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Fanciful Notions: European Armies, Trump and NATO

The idea of a standing European army, one dedicated to the specific needs of Europe as opposed to being an annex of another power is far from new. In gestation alongside notions of European federalism and its defence have come the idea of a force filled with respective nation states that might have aims and ambitions different from those of Washington or Moscow. Critics of the idea are never far away.

The companion concepts of European integration and defence have not had a smooth ride in transatlantic relations. The twitchiness shown by various European leaders to the Trump administration's approach to European defence has become obvious. Trump's tactic here has been to pile scorn upon the European army idea while insisting that NATO members pay their dues. He is also counting on the Euro-sceptics who fear that such an army would see Brussels dictating the tune of conscription to member-states.

The Armistice Day commemorations supplied another political opportunity to talk about armies – as if we did not have enough of them already. Even if war should be avoided, the political leader will often find it irresistible to speak of preparedness for the next one. The catastrophic freight of the Great War of 1914-1918 is still weighing down nations, but talk of being armed and ready for the next conflict refuses to go away.

France's Emmanuel Macron, who finds himself in the doldrums of unpopularity at home, has embraced the idea of a continental army. To Europe 1 radio, he explained that the object of European security had been compromised by decisions made by the Trump White House. "When I see President Trump announcing that he's quitting a major

disarmament treaty which was formed after the 1980s Euro-missile crisis that hit Europe, who is the main victim?”

The question could have remained rhetorical, but Macron did not want to leave his audience in any nagging doubt: “Europe and its security.” The stakes had changed, and the United States had become more unsettling problem than solid protector. “We have to protect ourselves with respect to China, Russia and even the United States of America.” The comments were less directed at actual physical harm occasioned by traditional military combat than the skirmishes of the Internet waged on the digital frontier.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel is of like mind. To a meeting of the European Parliament, she outlined how a “real, true European army” had to be created “so that we can tackle issues immediately on the ground.” Other powers could not be relied upon to achieve this task. “Only a stronger Europe is going to be able to defend its values and interest worldwide, and the times when when we can rely on others are past.”

These comments might have been ill-advised but entirely logical: the notion of immutable, friendly alliances remains a stretched one, and the interests of states can diverge with violent suddenness. Where there are problematic lies in the shift being insisted upon by Merkel and Macron: the idea that European “values” and its “identity” needs to be manifested in a standing army that might be both a guarantee of security and a promoter of Europe.

Given that much of Europe is in fractious dispute over the nature of such values, and what imperils them, this project is already stuttering before it finds form, an inchoate aspiration rather than a genuine prospect. The wisdom of the sometimes sound and often diabolical Austrian diplomat of the Napoleonic era, Klemens von Metternich, comes to mind: coalitions and “all fraternizations” need a “strictly determinate aim” to unite them less they disintegrate.

Trump’s response was predictably adolescent in its fuming quality. Macron “has just suggested that Europe build its own military in order to protect itself from the US, China and Russia. Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its share of NATO, which the US subsidizes greatly!”

The view of shoring up Europe’s own defence in the absence of the United States is viewed as inconceivable for generations of politicians on the continent. To do so in the absence of the excuse of keeping a US presence in Europe – NATO- is also seen as so improbable as to be unnatural. Both Merkel and Macron insist that such an armed force would be a “supplement” to NATO, not its replacement nor its counter.

There are also operational matters. Arguably, only Britain and France have deployable forces in actual instances of conflict, but they are, in the main, annexes of US-led operations. In a manner heavy with condescension, strategists enthused by a continued role of a large hegemon in European affairs simply insist that Europe cannot go it alone, needing the gusts of wind from across the Atlantic to keep matters flying. One such member of this fraternity of thought is Michael Shurkin of the RAND Corporation. “By and large, all of them [the European powers] have militaries designed to work as a coalition run by the US.”

Dependency is, however, a condition that sits uneasily. It seems an echo of charity; those who receive it are bound to, at some point, seek an alternative. Even before Trump’s coming to power, thought was being given to the future of European defence. A collection published in 2016 by the European Union Institute for Security Studies as part of its Chaillot Paper series is one such example. The authors acknowledge the issues of a common external security policy (CSDP), which sees far more convergence between European states than a common defence policy. CSDP, in any case, “suffers from a lack of commitment and a lack of resources, within its scope shifting increasingly towards border monitoring and training purposes.” What Merkel and Macron are suggesting is moving Europe towards a previously shunned idea of territorial defence.

Analysts such as James R. Holmes of the Naval War College see a European army as making good sense. He does so from two perspectives: a suspicion of Russia, to which he attributes jaw dropping powers of embargo in any future conflict with Europe; and the declining influence of the United States. Numbers of US personnel based in Europe are small relative to the Cold War deployment: some 62,000 or so. The American merchant fleet has been depleted in terms of numbers.

The structural matters of such an army are so vague as to be considered untenable. “The EU is not a country, it is not a state” remarks François Heisbourg, an adviser to the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris. No army, he claims, can exist without an executive branch. The former British Prime Minister David Cameron has also previously argued that “suggestions of an EU army are fanciful: national security is a national competence”.

But armed forces filled with the nationals of other states have been typical of the Blue helmets of the United Nations, though their deployments a sketchy record. Given the chaos of a Europe gazing over a yawning chasm, a single army is the last thing on the lips

of Europe's citizenry. Trump might have to do more to push European leaders towards a more coherent security front.