‘EU Army’—and the emergence of a ‘European superstate’.* The main takeaway from the current

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<sup>9</sup> The information provided here on the functioning of the Hanseatic League and its defence arrangements is drawn from *ibid.*, 109–29.





analysis is that they should abandon such fears and promote instead an ambitious system of defence for the EU as a union of states. Raising an army and successfully engaging in combat have nothing to do with becoming a state. The EU can accomplish these ends while remaining a union of states. It is true that the EU's military capabilities are now limited to the 'Petersberg tasks': to missions of a humanitarian, peacekeeping and peacemaking nature. However, this has been a conscious choice resting on the assumption that NATO could be relied upon to provide 'hard' security and defence. With the US expected to disengage partially from the Old Continent and with the possibility of the strategic priorities of the two sides of the Atlantic diverging, old fears about a 'duplication' of tasks that could weaken NATO are losing credibility. A strong EU foreign and defence policy is our best hope of preserving the transatlantic Alliance, as it would prove to our American friends that we are seriously considering a quantum leap in this field—one that would ease their burden. We would continue to deal with common transatlantic defence issues within the NATO framework, but we would also be able to act autonomously on other matters.

3. *The security and defence policy of unions of states is bound to have a defensive, 'negative' nature, as opposed to the active and at times aggressive pursuit of strategic priorities that is typical of states.* The reason is simple: given the diversity of cultures, strategic traditions and capabilities among the various states, agreement on very active—let alone aggressive—goals is virtually impossible. This is why throughout history many unions of states have taken an openly neutral stance in international matters. This has been the case in Switzerland. And it was even the case in the early US, at least as far as European conflicts and diplomatic games were concerned. The Holy Roman Empire was no exception: in its modern phase, its primary mission was to defend the Christian Occident against the recurrent assaults of the Ottoman Empire. In later centuries its common structures were also mobilised to defend the independence of its constituent principalities against the France of Louis XIV, a new aggressor in the West. One can see, then, that to speak of a 'Europe puissance' is to betray a misunderstanding of the nature of the EU as a union of states. Even if the EU fully realises its security and military policy potential, it is likely to remain a guarantor and a defender, and not become an active power.



4. *History shows that the presence of a shared security threat is important to fostering the establishment and strengthening of common defence structures.* The Hanseatic League was kept together by the common interests of its towns in maintaining open trade routes and autonomy from territorial princes. Similarly, in the modern history of the Holy Roman Empire, the main unifying factors were the Ottoman and later French military threats. There is every reason to think that European integration itself would never have got underway without the immediate threat of Soviet Russia after the Second World War. If the presence of a solid American security umbrella long postponed the push for a real European security force, the time for it is now riper than ever. Although Putin's Russia is not Stalin's Soviet Union, there is no doubt that it is actively trying to undermine the security of both certain EU members and of Europe as a whole. While countries in Western and Southern Europe are not as directly threatened as those of the former Soviet bloc, everyone has an interest in maintaining the strategic independence of the continent from external influences, whether from Russia, China or elsewhere.
  
5. *The institutional organisation of the EU's security and defence policy should aim for the highest degree of effectiveness and rapidity that is compatible with unity in diversity.* This means that complete centralisation of foreign policy in Brussels is neither possible nor desirable. Well-crafted institutional mechanisms for quickly deploying troops are preferable, even without creating a standing EU army or transferring final responsibility for defence to the EU level. New rules for common decision-making should also be explored. These rules could impose checks on hasty military interventions of the type we have seen in recent history. They could also provide better protection for the vital interests of all EU countries, especially the smaller ones. Within the Hanseatic League and the Holy Roman Empire, security policies were not monopolised by common institutions. However, these institutions played an important role in discouraging their entities from engaging in divisive and controversial initiatives that could have jeopardised the interests of the whole. Perhaps the EU can draw inspiration from these experiences. For example, while EU countries should maintain the freedom to develop their own foreign policy, they could be obliged to inform the High Representative and their partners about signifi-



cant defence and military initiatives they intended to take. Any EU country or the High Representative would then be allowed, if they deemed it necessary, to 'Europeanise' such national initiatives by requesting a binding vote of the Council. If this system of mutual checks had been in place, we might have been spared the disruptive divisions over the Iraqi war in 2003, as well as the hasty Libyan intervention in 2011.

6. *The historical cases presented above help us understand the role of common institutions in the security and defence policies of unions of states.* More than a power of command and direct action, theirs is a power of initiative, mobilisation and organisation embedded in consensual decision-making structures with many checks and balances. The quintessential embodiment of these powers was the Holy Roman Emperor. While theoretically the senior and most powerful ruler of the Christian Occident, in practice he could only undertake military initiatives with the approval of the territorial rulers represented in the imperial parliament. Not having a standing army, he also had to rely on them for raising troops. In the EU, the supreme executive is the European Council, headed by its permanent president. Unfortunately, doubts persist about this body's ability to represent a truly European power of initiative and organisation superior to and autonomous from national governments (especially those of the biggest member states). Addressing the 'leadership deficit' at the EU level is therefore crucial.

## Conclusion

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Political modernity was built around the centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic state that tragically triumphed in the twentieth century. This political entity claimed a monopoly both of legitimate force within its territory and of external representation outside it. Such claims progressively consigned to the dustbin of history the wealth of flexible and pluralist political arrangements that had dominated the pre-modern era, such as leagues of cities and the Empire. These polities had shown that political structures poles apart from the unequivocal hierarchies and the centralised command chains of states could have very effective security and military policies. The EU saw the light of day at the beginning of the postmodern era, which promises to be another age of



pluralism, flexibility and complex hybridisations. Thus, when upgrading its security and defence structures to become a real power, the EU should not look to the modern state as an example. Rather, it should draw inspiration from the experience of certain early-modern polities for which the preservation of internal pluralism, autonomy and multiple identities was an absolute priority—just as it is for the EU.

## About the author

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## Credits

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Editor: Federico Ottavio Reho, Research Officer, Martens Centre

External editing: Communicative English bvba

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.  
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