



Washington Might Feel The Chill Of A More United European Defense

Stanley R. Sloan

June 22, 2017

President Donald Trump may have succeeded beyond his wildest imagination in his Europe/NATO policies. He boasts he has made our European allies do things that no other American president has done. And, to be honest, he has helped unite the Europeans. Unfortunately, he has largely united them against the United States, rather than behind it. The result may include more European spending on defense, but a much less cooperative transatlantic relationship, which could be disastrous for U.S. efforts to gain international support for its policies.

Much has been made of how both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel left the NATO and G-20 summits convinced that they could not look to Trump's America for leadership of the West. His failure to support the concept of collective defense, opposition to the Paris Climate Agreement, and apparent disdain for America's friends left these leaders stunned and convinced that they would have to oppose Trump's most disagreeable inclinations. After returning to the United States, Trump acknowledged his support for NATO's Article 5 commitment in a Rose Garden press conference with Romanian Prime Minister Klaus Iohannis, but the damage to American credibility had been done.

While these reactions made headlines on both sides of the Atlantic, something else was brewing that may be of even greater significance. The members of the European Union, most of whom are also members of NATO, once again have been ginning up ideas about autonomous European defense efforts and structures. The last serious surge of ideas in this area came during the crisis over the U.S. invasion of Iraq. French and German opposition to George W. Bush's decision in 2003 led to proposals for a European army and autonomous defense planning arrangements outside the NATO structure.

So, what's the problem? Don't we want the Europeans to spend more and contribute more and better forces to NATO missions? Won't this help relieve the burden on the United States?

The answer given by most European and American defense experts is that the European allies do need to do more. But most also agree that those efforts will be most effective if shaped by and built within the framework of the transatlantic alliance and its leading institution, NATO.

A somewhat different argument appeared in these pages recently, observing that President Trump had not yet reduced its commitment to Europe as many have feared, but have nonetheless

managed to alienate our allies. Despite the downside, the authors, Benjamin Friedman and Joshua Shiffrin, argue that Trump's policies could lead to an increase in European defense efforts. Whether the increases currently underway are in any way stimulated by Trump's "tough talk" remains to be seen. The allies agreed in the 2014 Wales Pledge to increase defense spending to reach the goal of 2 percent of GDP by 2024. The pledge came explicitly in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine and threatening behavior toward NATO allies.

Jordan Becker, an expert on NATO burden-sharing, recently observed in *War on the Rocks* that "...the true effect of the Wales Pledge will not be measurable for several years, and it will be difficult to isolate its effects from the effect of tough talk on burden-sharing from Washington." From a historical perspective, there is no solid evidence that "tough talk" from Washington has been particularly helpful in stimulating European efforts, starting with the fact that the failure of the European Defense Community in 1954 came in the wake of U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warning that such an event could result in an "agonizing reappraisal" of the American commitment to European security. That, of course, did not come about because Washington's perception of the Soviet threat far outweighed the disappointment at the European failure.

The center of current efforts to improve coordination of European defense efforts is found in a report by the European Union's executive body, the European Commission, and the union's top foreign and defense policy official, Federica Mogherini. This report, "Reflection Paper on the Future of European Defence," is a responsible, credible piece of advocacy for the European Union to develop greater coherence in the defense efforts of its members.

The report reasonably acknowledges that decisions along the way would be made by the member states, with the E.U. institutions providing support. The report calls for developing a common defense industrial market while enhancing E.U. military planning and operational capabilities.

The report lays out three scenarios, or options, moving from a relatively modest set of goals to more ambitious ones. In the first scenario, E.U. members would intensify cooperation, but would operate largely on a volunteer basis:

Such cooperation would ... depend on ad-hoc decisions as and when a new threat or crisis emerges ... Member States would not be bound — politically or legally — by a common direction of travel in security and defence.

In the second scenario,

the E.U. would enhance its ability to project military power and to engage fully in external crisis management and in building partners' security and defence capacities. It would also improve its ability to protect Europe in areas ... such as counterterrorism, countering of hybrid and cyber threats, border control and maritime and energy security.

The European Union, in this case, would be far more institutionally involved in defense and would be "more directly engaged in the protection of Member States and citizens in case of significant attacks or disruptions against a country and/or its critical infrastructures."

In the most integrative and ambitious of three scenarios laid out in the report, the defense union would be sufficiently evolved by 2025 so that most defense and security decisions would be taken in common and executed at the E.U. level. According to the report,

The E.U. would be able to run high-end operations to better protect Europe, potentially including operations against terrorist groups, naval operations in hostile environments or cyber-defence actions.

The report sees this option as a complement to NATO, not competition: "...the protection of Europe would become a mutually reinforcing responsibility of the E.U. and NATO."

This most demanding outcome could be seen as exactly what the United States wanted when Dulles threatened the "agonizing reappraisal" of its commitment. However, the Eisenhower administration had not fully comprehended the many factors, as I have discussed elsewhere, that would eventually lead to the failure of the European Defense Community. Today, it is perhaps some Europeans (and Americans, including at one time the Obama administration) who are being too optimistic about the willingness of European states to merge their sovereignties so thoroughly.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has in the past emphasized the importance of the non-military contributions the European Union makes to security. But in endorsing this report, and apparently provoked by Trump's critique, he argued "...soft power alone is not powerful enough in an increasingly militarized world," as he has also suggested in his past arguments for creating a "European army."

In the report, Mogherini and Juncker all have emphasized that this E.U. defense enhancement should happen in overt and close cooperation with NATO. But the undercurrent stimulated by President Trump's apparent antagonism toward NATO, the European Union, and the European allies has begun to make this initiative feel like a declaration of defense independence from U.S. leadership, or at least as a hedge against American abandonment.

Americans should wish the members of the European Union the best of luck in improving their now-deficient defense efforts. But if it happens as a way of politically challenging the United States, we are likely to see a steady deterioration of transatlantic political-military cooperation.

Now, the irony is that this European effort is not likely to lead to the extreme outcomes advocated by some Europeans, including the creation of a "European army." To get to the extreme point of the process — a true European defense union — the members of the European Union would first have to agree on very extensive integration of their political systems — a political union. In this international environment, we know that things previously unimaginable can become possible. However, it seems highly unlikely, in the near term, that E.U. member political leaders would give up autonomous control over such core national sovereignty decisions such as sending military forces to fight and die on behalf of their country or the European Union.

It also is doubtful that the members of the European Union would be able in that same time frame to shift resources sufficiently to support such an extensive plan. They already find the NATO goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense challenging. Why should one expect E.U.

members to be able to spend what could be twice that to support a fully-fledged European defense union, to say nothing of a “European army?”

The far more desirable option, in terms of both European and American interests, is for all NATO allies to work together to develop plans and capabilities to deal with the very real security threats that face them. This process can and should include much more intensive European-level cooperation, if it is developed in an intensive cooperation between NATO and the European Union.

But on the current path, transatlantic relations are headed toward a dialogue based on mutually shared mistrust, creating opportunities for Russian President Vladimir Putin to exploit. This is no way to run an alliance.