Quo vadis EU defence? A look beyond 2030

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Will the next decade be decisive for the EU's defence and its ability to take its destiny into its own hands? Will Member States finally abide by their promise made in 1999 at the Cologne Summit, and build a true "capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so" or will they carry on kicking the can down the road and paying lip service? In trying to answer these questions, one should examine how the EU's defence could develop and what it should look like beyond 2030, says **Frédéric Mauro** in the following Opinion Editorial for *European Defence Matters*.

What the EU's defence *could* look like is a question that belongs to the realm of strategic prospective and would require a much more sophisticated analysis than permitted within a thousand words. Nevertheless, inspired by the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System's report[1] we can broadly distinguish three categories of drivers.

The first is constituted by mega-trends which are developments already underway and nearly impossible to change over the coming decade. We can easily identify two conflicting trends of the sort. One is the willingness of national European leaders to retain as much as they can of their alleged 'sovereignty' and to call the shots for all defence aspects, be that operational (forces), industrial (capacities) or political (decisions). This is the reason why the CSDP is strictly intergovernmental, with little say for the European Parliament nor for the European Commission and almost always requiring unanimity. On the other hand, there is the obvious need for Member States to build a capability process able to produce an 'operational capacity'. That was the original intent behind PESCO, the Permanent Structured Cooperation, three words that hide the one and only that sums them all up and that really matters: 'integration'.

Sovereignty versus integration

Until now the national sovereignty approach has always prevailed over the integrationist one. But that could change taking into account catalysts. Those are specific trends with higher degrees of uncertainty, that move faster than mega-trends and thus accelerate or decelerate these trends. We can identify three series of catalysts. The first one is the level of threats. The Union is facing a lot of direct threats coming from both nation states, such as Russia or Turkey, and terrorist organisations. Moreover, it is also facing insidious threats such as disunion, disinformation, or election meddling by actors who see the Union as a foe. How and when those threats will materialise, and on which battlefield, is still unknown. However, the greater the threat is, the more plausible integration becomes. The same works for the second catalyst: the protection granted to Member States by third countries through NATO. Anything that undermines the Atlantic Alliance or weakens NATO strengthens the attractiveness of integration. If NATO were to disappear, integration would impose itself. The third catalyst is made up of the Member States political mindsets. Is it realistic to get all the EU leaders (or at least a majority of them) on the same page, ready to integrate their national defence apparatus into one coherent 'full spectrum force package', what implies specialisation, shared capabilities, and modification of the decision-making procedures? It looks like alignment of planets. That hardly happens in politics. At least without any real game changer.

Game changers

These game changers are decisions that shape the future and yet have the lowest degree of certainty. What could be the next 'black swans' after 9/11, the Arab spring, IS, and Covid-19? Nobody knows. However, a war between Turkey and Greece or one between the US and China would deeply affect the way European Member States consider the necessity of being able to defend themselves, by themselves, and for themselves.

Decision making

Putting generals or defence industrialists together is definitely not the right starting point for the EU's defence. It has been done for twenty years, producing the results we know. EU defence will only take off if Member States set up a political body capable of issuing orders to an efficient chain of command and making national forces act as one, with others whenever possible, and autonomously if necessary. Much has been said about strategic autonomy. But decision making is just as important. The number of participants is not relevant. You need only two to disagree. And, even if it may take some time, you can find a deal at 27. In this regard the concept of an avant-garde is misleading. It is more a question of a common perception – some would say 'strategic culture' – and efficient decision-making procedure. Both elements are necessary.

This change of policy would require audacious leaders, big political steps such as the creation of a European Security Council taking decisions by qualified majority, and eventually the assent of the European nations involved. Today that might seem impossible. But so was the fall of the Berlin wall. After all, "with regards the future, it is not about predicting it, but to render it possible" (Saint-Exupery). ◄

Of course, all three categories of drivers – mega-trends, catalysts, and game changers – are interlinked. They will play a positive or negative role in the development of a European defence, but the ultimate face of it in 2030 will also depend on the decisions that must be taken now. As stated in ESPAS's report: "foresight is much more about shaping the future than predicting it".

That leads to our second question: what should the EU defence look like in ten years?

For the last thirty years, in the wake of the Maastricht treaty and abiding by the Monnet's playbook, the question of the European Union's defence has been answered 'bottom-up', 'step by step', building all sorts of industrial cooperation and setting up as many 'tools' as possible, such as the Eurocorps or the Battle groups. This of course was done with a lot of 'pragmatism' which was tantamount to having 'no plan' other than the vague idea of 'doing something'. Unfortunately, that strategy will never beget a genuine capacity for autonomous action. Because even in its most audacious blueprint – PESCO – and its most advanced realisation, the Lancaster House agreement between France and the UK, the fundamental question of the political decision-making process has been deliberately swept under the carpet.

[1] ESPAS – European Strategy and Policy Analysis System – Global trends 2030 – Challenges and choices for Europe – April 2019

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