

New American scepticism on EU defence cooperation

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AMERICAN OFFICIALS HAVE RAISED CONCERNS ABOUT PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION, THE EU'S NEW DEFENCE PACT. IF THESE CONCERNS SIGNAL A BROADER SHIFT IN US POLICY TOWARDS EU DEFENCE COOPERATION, THEY WILL UNDERMINE US EFFORTS TO IMPROVE TRANSATLANTIC BURDEN SHARING.

In December 2017, the EU established Permanent Structured Cooperation, a previously unused Lisbon Treaty provision that enables able and willing EU member states to deepen their defence cooperation. Its primary aim is to improve the participating countries' defence capabilities and make their armed forces more deployable through joint commitments and common projects. EU circles have broadly hailed PESCO as a 'game changer' for the Union's defence dimension, although some European commentators believe it has been oversold and will make at best a 'modest contribution'.¹

PESCO's establishment was welcomed by both NATO and the US. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg saw that stronger EU defence is also good for the Alliance because it can lead to increased defence spending, new capabilities, and improved burden sharing.² The US was especially keen on PESCO's Dutch-led military mobility project, which aims to reduce the logistical, regulatory, and legal barriers to the cross border movement of military personnel and equipment in Europe. Secretary of Defense James Mattis noted that the US supported the EU's efforts in implementing this project because recent NATO exercises had exposed problems in the area.³ Yet, in February 2018, American officials suddenly began to raise concerns about the EU's plans to strengthen its defence dimension through PESCO.

¹ Tomáš Valášek, 'And Now for Something Completely Different', *E!Sharp*, February 2018, <https://esharp.eu/debates/external-action/and-now-for-something-completely-different>.

² NATO, 'Doorstep by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the start of the European Union Foreign Affairs Council in Defence format', 13 November 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_148840.htm.

³ US Mission to NATO, 'News Briefing by Secretary Mattis at NATO Headquarters following the Defense Ministerial November 9, 2017', <https://nato.usmission.gov/nov-9-2017-press-conference-secretary-defense-mattis/>.

New American scepticism

The New York Times suggests that the US' concerns about PESCO reflect a 'new American scepticism' on EU defence cooperation.⁴ This is based on three main concerns: (1) that PESCO will decouple European resources from NATO, (2) that it will duplicate existing NATO assets, and (3) that it will increase protectionism in Europe's defence markets and limit the access of American companies to them.

First, on 12 February, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Katie Wheelbarger explained that the US does not want to see 'EU efforts pulling requirements or forces away' from NATO into the EU. More specifically, she noted that the US was supportive of PESCO 'as long as it's complementary to and not distracting from NATO's activities and requirements', especially in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵ This means that the US does not want the commitments the participating EU member states will make in the framework of PESCO to limit the availability of their resources elsewhere, particularly in NATO operations.

Second, during the 2018 Munich Security Conference, US Senator Lindsey Graham expressed concern over the possibility that PESCO will duplicate existing NATO structures. According to him, 'no matter what you call [PESCO], it comes out of the same wallet' as NATO.⁶ It has subsequently become clear that duplication is also one of the US government's main concerns in this regard.⁷ This is why Stolten-

berg emphasised in Munich that European leaders should 'state again and again' that PESCO is not about competing with the Alliance since some allies are still a bit 'afraid that this may create duplication or be an alternative to NATO'.⁸ Yet, it should be noted that Graham's remarks on PESCO were on the whole positive, as demonstrated by his argument that PESCO 'gets Europe acting together again' by helping Europeans think as a group.

Third, on 13 February, US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson noted that the US does not want PESCO 'to be a protectionist vehicle for the EU' because 'it could splinter the strong security alliance that we have'.⁹ She also emphasised that the US wants 'the Europeans to have capabilities and strength, but not to fence off American products'. She sees that 'it's very important that there be transparency and openness in all of those areas where PESCO would be in a bidding process'.

The wrong American policy

It is unclear whether this new American scepticism about EU defence cooperation reflects a broader change in US policy, or whether they are simply 'random comments' that reflect a lack of understanding by the White House of the European project, as has been suggested.¹⁰ If the US is returning back to the views of the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, which saw EU defence cooperation is a potential threat to NATO, it would be a mistake for three reasons.

First, it undermines President Donald J. Trump's own 'America first' foreign policy. By developing the participating EU member states' defence capabili-

⁴ S. Erlanger, 'U.S. Revises Concerns About European Defense Plans, Rattling NATO Allies', *New York Times*, 18 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/nato-europe-us-.html>.

⁵ K. Manson and M. Peel, 'US fears closer EU defence ties could undermine Nato', *Financial Times*, 12 February 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/70aafe9c-1018-11e8-8cb6-b9ccc4c4d4bbb>.

⁶ NATO, 'Panel Discussion "Defence Cooperation in the EU and NATO: More European, More Connected, More Capable?" at 2018 Munich Security Conference with participation of NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller', 16 February 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_152237.htm.

⁷ A. Shalal, 'U.S. seeks 'robust involvement' in EU defense pact: sources', Reuters, 27 February 2018, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-eu-military/u-s-seeks-](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-eu-military/u-s-seeks-robust-involvement-in-eu-defense-pact-sources-idUSKCN1GB2UR)

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⁸ NATO, 'Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the opening session of the Munich Security Conference', 16 February 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_152209.htm.

⁹ US Mission to NATO, 'February 13, 2018: Press Briefing by Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchinson', <https://nato.usmission.gov/february-13-2018-press-briefing-ambassador-kay-bailey-hutchinson/>.

¹⁰ Erlanger, 'U.S. Revises Concerns About European Defense Plans'.

ties, PESCO will make Europe stronger, better prepared to defend shared transatlantic interest and ideals, and more willing to invest in taking care of its own security. These are all goals that are supported by the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy and its 2018 National Defense Strategy. If the one of the key aims of Trump's foreign policy is to encourage America's allies to invest more in their own security and stop them from free-riding on American security guarantees, opposing PESCO is clearly inconsistent with that aim.

Second, PESCO aims to improve the participating EU member states' defence capabilities and make their armed forces more deployable, which will benefit both the EU and NATO. Each member state has only one set of armed forces, which it uses for national, EU, NATO, UN and other purposes. This means that any capability improvements that PESCO might eventually deliver will also benefit the European pillar within NATO and improve transatlantic burden sharing. Rather than decoupling resources away from NATO, PESCO will therefore add resources to it.

Third, PESCO aims to strengthen the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) but US defence products will continue to be attractive in Europe. The products of leading American defence companies will not be 'fenced off' from Europe, as there are currently no European competitors for advanced US defence systems, such as the F-35 stealth multirole fighter, and developing them will take decades. American defence products will continue to be attractive, in addition, since purchasing them allows Europeans to signal their desire to maintain or deepen their ties to Washington. In fact, the US should encourage joint European efforts in defence procurement and capability development while keeping an eye on potential protectionist tendencies. At the moment, EU member states maintain 17 different types of main battle tanks and 20 fighter planes, whereas the US maintains only one and six respectively. This type of duplication is extremely wasteful and prevents genuine economies of scale from emerging.

The US should fully support the EU's current efforts to strengthen its embryonic defence dimension because there are no good reasons to believe that PESCO will undermine NATO. As one observer tactfully noted, '[t]he real question is whether it will do anything at all'.¹¹ Furthermore, the involvement in PESCO of Atlanticist countries from Central and Eastern Europe will make it hard for it to develop in a way that might eventually undermine American interests. In other words, America's concern should not be a strong and independent Europe, but rather a weak and dependent one.

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¹¹ S. Togawa Mercer, 'No, Europe Isn't Ambushing NATO', *Foreign Policy*, 3 January 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/03/no-europe-isnt-ambushing-nato/>.