



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.

Many in the Washington foreign policy establishment fear such a scenario, based on the premise that the United States’ status as a global superpower is due to its role in directing, and in a sense subordinating its European allies, which serve to magnify America’s power more than anything else. Some American policymakers may also fear that an independent European army would not

necessarily work in tandem with American interests. After all, most European states are now part of the American-led Western alliance, and throughout the United States' history, many of our gravest threats came from independently minded European powers, such as Great Britain, France, Spain, and Germany.

Such a view, however, is more akin to the relationship between a master and clients than between allies.

An alliance ought to be a partnership of independent actors who help each other in times of real need, while pursuing other national policies and goals, using their own means. Seeking to turn every potential threat against Europe into a problem for the American military to solve or protect against neither helps Europe—because it makes it dependent and unable to exercise genuine strategic autonomy—nor the United States—because it pulls and stretches its military too thin without sufficient justifying benefit for our national security. America simply does not need a base in every European state that might feel threatened by Russia.

Europe's desire for strategic autonomy, starting with a European-led army, is a function of the natural tendency of any nation or group of states to forge their own path after a period of protective growth, which the United States provided for the war-torn continent after the horrors of the World Wars. Those days have receded into the past, the creation of a European army ought to be welcomed by American policymakers as the long-awaited maturation of a valued partner, one that would do more for its own security, so that the United States can focus more closely on its own national interests, most importantly the emerging threat from our primary global rival, China.