



# European defence policy and subsidiarity: The imperative of the EU level

European View  
2019, Vol. 18(1) 62–70  
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DOI: 10.1177/1781685819838431  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



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## Abstract

Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, defence policy, across Europe, has traditionally been the preserve of the nation state. That remains the default situation today, despite over two decades of movement towards a common EU security and defence policy. European leaders, ever since the 1980s, have insisted that the EU level is the most appropriate for this policy area, and public opinion appears to agree with them. Yet, despite many developments in the direction of a 'European army', and despite the launch of dozens of EU overseas missions, defence planning and procurement, as well as the deployment of forces, remain the preserve of the EU's national governments. Since 2016 we have witnessed an intensification of the move towards the EU level. This article argues that it is still too soon to determine whether a genuine shift away from the nation-state level is now in progress.

## Keywords

European defence, NATO, CSDP, Subsidiarity, National sovereignty

## Introduction

The classic instrument of national defence policy, enshrined during the French Revolution with the *levée en masse*, has been the conscript army. But rarely has such a force, on its own, proved capable of guaranteeing the defence of the nation (Taylor 1954). International relations theorists have demonstrated that, faced with the emergence of a great-power threat, nation states will react in one of three ways: balancing, band-wagoning and buck-passing (Waltz 1979). Of these, the most prevalent is the

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formation of balancing alliances against the threat from an over-powerful state (Walt 1990). Subsidiarity argues that each policy area will take decisions at the most appropriate level. In the area of defence, however, we have witnessed an ongoing tension between the national level and the EU level. Although states have clung rigorously to the principle of national sovereignty, the reality is that most of them have sought security through collective arrangements with other states. In fact, the greatest example of this since the end of the Second World War has been the existence of NATO, which introduces the concept of the Atlantic level. Despite the discursive veneer and institutional framework that cloaks NATO as an alliance of equal sovereign states, the reality is that all NATO members essentially abandoned—or pooled (depending on one's political perspective)—their sovereignty in a collective entity, ultimately seeking refuge under the US nuclear umbrella.

Such an arrangement was far from ideal. Not only did it involve the relative subordination of most states' foreign policy to US preferences, but it did not offer a cast-iron guarantee of national security. Once the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons,<sup>1</sup> and particularly once it had mastered the engineering of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of targeting US cities, the proposition that a US president would be prepared to sacrifice Boston in the defence of Bonn lacked credibility. NATO's introduction of the doctrine of flexible response in 1967 (Daalder 1991) left European states at the mercy of an indeterminate defensive posture in which the passage from conventional deterrence to nuclear war remained a function of US presidential interpretation.

Under President de Gaulle, France opted out of NATO's integrated military command and pursued a national nuclear deterrent (Vaïsse 1998). Towards the end of the Cold War, the Euromissiles crisis, sparked by the deployment of both Soviet and American nuclear missiles with potential 'first strike' capability (Nutti et al. 2015), led to the first inchoate efforts by European states to break out of the perceived straitjacket of subordination to US presidential politics. Meeting in The Hague in 1987, under the guise of the 'Western European Union', the leaders of Europe's only dedicated defence institution insisted that European integration could never be complete until it had been 'extended to security and defence' (Western European Union 1988, 37–45).

## **Towards the European level in defence policy**

Thus, even before the end of the Cold War, European security and defence policy was framed as ideally operating at European—rather than at national—level (Howorth 2000). Over the next decade, this approach was formally adopted by EU leaders on several occasions. The Treaty of Nice (2000), the Constitutional Treaty (2004) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) all asserted that the eventual aim of the EU was the forging of a common defence policy. The wording of Lisbon is clear—while remaining shrouded in ambiguity: 'The common security and defence policy shall include the progressive framing of a

common Union defence policy. This will lead to a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides' (art. 42).

Interestingly, this perspective, which seemed self-evident to Europe's leaders and political class, has long been shared by European citizens. Over the past 25 years, the European Commission's Eurobarometer surveys have regularly shown that between 75% and 78% of those surveyed have indicated that they believe security and defence policy should optimally be conducted at EU level (European Commission 1993; European Commission 2018). The responses vary from country to country, with Cyprus (90%) and Latvia (87%) being the most positive. Yet even the least positive, Austria (57%) and the UK (63%), post significant majorities in favour of a common defence policy (European Commission 2018). The socio-economic breakdown of these figures is also revealing. Those with the highest levels of education post the highest degree of support (79%), with the less educated being less favourable (68%). Those at managerial level are more positive (81%), whereas those working in the home are more sceptical (67%). Those with few financial problems are more supportive (77%) than those in financial difficulties (66%). The higher a respondent situates himself or herself in terms of social class, the more favourable he or she is likely to be.

However, what these respondents understand to be the practical consequence of their support for an EU-level Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is a slightly different matter. A clear majority (55%) of all respondents are in favour of the creation of a European army (16% being 'totally in favour' while 39% are 'somewhat in favour'). Opposition to a European army is expressed by 39% (22% being 'somewhat opposed' and 17% 'totally opposed'). Since 2015, there has been a 2% increase in the proportion of respondents favouring such a development. Across the EU, support for a European army finds majorities in 20 countries, ranging from the most favourable, the Netherlands and Belgium (74%), to the least enthusiastic, Malta (55%) and Denmark (52%). It is noteworthy that Denmark, which has an opt-out from the CSDP, still musters a slight majority, both in favour of a common policy and in favour of a common army. Majorities in only three countries are clearly opposed to the notion of a European army: Sweden (58% against), Finland (55%) and the UK (55%). In Ireland and Austria, more citizens are opposed (49% in both) than in favour (46% and 45% respectively). Yet, behind these raw statistics, whose findings should be treated with the usual social-scientific caution, there is clearly very little consensus on precisely what is implied by a security and defence policy being conducted at EU level (European Commission 2017b).

For centuries the key symbol of *national* defence has been the conscript army, geared to territorial defence and resistance to invasion. After the Cold War, as the EU began to consider a common defence policy at EU level, such national forces seemed ill-adapted to the requirements of the time. The wars in the Balkans throughout the 1990s, followed by destabilisation throughout the Middle East and North Africa, called for a serious European crisis-management intervention force—for which conscripts were neither militarily trained nor legally deployable. At a meeting at Petersberg Castle (near Bonn) in

June 1992, European military planners set about defining the tasks such a force might be required to fulfil, corresponding to three levels of combat intensity: ‘humanitarian and rescue tasks; peacekeeping tasks; tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making’<sup>2</sup> (Ortega 2005). This approach required a radical transformation of the EU’s existing capacity to provide deployable, professional intervention forces geared to ‘out of area’ crisis management. What did this imply?

The first task was to end conscription and to move towards all-volunteer forces (King 2011). At the end of the Cold War, only four of today’s EU member states had all-volunteer forces: the UK, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta. Belgium announced the abolition of conscription in 1992 and ended it in 1994; the Netherlands followed suit in 1993 and 1996. France and Spain decided on abolition in 1996 after agonising debates about the connection between the armed forces and democracy. In both countries, the last conscripts departed in 2001. Since that date, a further 17 EU member states have abolished conscription.<sup>3</sup>

The motivations for abolition varied from country to country. Most, such as Belgium, Spain, and many Central and Eastern European states, sought to focus on the downsizing of the military budget; others, including the Netherlands, France, Germany, Poland and Italy, aimed to transform their militaries into deployable forces for overseas crisis management (Joenniemi 2006). In 2013, only 6 EU member states, out of 28, retained conscription. Greece and Cyprus are concerned about Turkey. Finland and Estonia remain concerned about Russia.<sup>4</sup> In Denmark and Austria (where, in January 2013, a referendum retained conscription by 56%), retention is largely connected with identity. To all intents and purposes, Europe today has fully professional armed forces. However, each of these forces remains tightly tied to its national framework. Professionalisation has not led to Europeanisation in any structural sense.

Since 2003, it is true, the EU has conducted 36 overseas missions under the guise of the CSDP, of which 16 (6 military and 10 civilian) are ongoing (EEAS 2019). These missions can be broken down by type in a variety of ways, but the reality is that a very small minority of them are strictly of a military nature: six involving land and air forces, two naval operations and three training missions. The remaining 25 cover policing, border assistance, capacity-building, rule of law, security-sector reform, and various forms of monitoring and advice (Howorth 2014, 144–89). In all cases, forces have been temporarily assigned from national contingents and returned to their home bases once the mission has been terminated. In the case of the major military missions, command structures have been supplied either by NATO (EUFOR *Althea* in Bosnia) or by national operational headquarters (OHQ): EUNAVFOR *Atalanta* in the Gulf of Aden (UK); Operation *Artemis* in the Democratic Republic of Congo (France); and EUFOR *RD Congo* (Germany). Owing largely to resistance from the UK, the EU has never been able to generate its own fully functional OHQ, having to make do with a small EU Civil–Military Planning Cell. This absence effectively consigned several potential EU operations either to a minimal size (Chad in 2008) or to non-existence (Libya in 2011). After the UK

referendum in June 2016 and the launch of Brexit, EU leaders once again pushed for the need for an OHQ, but sustained objections from London resulted in this facility being yet again downgraded to a small-scale Military Planning and Conduct Capability, designed to be used for ‘non-executive’ missions (essentially military training missions) (EEAS 2018). Plans to move towards a full-scale OHQ must await the UK’s eventual departure from the EU. To date, concrete moves towards a meaningful armed force at EU level remain strictly limited.

Indeed, very few of the activities subsumed under ‘crisis-management intervention’, whether military or civilian, are really an expression of ‘European defence’ per se. Collective defence remains, in all official discourse, the responsibility of NATO. Nevertheless, in 2015 the EU28 spent \$227 billion on ‘defence’. That is a considerable sum. It is, however, less than 40% of the US defence budget for that year (\$597 billion) and it has been falling in relative terms. In 2008 the collective EU defence budget was equivalent to the combined defence budgets of the eight next biggest defence spenders (China, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, Brazil, South Korea and Australia: \$289 billion), which included all the ‘rising powers’. In 2015 it was dwarfed by those powers, with China and Saudi Arabia alone spending more than all EU member states put together. The EU gets very little bang for its euros.

Out of that considerable overall ‘defence’ outlay, the EU28 have been attempting to fund 28 separate armies, 24 air forces and 21 navies. Furthermore, just three countries in the EU (France, the UK and Germany) together account for over 60% of the combined EU28 defence budgets. And if Italy is added to the trio, the four nations alone contribute over 70% of total EU defence expenditure. The only one of the new accession states with any significant military clout is Poland, which has tripled its defence budget in the past decade and ranks (at \$10.3 billion) in fifth place in the EU28. Many member states (and not just the smallest ones) are effectively cheap riders. The average defence budget of the 15 lowest-spending EU member states (who collectively account for barely 5% of overall EU expenditure) comes to just over \$800 million. That is less than the defence budget of Côte d’Ivoire. One might ask exactly what those nation states believe they are buying with their money. In the view of one leading expert, much of the money the EU spends each year on defence ‘is simply wasted’ (Witney 2008). The case for the rationalisation—and indeed the Europeanisation—of this defence spending is overwhelming. Measures to this end are overdue.

## **The 2016 ‘relaunch’ of the CSDP**

Since 2016 we have witnessed a relaunch of the CSDP project, with new initiatives on several fronts (financial, industrial, operational and strategic) appearing with sustained regularity (Howorth 2017). How can we assess these developments? A genuine shift from the national to the EU level in the field of security and defence policy would require four developments. The first would be the political recognition on the part of all member

states that such a move is of the highest strategic priority. This appears to be the conclusion that can be drawn from this new intensive focus on the CSDP.

The second would be a concerted assessment of the optimum different configurations of member states for specific security and defence objectives. This has begun to take on a multiplicity of forms—but in a random and uncoordinated fashion. There are currently, in addition to NATO, four groupings of states in the defence realm with very different ambitions. Many analysts have focused on the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as the one major breakthrough that looked genuinely promising (Biscop 2018; Mauro 2017). PESCO was initially intended to generate a vanguard of the more militarily competent states to forge ahead with defence projects. However, ironically in this instance, the inclusion of all but three member states (the UK, Denmark and Malta) has loosened the intended bonds, with the result, according to one expert, that 'the vanguard has become a convoy'—with Poland in particular 'aiming to slow the whole process down' (Witney 2017).

Germany's Framework Nation Concept, devised within NATO, has created a grouping, under German leadership, of 17 states from Central, Eastern and Northern Europe to focus on building up a significant military force to deter Russia. A UK initiative, the Joint Expeditionary Force, embraces Britain and the Scandinavian and Baltic states, and is intended to demonstrate both that states in the northern region take Russian aggression seriously and that the UK can remain a European leader even after Brexit (Saxi 2017). The French plan is for a European Intervention Initiative designed to lead to European strategic autonomy. This initiative lies outside both NATO and the EU. France has been highly selective in its partners. Only 10 countries are involved (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK). Rather than a collective thrust, Paris envisages multiple bilateralisms, all under direct French command. This has been interpreted as a French counter to the German Framework Nation Concept and a sign that Paris has grown weary of in-fighting over the direction of PESCO (Taylor 2018).

It is hard to see these four separate initiatives in any light other than a competitive one. The three biggest states in Europe—plus the EU itself—all want to trail-blaze towards a European defence capacity worthy of the name. If this is the new reality of Europeanisation, then it does not look good for the EU.

The third requirement for an EU-level defence capacity would be the design of mechanisms aimed at rationalising defence spending and facilitating strategic planning. The 2017 launch of the European Defence Fund seems promising. The involvement of the European Commission in offering funding for both research in innovative defence products and technologies is a positive development (European Commission 2017a). Clusters of nation states can now bid for the type of defence equipment they believe best serves their needs. Yet the annual seed-corn sums involved (€25 million for research and technology and €500 million for development and acquisition in 2017), while not insignificant, are extremely modest. Those who perceive this new

development as revolutionising European defence funding might be advised to reserve judgement (Valasek 2017; Besch 2017). Plans for a European Security Council that would accelerate and intensify strategic thinking and military decision-making are also innovative, even though to date the precise outlines of such a body remain unclear (Nováky 2019).

## Conclusion

The final requirement would be a central political authority with both legitimacy and a clear mandate to implement a grand strategic objective—in other words, something akin to a traditional nation state. In the realm of defence, the EU remains at some distance from achieving that goal. Almost all EU member states have preferred, ever since the late 1940s, to sidestep the sensitive problem of European leadership by looking to the US to deliver this key function. At a time when President Trump seems to be calling into question the US desire to continue to play this role—even speaking openly of withdrawing the US from NATO—the challenge of establishing what President Macron consistently refers to as ‘European sovereignty’ appears inevitable, but remains as daunting as ever. The EU member states appear to *aspire* to take defence to a collective EU level, an aspiration that seems to be supported by their populations. They have given themselves a significant number of instruments with which to cross that vast Rubicon. However, they currently find themselves caught in mid-stream, with no assured means of making it to the opposite bank.

## Notes

1. On 29 August 1949, on learning of the first Soviet nuclear test, General de Gaulle wrote in his diary: ‘Ceci change tout’ (This event changes everything).
2. This latter formulation was a euphemistic way of saying ‘war-fighting’, a term which was unacceptable to Germany.
3. In 2010, Sweden ‘suspended’ conscription *during peace time*, which meant, in effect, a shift towards an all-volunteer force. In 2017, this decision was modified owing to perceived threats from Russia and 4,000 young men and women will henceforth be enlisted for basic training (Government Offices of Sweden 2017).
4. Estonia was considering ending conscription prior to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, but abandoned the idea after that conflict.

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