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Why Europe Should Defend Itself

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French President Emmanuel Macron suggested earlier this month that his continent needed a “true, European army,” adding that “we have to protect ourselves with respect to China, Russia and even the United States of America.” His position was later echoed by Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany, who clarified that such a project would not be “an army against NATO, it can be a good complement to NATO.”

While Macron meant that Europe—that is the European Union—had to protect itself against the U.S. in the cybersecurity realm, his comment raised alarm and concern among many policymakers in the United States, who believe that the creation of a European army implies an abdication of American leadership in protecting Europe. President Donald Trump himself, who is an advocate of burden sharing, and has frequently called for European countries to spend more on their defense, also took offense at Macron’s suggestion, perhaps under the influence of establishment thinking in Washington.

Macron and Trump are mostly in alignment in their views because a European army would serve both the interests of the United States and those of European states, particularly France and Germany. While it is true that the logistics of a European army would be difficult to work out, especially the integration of different weapons systems, and national armies with different languages and command structures, there is no doubt that a European army would be a capable fighting force, especially if it works with NATO and its American allies.

The U.S. would be able to pass on much of the cost of protecting Europe—in both blood and treasure—to Europeans themselves, who are already geopolitically situated to stand up for Western interests, in tandem with their American allies, in relation to Russia and non-state threats from Africa and the Middle East. Europeans, in particular, may also be better at determining how best to handle Russia, given their mutual desire to avoid escalation in Europe. This would free up the U.S. military to deter more serious threats, particular our long-term strategic competitor, China.

Meanwhile, Macron would also get what he wants. According to Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at Cato Institute, Macron simply wants Europe to “assert itself independently in the world,” the perennial French dream, but one that is not at odds with America’s interests.