Commentary
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EU's Quest for Defence Autonomy: Perpetual struggle amid geopolitical realities

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Summary

One of the key political topics in the EU has become the need to rapidly build up its own military-industrial capabilities and develop defence autonomy. It has attracted a lot of attention but is in fact another reincarnation of a debate that has been going on for many decades. As before, there is no realistic expectation that the declarations of European politicians will be realized.

As the British once remarked, one can endlessly look at three things: how fire burns, how water flows, and how other people work. Many scholars of European politics would probably agree to add a fourth thing: how the European Union tries to establish military and military-technical cooperation among its member states and talks about strategic autonomy.

Today, these endeavours are back at the top of the EU's political and media agenda. In March 2022, it adopted its first-ever defence strategy, the Strategic Compass. This March, the first military-industrial strategy in the history of European integration was also made public. The new European Commission, to be formed after the June elections to the European Parliament, will **establish** a new position of European Commissioner for Defence.

His main task will be to stimulate the European military industry, including through a significant increase in joint defence orders. There are also more ambitious voices in favour of creating a pan-European army, especially in view of Donald Trump's possible victory in the US presidential election in November.

The topic is as old as the EU itself

All of this news is loud and attention-grabbing today. The reason for this is the sharply deteriorating security situation both on the European continent itself and beyond. The key factor is the Russian-Ukrainian war. The political mainstream in most EU countries perceives it as an existential issue for the entire European security and fears that the confrontation may soon reach the level of a direct military clash with Russia.

In this hypothetical scenario, most EU countries pin their main hopes on NATO and specifically on American security guarantees under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. However, this article, as **mentioned** earlier, does not provide for the automatic opening of the US "security umbrella," its wording is more political than legal. Therefore, European capitals are watching with particular excitement the transformation of the political atmosphere in Washington and its impact on the US attitude toward its allied commitments.

How the North Atlantic Alliance is perceived by Trump, the favourite in the presidential race, is known from his past cadence as head of state. Not so long ago, in typical epithetic style, he reminded of his position by promising that he would "encourage" the Russians to "do whatever they want" with regard to NATO member states whose military budgets do not meet his expectations.

Understandably, these words caused quite a stir in the EU and gave the strongest impetus to the discussion about the importance of jointly developing European competencies and capabilities in the military and military-industrial spheres. All the more so, even if the Democratic Party is able to retain the White House, US strategic priorities will continue to shift rapidly toward the Asia-Pacific region.

So the reaction of politicians and bureaucrats in the EU is understandable and expected.

> But the discussion about the need to have European armed forces and develop its own coordinated military industry is not only not new, it has accompanied European integration practically from day one.

One can recall, for example, how in 1948 five European states concluded the Brussels Agreement, in which they undertook to cooperate, including in matters of collective defence. In 1955, on the basis of the agreement, Western European Union (WEU) emerged, under which attempts were made for many decades to develop military and military-technical cooperation in Europe.

The Alliance was sometimes tried to be presented as a European alternative to NATO, but it was mostly seen as an organic component of the latter, which was nevertheless intended to increase Europe's military capabilities and autonomy. Today, few people can remember about the Western European Union and the fact that it formally existed until 2011. And this in itself is a vivid sketch of the potential of the European "military fist".

In general, since the late 1990s, discussions about the EU's aspirations for defence autonomy and self-sufficiency have been ongoing, and various specific initiatives have been put forward as a follow-up. Thus, shortly after the famous Franco-British summit in Saint-Malo in 1998, the European Security and Defence Policy was established.

To the socio-economic dimensions of European integration was added the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and in its continuation the Common Security and Defence Policy. New joint mechanisms are periodically emerging to put declarations of intent into practical action. For example, in 2007, the full formation of EU battle groups was **announced** to ensure the Union's readiness to respond quickly militarily to crises. To date, however, these groups have never been activated.

> The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in December 2009 and is still the basic treaty that governs the functioning of the entire EU, continued to create institutional prerequisites for the development of pan-European defence autonomy.

Further impetus for this topic was given by the withdrawal of the UK, which had traditionally been sceptical of it, from the EU. New initiatives began to multiply literally before our eyes: Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Defence Review, the European Defence Fund, the Centre for Military Planning and Conduct Capability, the European Peace Foundation, etc.

The list of defence solutions and ideas that have ever appeared and are appearing now in the EU can be continued almost indefinitely. However, let us stop here and summarize: today we are witnessing the same discussion entering another round, in which only some minor details are determined by the peculiarities of the current geopolitical moment. And the same basic characteristics and problems of the European integration project remain at its core as in the 1950s or 1990s.

The glass is half-full...

We cannot say that attempts to establish military and military-industrial cooperation within Europe are completely devoid of achievements. If one wishes, one can always find successes under the activities of the Western European Union in various periods

and within the EU itself. Everything depends on the criteria and scale of success that we are guided by.

The same can be seen today. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the EU is hearing many voices about the success of its own military-strategic response against the backdrop of the unpredictability of future US policy. There is talk of the EU's unprecedented strength and determination to counter the Russian threat by all available means, despite the enormous economic difficulties involved.

It is emphasized that some time ago it was impossible to imagine that European states (especially Germany) would substantially increase their defence budgets and provide military and financial assistance to Ukraine to such an extent. The long-term significance for the entire European defence landscape of the decisions of Finland and Sweden to abandon their policy of neutrality and non-alignment is pointed out.

It is argued that the increasing difficulties in making decisions on assistance to Kyiv in the United States mean a historic chance for the EU to finally fully establish itself as a self-sufficient actor in the military sphere.

At the same time, the other side of the coin is clearly visible. The common place in expert discussions is the **statement** of "the appalling state of affairs in European defence.

> It is obvious that for many decades Europe has seriously underfunded its own military needs, and it did so deliberately.

And the funding that has been allocated has often been used for purposes (for example, developing infrastructure for humanitarian and counterterrorism missions far outside Europe) that have not contributed to strengthening the real conventional capabilities of the armed forces.

Many analysts are also alarmed by the unsatisfactory state of armaments in many EU countries. Thus, according to **estimates**, the German Bundeswehr has enough ammunition for several days of active military operations at best. The picture of the European tank fleet is deplorable. In Germany, out of about 300 Leopard-2 tanks available, only 130 **were** in good condition. The situation is similar in Spain, where at least one third of the three hundred Leopards are not in working order. The situation with artillery in the EU is no **better**.

As a result, politicians and officials in the EU are calling for emergency budgetary and military-industrial measures to remedy the situation. These include Olaf Scholz's now-ubiquitous **Zeitenwende** ("tipping point"). Or the recent **call** by Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for the Internal Market, to urgently allocate € 100 billion to stimulate defence production in the EU. And all the recent declarations and initiatives of the European Commission, including the adoption of the first military-industrial strategy and plans to appoint a European Commissioner for Defence, are attempts to address the same large-scale problems.

However, there is little realistic reason to expect the glass for the EU's autonomous defence ambitions to be any more full this time around, unlike in previous decades. For now, the more realistic scenario seems to be that the loud pronouncements of Brussels bureaucrats will regularly be followed by frequent practical failures, as with the anecdotal failure of the EU's **commitment** to supply Ukraine with a million artillery shells. And there are at least two fundamental reasons for this.

United in diversity under the American umbrella

The first is the ubiquitous European diversity. The second is that only the US security umbrella has historically been able to channel this diversity into a constructive direction and minimize the risks of serious conflicts while providing for Europe's defence needs. Attempts to circumvent these problems inevitably lead to insoluble dilemmas for the EU: without the United States, Europeans cannot guarantee even the basic needs of their own security, and the development of an autonomous European military and military-industrial infrastructure is blocked by the United States itself, which can rely on some of its most loyal allies within the EU to carry out its policy.

> Thus, although the United States is refocusing its geopolitical attention on the Asia-Pacific region, it is clearly not going to weaken the positions of its own military-industrial giants in Europe.

For all the significant differences in the policies of Trump and Biden, we **see** that the administrations of both are using all means to ensure that the most tasty European military orders are placed with American manufacturers.

By doing so, they are limiting opportunities for serious development of the military industry inside the EU. And they are also effectively eliminating the possibility of full-fledged military-technical compatibility between the armies of EU member states. In

this respect, it is indicative that against the background of calls for standardization and complementarity of the European armed forces, 17 different types of tanks are **used** in the EU today, while in the United States there is only one.

It is still elementary impossible for the EU to get out of this vicious circle. First, because of the same diversity factor: many member states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, see Washington as their key ally and guarantor of security for obvious reasons, and therefore will block any attempts to move away from a close relationship with the United States. All the more so because without the US the EU simply does not have the material base to ensure its own defence autonomy.

Characteristically, between 1989 and 2022, the number of military personnel in the EU **fell** from 3.4 million to 1.3 million. At the same time, the EU's share of world GDP **fell** from 28.6 per cent in 1990 to 17.9 per cent in 2019. And so one can endlessly declare the desire for defence and strategic autonomy, but in politics, words and declarations only carry weight when they are based on material reality.

Secondly, there are no leaders (both among politicians and countries) in the European political arena who would have the trust and resources to move the real European situation with military autonomy even slightly. Moreover, only the hegemon represented by the United States ensures with its presence not only the security of the EU from external threats, but also stability within the EU itself.

Assuming that the hegemon leaves, European nationalism will not only bring back traditional contradictions, but under the conditions of systemic turbulence in international relations, they will rapidly multiply and increase the risks of even internal conflicts in the European Union.

Time will tell whether Trump's possible new presidential term and the general geopolitical reorientation of the United States can fundamentally change these calculations. In the short and medium term, there are few preconditions for this. Therefore, instead of defence autonomy for the EU, we can rather expect an even greater increase in European dependence on Washington.

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