

Going it Alone?

By Steven Philip Kramer and George Topic

For three-quarters of a century, a highly developed continent composed of sovereign nations put its defense in the hands of someone else. In practice, European defense depended on the United States, although this relationship, as embodied in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was supposed to be mutual. One has to go back to the time of the Delian League to find a historical precedent. The relationship was based on several assumptions shared on both sides of the Atlantic:

- That the Soviet Union was an existential threat to Europe and that Russia remained a serious threat.
- That Europe was vulnerable and could not defend itself alone.
- That the United States and Europe constituted an Atlantic community that shared basic liberal democratic values.
- That the United States could be trusted to defend Europe.

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These assumptions are no longer broadly shared for many reasons. But most important has been the impact of Donald Trump and his presidency. Its “America First” pronouncements raised the question of whether the United States would always remain committed to defending Europe (although congressional support for NATO remained strong). It was not uncommon to hear people in the Atlantic security community say that a second Trump administration would mean U.S. withdrawal from NATO. The Trump administration made Europeans question whether the United States and Europe shared the same values. Certainly, the election of Joe Biden was hailed by most Europeans, but who can be sure that the political movement embodied by Trump would not return? The Republican Party still seems to be the party of Trump, and it’s not clear whether or not it will stay that way. How long are European leaders and populations willing to live with the possibility that a “Trumpist” government will return? Even if this does not happen, the legacy of the last administration’s policies and the perceived need for Republicans to support them to avoid primary challenges has left a significant impact. Americans may not fully appreciate how much damage the Trump administration did to faith and trust in America—not only on the part of European leaders but also on European publics.

The result of the last four years has been a return of the idea that Europe needs to



be capable of defending itself in case the United States can no longer be counted on—an idea promoted by French president Emmanuel Macron. Shouldn't Europe have its own grand strategy and the means to pursue it? In other words, why shouldn't Europe, an economic "superpower," be a superpower in all respects? If the world is not prepared to follow Europe's example as a new form of post-modernist political organization, shouldn't Europe accept the need to play in the league of global superpowers and develop its own self-reliant system of defense?

Most of the great security issues Europe faces do not require vast armed forces; the industrial age military capabilities that have served as effective deterrence may still be necessary but certainly are not sufficient. Some issues call for solutions that do not involve armored brigades. For example, the significant

migrant problem requires only small, specialized military forces and, of course, a much broader collection of actions across governments, individually and collectively. China also poses a variety of serious security challenges to Europe. It is not clear to Europeans whether it is just a robust competitor or constitutes a security threat as the debate over 5G demonstrates. China is not a military problem for Europe in the traditional sense: no one fears a Chinese army sweeping across the steppes like Genghis Khan or Tamburlaine. But the risks associated with key acquisitions of ports, critical infrastructure, and advanced technology firms may be even more dangerous—and difficult to defend against. Finally, the rising tensions between the United States and China make Europeans question whether they share the same strategic interests as the United States. Does Europe want to be caught up in a new Cold War between the United States and China?

Image: French president Emmanuel Macron attends a press conference at the end of an Informal Meeting of EU Heads of State and Government in Porto, Portugal. May 8, 2021. Jose Coelho/Pool via Reuters.

The principal defense risk Europe faces is Russia, no longer the USSR but still a serious problem. Without a threatening Russia, there would be little need for NATO, at least not in anything like its current form. Therein lies a paradox: with the end of Communism, it would seem that Russia's interests lay in a close and cordial relationship with Europe, which would facilitate its economic development and strengthen its social and cultural resurgence. But Russian president Vladimir Putin seems to have returned to the vision of Nicholas I—"Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality"—with the difference that Putin is far more interventionist than Nicholas. Russia's appeal is once again Slavophilism and religion—although that is a multi-edged sword since Russia contains significant Muslim minorities—and Putin's aura as a defender of the "White Race." Putin is thus a supporter of tin-pot dictators like Belarussian president Alexander Lukashenko, a model for potentates like Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban, the darling of the European Far Right.

Russia's great economic resources are gas and oil, whose days are numbered. The pace of development of alternative energy sources, and particularly the adoption of clean energy in Europe, will have striking implications for Russia as well as other oil producers. Putin has allied Russia to China, defying the basic rules of geopolitics. Surely a border separating a thinly populated Russian Asia from a densely populated China should give Russia pause. Additionally, the

demographic bell tolls for Russia with its low birth rates and high mortality (but higher birth rates for Muslim minorities). Recent protests over Alexei Navalny and the roiling discontent in Belarus offer ominous portents for harnessing the power and potential of younger Russians.

For Putin, weakening EU cohesion, undermining its members, paralyzing Ukraine and Moldova through frozen conflicts, and keeping Belarus under dictatorship substitute for a real strategic vision. Now Putin has even been able to insert Russian forces into Armenia and Azerbaijan. Many of these schemes may serve Putin's near-term interests, but ultimately bring risk, suffering, and retaliation to the Russian people. All this seems truly self-defeating in the long term. Europe as a post-modern entity has trouble understanding an atavistic ruler like Putin. But Russia and Putin—including his supporters—cannot be ignored; Russia remains a threat because of its vast if aging nuclear arsenal and its newly acquired skills at projecting its limited power in clever and unpredictable ways. It is also important to recognize that if Putin's regime

feels seriously threatened, that there are few limits to what it might do to retain power.

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Image: Russian president Vladimir Putin attends the Navy Day parade in Saint Petersburg, Russia. July 25, 2021. Sputnik/Aleksey Nikolskyi/Kremlin via Reuters.

Gorbachev and could happen after Putin. Thus, Russia constitutes an anomalous but real problem for Europe. For Europe to have a common defense, it must be able to defend itself collectively against Russia.

One of the central questions for European nations and Europe as a whole is whether the development of inexpensive weapons and associated capabilities offer a satisfactory opportunity for deterrence and/or defense against Russia. This includes not only the threat of invasion or significant incursion as witnessed in Georgia and Ukraine, but other forms of aggression such as cyber-attacks, information warfare, and energy blackmail as well as assassination and sabotage. Will changes in military technology reduce the relevance of industrial age forms of defense such as massed combined arms warfare? Some weapons systems that

are currently available and others that are under development appear to be effective against armor, air defense systems, and other major equipment at a small fraction of the cost of their targets and could cause significant disruption to attacking formations. They offer the possibility that Europe and its small frontline states can impose an unacceptable cost on a conventional invader. But they do not eliminate the need for key combat enablers such as strategic lift; command control, communications, and intelligence; and logistics that are essential for victory in a major kinetic war. If the Americans who play a key role in so many of these areas are not available, can Europe deter conflict without them?

There is no question that European technology is every bit as advanced as American; in some cases, owing to the lengthy and cumbersome U.S. acquisition processes, some of the newest technology is more



readily available from non-U.S. sources. At the same time, there is also significant reliance on U.S. equipment systems, in part because of the formidable development expenses and cost of maintaining repair parts and maintenance capabilities. Additionally, some countries perceive political pressure to “buy American.” These are challenges to the idea that Europe *could* reduce its dependence on American military and technological support or even go it alone.

National Defense University scholar T.X. Hammes has written extensively on the potential damage and disruption that these weapons can cause. For example, the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone, reported to sell for under \$2 million, can loiter for up to twenty-four hours and can be used for spotting or direct engagement against targets—and no pilots are put in harm’s way. Long-range precision missiles can be procured for \$1 to \$1.5 million and could easily be hidden in cargo containers on commercial ships. In addition to the cost advantage, the range and precision of drones, missiles, and larger unmanned aerial craft are already changing the strategic calculus of future warfare. The efficacy of cheap armed drones against various types of equipment in the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is certainly sparking recalculation by military leaders worldwide. Several years ago, inexpensive Russian drones armed with grenades executed a devastatingly successful attack on a Ukrainian ammunition storage facility that destroyed a significant portion of its inventory. The potential damage and disruption that these weapons can possibly make combat as we have known it untenable. The opportunity to attack logistics resources—ammunition storage/distribution activities and petroleum, oil, and lubricant storage facilities are obvious targets, but airfields, control towers, road junctions, train stations, and bridges can impact military operations. It is noteworthy that

Ukraine is purchasing Turkish drones—to Russia’s consternation. The development of these new technologies raises the question of how wise it is to focus investment primarily in the conventional defense of Eastern Europe.

Another aspect of the strategic investment calculus for Europe and the United States is a sober assessment of the viability of what can be called industrial age deployment and sustainment concepts. Almost every assessment of NATO’s ability to deploy and defend against a major Russian incursion into the Baltics comes to the stark conclusion that our current capabilities are not adequate; the alliance would be presented with a *fait accompli* before it could emplace traditional defensive forces to meet the obligations of Article V of the NATO charter. At the present moment, the United States and Europe together are not in a good position to accomplish this mission; Europe alone is even less equipped to do so.

Are new technologies and innovative defensive capabilities sufficient to make it possible that Europe could realistically defend itself from a Russian invasion or major incursion without significant U.S. support? There will always be a need for conventional ground forces to take and retain territory; the issue is how to balance investments in future defensive capabilities or threaten retaliatory effects that will provide deterrence. If forward-positioned drones, low-cost and highly dispersed missiles, and even unmanned combat fighter-bombers can inflict major damage at an acceptable price tag, perhaps spending many billions of dollars or euros on enabling the movement of equipment into eastern Europe is a poor strategic option. It may be that there are more effective deterrence investments and ways to reapportion tasks across European nations and the United States and Canada. Moreover, some modern security capabilities could also represent better economic

opportunities and assist other nations in enhancing stability, security, and progress for their people.

It is easy to answer the question of whether Europe can defend itself against a determined Russian invasion of the Baltics or other NATO allies in eastern Europe—the answer is no. As noted above, geography and the current correlation of military power favor a successful attack. The cost of mounting a counterattack to reclaim and secure the territory would be tremendous for all concerned—and catastrophic for the nations and people in the areas where kinetic warfare would actually occur. Beyond that, the destruction of infrastructure and other enabling capabilities—obvious targets in such a war—would have massive impacts on both sides. This is all without including the possibility of nuclear escalation. Even the limited use of tactical nuclear weapons would have devastating consequences.

In short, new technologies may be necessary but not sufficient to mount an adequate defense in Europe. They might increase the chance that Europe could defend itself in case of attack, but it would be imprudent to think that they would render American support unnecessary. And it is equally questionable whether Russia would consider a purely European defense—even with nuclear weapons—a sufficient deterrent. A purely European defense would be an extremely risky venture indeed.

It's not surprising that President Macron of France has been the advocate of "strategic autonomy." Since the early

stage of the Cold War, France has been the major proponent of European rather than Atlantic defense cooperation, what one of us has called the "French thesis on Europe." The initiator of this idea was Charles de Gaulle. Fearing that the United States would use its role in European defense to dominate Europe, de Gaulle talked about a "European Europe" and European defense cooperation. Above all, he worked to convince Germany to follow him. At the same

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time, de Gaulle torpedoed the possibility of a more federal Europe. In some ways, the postwar represented a dialogue of the deaf between de Gaulle and Jean Monnet. Monnet advocated a federal United States of Europe but supported an Atlanticist approach to European defense, de Gaulle a Europe of Fatherlands coupled with European defense.

A major reason for the failure to create a synthesis of these two ideas was the debacle of the European Defense Community (EDC). After the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States decided that Europe needed to rearm to face a potential threat from the USSR.

That, in turn, required rearming Germany, an idea which was anathema to France and

not very popular in Germany. French prime minister René Pleven came up with the idea of the European Defense Community, which would constitute a European pillar of NATO. Germans would be rearmed, but not Germany, since German forces would be dispersed under the EDC command. There would be a European minister of defense under the European institutions that were being created thanks to the Schuman Plan. But the French military

would lose its autonomy. This proved unacceptable to France and after years of controversy, the EDC failed ratification by the French National Assembly in 1954. German rearmament took place under NATO. From that time on, defense was not within the purview of European institutions until after the Cold War ended; the Treaty of Maastricht gave the EU a mandate for issues pertaining to security and defense.

Especially after the defeat of the European Defense Community, few supported combining federalism and European defense cooperation. During the Cold War, de Gaulle's efforts to create a European defense arrangement failed; this was an offer that the rest of Europe could easily refuse, especially the Germans. They wanted—they needed—the American nuclear

umbrella. The French *force de frappe* was no substitute. Not that de Gaulle was willing to extend the French nuclear deterrence to the rest of Europe. After the end of the Cold War, with the Russian threat briefly gone, the French espoused the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which was seen by the United States as threatening NATO. Even if little tangible was accomplished, the French thesis on Europe gave France a leadership role in Europe since it embodied the ambivalence of many states towards the United States. The British opposed ESDP, and Germany was schizophrenic, supporting both ESDP and NATO. But ESDP was never intended to have warfighting capabilities, and its ultimate implementation (with British involvement following the St. Malo declaration) was



never as earth-shaking as its proponents hoped nor its opponents feared. In 2003, President Jacques Chirac went far beyond de Gaulle by taking on the United States over its invasion of Iraq. The result was a virtual cold war between the Bush administration and France and Germany. The rift was repaired when Chirac's successor (and political rival) Nicholas Sarkozy brought France back into NATO's integrated military command. France became a "good" American ally but thereby lost some of its influence as representing an alternative to American policy. This happened around the time of the Great Recession, which tipped the balance of the Franco-German relationship against France. At a time when economic and financial power counted most and when French leaders were ineffective, Germany was clearly the dominant power in Europe. Macron's European activism, in general, and his proposals on strategic autonomy, in particular, serve to restore France's position as a European leader. They also mark a return to the French thesis on Europe, this time based not on fears of American dominance but on loss of trust in an enduring American commitment to Europe.

But let's assume that strategic autonomy implies some form of self-reliant European defense. Could it take place under the auspices of the EU? That seems highly improbable. First, there would need to be a robust mutual defense pact of EU nations. Secondly, there would have to be a European rapid response force that can move quickly before a *fait accompli* is established. That, in turn, requires the existence of a European command structure. But such a structure requires a European executive authority that can give orders on its own

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just like presidents of the United States or France can do for their respective armed forces. Strategic autonomy thus requires a fundamental restructuring of the European Union—virtually impossible within a reasonable time frame. Any change would require an intergovernmental conference to amend the treaties undergirding the EU, unanimous approval of all governments, approval by their parliaments, in some cases popular referenda and in others like Belgium, passage by sub-national parliaments. Recalling the fate of the Treaty of Lisbon, this approach seems doomed to failure or at the very minimum long delay. Another approach could be the creation of a totally new organization for European

defense including such members as choose to join. Again, a difficult and unlikely project.

It makes more sense to finess the problem by basing European defense on NATO. NATO already provides a recognized and legitimate command structure and a decisionmaking process. It also provides the possibility of undertaking various forms of actions like peacekeeping without U.S. participation. Returning to the old idea of a European pillar in NATO, which could act jointly with the United States or on its own, might simplify the process. This approach would combine the advantages of common defense together with the United States while providing for the alternative of independent European action without it. But for this to work, a "European deterrent" would have to be credible. To be sure, a European deterrent would be more credible if it included the British, but a post-Brexit Britain is unlikely to participate in a purely European enterprise. Cooperation within NATO would be more probable than cooperation outside of it.

Image: A cameraman stands in front of a screen ahead of a NATO summit, at the press center in Brussels, Belgium.

June 13, 2021. Reuters/Yves Herman.

The main obstacle to European defense is Germany. For decades, Germany has given French initiatives rhetorical support but little more, just enough to maintain the appearance of Franco-German cooperation. But European defense would require significant German commitment and an increase in the German military budget, which Germany has resisted, not only to maintain its sacred balanced budget but also to minimize its role in global security. It's a political, not an economic, choice. To paraphrase the old saw, Americans (and French) come from Mars, Germans from Venus. Other European states can hide behind Germany. Is Germany (and Europe) too poor to afford both drones and butter? Hardly.

The trump card is of course the nuclear calculus; with the departure of the United Kingdom from the EU, the issue of French nuclear deterrence and/or retaliation is critical. Having a European nuclear deterrent to balance the Russian nuclear capacity would be essential in the absence of

the United States—but that would mean potentially putting French nuclear forces under a European command, which is not at all likely. Alternately, there would have to be a firm promise that the Europeans could count on the French nuclear deterrent becoming a European deterrent; this would always be an extremely sensitive question, and if there was any equivocation, possibly born of political disagreements, the impact would be devastating. Weakening this cohesion/resolve would of course become a major objective of Russian diplomacy, disinformation, and economic incentivization. A German government led by the Greens or a coalition in which they play a major role might well be more critical of Russia than the Merkel regime yet even less willing to support a European army. And the significant support for Marine Le Pen's candidacy in the 2022 French presidential elections indicates that France itself might abruptly change course. Would the concept of European defense



and even the EU survive a Le Pen presidency unscathed?

It is clear to us and almost everyone that a continued U.S.-Europe security partnership is in everyone's best interest, and we do not advocate any attempt by Europe to "go it alone." At the same time, a significant reassessment of roles, missions, and resources could actually strengthen Euro-Atlantic security and make it both more stable and cost-effective. Much of what would be needed to strengthen NATO is also what would be necessary to create a self-reliant European defense.

While it is beyond the scope of this piece to offer a "solution" to the challenging security environment that Europe faces, there are two areas where the constituent nations and collective political bodies would do well to focus. The first is to look hard at what capabilities offer the most credible deterrent to Russian "adventurism" and other threats that may be on the horizon. The remarkable economic and technological development across the continent over the last several decades—along with significant societal changes—make a fresh assessment a reasonable undertaking. A shift in emphasis from industrial age warfare to the effective use of technology and more cost-effective weapons might well enhance the security of the region and reduce the economic burden. Simply using a two percent of GDP yardstick as a sole metric makes very little sense and can be destabilizing or counterproductive in its own right.

There may be some cost-effective capabilities that would provide a credible deterrent against a kinetic attack without the support of U.S. forces being deployed to eastern Europe. Even with the full support of the United States through NATO, it is possible that these capabilities—and others that will be developed—might still be a better investment for European nations.

A gradual shift to more self-reliant capabilities could even ease the pressure on America to reduce defense expenditures without accepting unreasonable risk. As discussed earlier, there would not be a lot of time to react or adjust to a significant American retrenchment.

Today, discussion of strategic autonomy seems to be taking place in a rarefied atmosphere, as a largely theoretical issue with little urgency. After all, the debate has been going on in one form or another for seventy years, and talk about European defense may have diminishing returns. Certainly, the election of Joe Biden as president indicates that at least for the time being, American guarantees to European security still stand. That situation could change rapidly if in 2022, the Republicans, still the party of Trump, gain control over both the Senate and House, presaging Trump's return to the White House in 2024. The subject of strategic autonomy would no longer be theoretical. Recognizing that Trump might pull the United States out of NATO or remain in the alliance without being willing to respond militarily to Russian provocations, Europe would have two years to cobble together an alternative plan for a purely European defense. Then the question would be whether Europe *could* act—and whether it *would* act.

In 1939, an infamous newspaper headline asked whether the French were willing to "die for Danzig." After 2024, the issue could be whether Europeans would be willing to die for Vilnius. Faced with such an unprecedented situation, a post-modernist Europe could choose to morph into a complete superpower—at great cost—transforming itself and changing global dynamics. Or else, Europe would have to come to terms with Russia from a position of inferiority. Ironically, a weak Russia might succeed where the mighty Soviet Union failed. □

Image: A U.S. Army soldier sits atop an M1A1 Abrams tank during exercise Steadfast Defender 2021.

Courtesy of NATO.