

## **A Common Defense Could Make the European Union Great Again**

Doug Bandow

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The European people have voted and left political devastation in their wake. The established ruling order continues to collapse. To do more than simply survive, the European Union needs to reconsider its geopolitical ambitions.

European leaders need to abandon their attempts to create an ever more intrusive continental government and instead emphasize tasks that only international cooperation can achieve. The most obvious EU responsibility should be sustaining a free European market. The most transformational would be developing a serious European security system.

The EU began in 1951 as an organization limited in function and membership. It was designed to help reconstruct the continent after World War II and reconcile long-time enemies France and Germany. Six years later came the European Economic Community, or Common Market, which freed trade among the organization's members. Still, old antagonisms refused to die: French President Charles de Gaulle blocked membership for his wartime allies in London.

In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty transformed the so-called European Project, setting the objective of an "ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe." The EU's institutions came to resemble those of an actual government, including a parliament and various executive bodies and agencies. The EU also expanded its legal and regulatory supremacy over national policy.

The organization still was not a real state, but more than a few European leaders envisioned creating a United States of Europe. A growing gaggle of bureaucrats, politicians, lobbyists, and journalists filled Brussels. A new Eurocratic elite continued to expand EU authority and even created a common currency, the Euro. When tying together economies with substantially different fiscal and monetary policies resulted in crisis, Eurocrats pressed for further political integration, including oversight by Brussels of national budgets, the core responsibility of any sovereign government.

Still, even Euro-friendly Germans were not willing to turn control of their economy over to the fiscal wastrels in Rome, Athens, and elsewhere. And the EU is no country. It has a flag that no one salutes and three squabbling presidents whom people mock. No one roots for a European football (soccer) team: fan enthusiasms are strictly national.

The greatest gulf between theory and reality is the EU's pretension to be a Weltmacht even though it has no military. And despite decades of proposals to develop a formal European defense and security policy, little of substance has occurred.

EU members remain deeply divided on many international issues. Much more separates European countries than American states, which had independent identities but shared cultures and histories; the colonies also fought together to win independence and forge a nation. Despite the Civil War, they did not constantly battle one another.

Yet despite creation of an EU foreign minister, major European nations continue to make their own decisions. Even more important, though, few Europeans see much reason to devote resources to and take risks for their own defense when the U.S. is willing to do it for them. America's defense dole has become very attractive.

What is the balance for the EU? The organization's greatest strength remains the continental market, though business regulation, regional subsidies, and agricultural bailouts are negatives. More problematic is the organization's impact on national sovereignty. EU standards have promoted liberalization and democratization in former Soviet republics and satellite states. However, the EU has also overridden national decisions in many areas, including on issues as important as immigration and government budgets. America's experience offers a dramatic warning: the more the EU looks like a United States of Europe, the less liberty European peoples will enjoy.

Most worrisome may be what has oft been called the organization's "democratic deficit." EU policy is dominated by a bizarrely fragmented yet largely unaccountable executive. The European Parliament is popularly elected but lacks normal legislative powers and is almost universally ignored by its own constituents. People typically use their EP votes to punish unpopular governments for domestic failures. Legislative blocs are diffuse with little policy coherence.

Moreover, Eurocrats are determined to achieve their ends irrespective of what the people want. When two nations voted down an EU constitution, the body switched to a treaty to achieve the same end. When Ireland, the only nation to hold a referendum on the latter pact, voted no, the EU demanded a revote.

Argued outgoing European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker: "It is time we had a little more faith in Europe's ability to provide collective solutions to problems felt acutely and independently by each EU member state." France's Emmanuel Macron and other European leaders continue their campaign to consolidate power in Brussels. The standard mantra is that Europeans need "more Europe," meaning EU authority centered in Brussels.

However, few Europeans want more intrusive economic controls. Poorer southern and eastern Europeans desire increased subsidies from their wealthier brethren, but they do not want to cede authority to Brussels. This was driven home by the migration crisis, which sparked electoral upheavals, including in traditionally stable Germany. While a majority of Europeans value continental cooperation, there is little popular sentiment to give the Eurocrats more power.

The latest European Parliament elections resulted in more changes in policies than personalities. Contra the claim of Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini that "a new Europe is born," not much of substance is likely to change in Brussels.

However, the traditional ruling parties have continued to collapse. The largest EP party aggregations, moderate conservatives and socialists, lost substantial support; for the first time in

four decades, they lack enough seats to form a “grand coalition” majority. The Greens, (market-friendly) liberals, and populists gained while more right-leaning conservatives fell back.

At the national level, Germany’s Social Democrats were humbled and its Greens advanced. Britain’s hapless Conservatives were crushed by the newly formed Brexit Party. France’s and Marine Le Pen’s populist National Rally surpassed President Emmanuel Macron’s party, while the traditional ruling socialists and conservatives each lost more than half their EP seats. And Italy’s right-leaning populist Lega took a strong first place. The Left won only in Spain and Portugal, while losing in Greece, whose prime minister had called a snap election. As Belgium’s electorate further fractured, the hard right nearly quadrupled its vote share.

The EU will survive, but it can do little more in such an environment. To regain public confidence, it needs to redefine its responsibilities. That is, it should focus on doing what individual countries cannot do, or at least not do well.

The most obvious continental task is defense. Some observers worry that Europe with a weaker or perhaps no EU would become isolationist or align with Russia, neither of which is likely. Moscow no longer inspires much fear except along its borders; moreover, the Europeans obviously enjoy their independence. More fantastically, some EU fans suggest that without the supposed firm yoke of Brussels, World War III might break out. That seems especially unlikely on a continent filled with countries that refuse to create serious militaries. Europe’s once overwhelming propensity for war is thankfully gone.

However, the EU could take on a more positive role, offering an affirmative defense strategy and force. Today, NATO plays that role, but in practice that acronym stands for North America and The Others. Only the United Kingdom and France have serious militaries capable of meaningful independent action. Most European governments spend little and poorly on their armed forces because they see few threats and expect the Americans to take care of any dangers.

Which, as President Trump has articulated imperfectly but loudly, is unfair to the U.S.—and no longer necessary, 74 years after the end of World War II. Alas, badgering and begging—modus operandi for Republican and Democratic administrations alike for years—won’t change anything. The Trump administration has won only symbolic military spending hikes, while actually *increasing* America’s contributions of manpower and materiel to Europe’s defense. Only the credible threat of leaving is likely to change the Europeans’ behavior. But why only threaten? Washington should plan to leave, handing over ultimate responsibility for the continent’s defense to Europe. The EU could even help create a European-run NATO.

The vision of a United States of Europe still burns bright in the hearts of many Eurocrats. But as the latest elections highlighted, the continent continues to fracture politically. The European Union could best reclaim a vital role by taking over Europe’s defense from America.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.*