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# BUILDING EUROPEANS' CAPACITY TO DEFEND THEMSELVES

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## SUMMARY

- Europeans know they must now do more for their own defence. But there is little consensus on how or even why they should do so.
- To hedge against US disengagement, Europeans should adopt the narrative of “taking a greater share of the burden of defending Europe” – with an emphasis on capabilities and operational commitments.
- Realism and pragmatism should guide Europeans’ choice of institutional vehicle. The CSDP offers new promise of technological and industrial progress.
- Capability development should focus on NATO and do more for the alliance’s Enhanced Forward Presence.
- The European Intervention Initiative should help revive operational culture, and could usefully generate a (virtual) European Air Intervention Group.
- Europeans must stop outsourcing their strategic thinking to Washington. A new European Security Council might help them engage with each other on the big issues.

*In May 2020, US President Donald Trump, infuriated by the slowness of many European capitals to comply with his instruction to move their embassies in Israel to Jerusalem, tweeted his intention to pull US troops out of Europe. Confusion reigned. When? All US troops, or just some? Russia’s bot factory lost no time in playing on European disarray – and, in particular, on the discontents of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states. Street violence escalated into border clashes and, behind a barrage of diplomatic menace and obfuscation, a Russian “peacekeeping” force rolled into Estonia.*

*Moscow had miscalculated both the speed with which Europeans would capitulate on the Jerusalem question and the reluctance of the US military establishment to stand by and be humiliated. So, NATO resisted with its available forces. But, outraged and outgunned, it was unable to stop the Russians reaching the gates of Tallinn and Riga 60 hours after they entered NATO territory. Russia massively reinforced Kaliningrad, including with ostentatious deployments of its new intermediate-range nuclear forces – but made no effort to press further into Europe, allowing a *de facto* ceasefire to take hold and calling for negotiations.*

*Slowly, NATO set in train its mobilisation and reinforcement processes. The alliance issued an ultimatum for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Europe and, when this was ignored, NATO troops massed in northern Poland in preparation for a full-scale offensive – at which point the Russian military struck a German armoured division there with a nuclear missile.*

*Within 24 hours, it was clear that Trump had no intention of retaliating in kind. It was game over. Military forces slowly stood down. Politicians and diplomats took over, confirming the reabsorption of the Baltic states into Russia and the withdrawal of American troops from Europe.*

## The need for greater self-sufficiency

A few years ago, the scenario sketched out above would have seemed not so much improbable as fantastical, the stuff of airport fiction. Today, it remains improbable – but not so implausible that responsible European defence planners can entirely dismiss it from their minds. Russia may be a failing state, with an economy that is now smaller than that of Italy, but it has restored its conventional forces to the point that NATO would be unable to prevent a surprise Russian attack from achieving significant progress in its opening phase. It has also, of course, maintained devastating nuclear capabilities. And there is not much room for doubt that its ruthless, revanchist president, a man who has shown no scruples about using chemical weapons, would resort to the kind of nuclear use Russian forces regularly rehearse, if he thought the risk calculus justified it.

Of course, this risk calculus will turn, as it has since the dawn of the nuclear age, on whether the US president would be willing to retaliate in kind – to “risk Chicago for Berlin”. With the US nuclear codes in the hands of a man who has gone out of his way to disparage the NATO alliance and shown no compunction about pulling the plug on his Kurdish allies in Syria, the US security guarantee to Europe looks less reliable than at any point in the last 70 years. No wonder European defence – the notion that Europeans need to take more responsibility for their own defence – is now firmly back on the political agenda.

Yet, of course, it is not all about Trump. Indeed, the European Union adopted the [European Global Strategy](#) – the point of departure for the recent spate of defence initiatives – in June 2016, when the prospect of a Trump election victory still seemed remote. But, even then, the strategy reflected a deteriorating security environment – as much, or perhaps more, to the south as to the east – and a world in which the long-term US “pivot to Asia” could not be ignored. Europeans’ acceptance of the need to achieve some unspecified degree of “strategic autonomy” preceded Trump.

There has been much satisfaction expressed in Brussels – in the EU quarter, at any rate – over the degree of progress on European defence under the Global Strategy. Progress has undoubtedly been made, but it is important to keep it in perspective. It is not just that, at this point, such progress comprises new plans and processes rather than concrete results. There is also general uncertainty about the adequacy of the scale of the effort – which, of course, begs the question of whether the ambition remains just to complement NATO and do enough to propitiate Trump, or to make a serious push for strategic autonomy and reduced dependence on the United States.

It does not help that the political mood in the EU has seldom been so fractious, with Brexit only the most prominent example of rising nationalism and the erosion of solidarity. Inevitably, this is reflected in the strategic field, with sharply differing views not only on the old fault line of NATO versus the EU, but also on the reality and importance of the various security threats the continent faces, the scale and nature of the right defence response, and the trustworthiness of different partners and allies.

States have long had to balance the competing demands of classic defence against armed attack with requirements that are traditionally viewed as part of internal security – but that nowadays include hybrid, especially cyber, threats. As the 2003 European Security Strategy observed, the internal and external aspects of security had become “indissolubly linked”. But in the absence of institutional developments responding to this reality – we await the creation of the first ministry of security to bring these issues together in any EU state – Europeans still lack effective means to weigh the respective values of investing in a new anti-tank regiment or new anti-hacking software.

Moreover, the acceptance of the need for, and the mechanisms to enable, collective action for external defence at the European level is – despite the inadequacies of the results so far achieved – much more developed than that for internal security. In the intelligence and cyber fields, a patchwork of intergovernmental exchanges and cooperation predominate, given the dearth of pan-European structures. We are still at the stage of sporadic initiatives by NATO or the European Commission. In defence, there is broad consensus that Europeans should be doing more together, even if there are arguments about what and where. The NATO secretary-general and the EU high representative are widely recognised as authority figures, even if their advice is too rarely heeded. But there is no comparable focus on advocating and organising collective action on the security front – though the recent creation of a security commissioner could help.

Against such a turbulent background, this paper argues, a determined European effort to move towards greater self-sufficiency in defence is indeed essential. But the right narrative is crucial. The objective should be framed as “assuming a greater share of the burden of defending Europe” – while shifting the metric away from “cash” to the other two elements in the NATO secretary-general’s new trinity: “capabilities” and “commitments”. The respective roles of NATO and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) should be developed with a hard-headed pragmatism; what matters is what works. While Europe’s industrial and technological capacities should be expanded through the CSDP, NATO may be – for now – the better bet for capability development. Accordingly, this paper proposes two specific initiatives for transatlantic burden-sharing: a challenging European level of ambition within NATO; and a “division of operational labour” between NATO and Europeans working without the US, whether through the CSDP or through arrangements such as the European

Intervention Initiative. Both approaches should be pursued as a conscious strategic bargain between those Europeans who focus on Russia and those who look more to the south.

Finally, this paper ends with an unwelcome reminder that, as global arms control crumbles, Europeans must re-engage with nuclear issues, including the question of a European nuclear deterrent. Nor will they move away from excessive dependence on US protection without finding ways to develop their own, independent, strategic thinking.

## **Conceiving, and talking about, a stronger European defence**

There is no need here to catalogue the various Trump utterances and behaviours that have led many to conclude that he is not to be trusted with Europe's defence. Some of his recent moves – abrogation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty; withdrawal of US forces from Syria – might almost have been designed to alarm his European allies. It is, of course, a fact that the Trump administration has increased the US commitment to Europe, developing his predecessor's 2014 European Reassurance Initiative into a European Deterrence Initiative with a budget of nearly \$7 billion for 2019. Welcome though this is, it is hard to see it as anything other than confirmation that, with the Trump administration, there is simply no predicting how the chips will fall. This is an unstable base on which to rest one's future security.

There is little use in arguing that Trump is just a temporary aberration. A possible six more years of him is a long "temporary". And Trump is only a particularly acute manifestation of the steady evolution of the transatlantic security partnership since the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the disappearance of the existential threat Europe and the US once shared, the interests and ambitions of the two sides have inevitably begun to diverge. The first signs were apparent in the Clinton administration's evident reluctance to become involved in the Balkans crises of the 1990s. Then came 9/11 and the Bush administration's "war on terror" – in which Europeans found that the price of continued US protection was to be (expensively) paid through support for American military misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. President Barack Obama seemed to promise better, but it was his administration that, with its "pivot to Asia", showed how the US strategic focus was set to shift away from Europe and towards the coming confrontation with China in the western Pacific.

Thus, America downgrading Europeans' strategic interests has been the consistent trend of the last 30 years – accompanied, naturally enough, by a growing mood of frustration with European reluctance to bear a fairer share of the burden of their own defence. Along with this has gone a settled US determination to secure a degree of compensation through the international arms trade, by restricting European access to the US market and to US technology. Indeed, the US has used the International Traffic in Arms Regulations to obstruct European competition in third-

country markets, and it has aggressively lobbied against Europeans' efforts to develop their defence industrial and technological base.

In short, Europeans would be wise to view transatlantic divergence not just as a Trump aberration but as a long-term structural shift in geopolitical interests. With a revanchist Russia now flexing its muscles on Europe's eastern border, one European response could be to work even harder at retaining America's interest, essentially by paying an even higher price for US protection. Such thinking seems to lie behind Poland's recent offer to pay for "Fort Trump", a US base on Polish territory. But it is not hard to see how the price would inevitably rise to include items such as European support for US foreign policy in the Middle East. No wonder that most Europeans support the opposite approach: hedging against transatlantic divergence by increasing Europe's strategic autonomy. The logical end state of such a policy is a Europe that is able to defend itself against Russia without relying on the US.

The trouble with this proposition is not that it is infeasible. Europe has both the financial and technological resources to achieve the aim. In 2018 the 28 member states of the EU collectively spent four-and-a-half times more on defence than Russia. And European spending is set to continue rising. France and the United Kingdom are both nuclear powers (and, though it may be exiting the EU, the UK insists that it remains fully committed to Europe's security). The problem is the scale of Europeans' defence deficiencies: making up for what the US currently provides and achieving genuine defence autonomy would be the work of decades rather than years. A new study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that, if European members of NATO wished to prevail against Russia without the US in a conventional regional conflict not dissimilar to that described at the start of this paper, they would need to invest between \$288bn and \$357bn over 20 years.

To put that investment into context, the lower end of the range is roughly what the EU28 now collectively spend on defence in one year – while, if all of them increased their defence budgets to 2 percent of GDP, around \$100bn more per year would become available. So, conventional defence self-sufficiency, measured against today's most potent conventional threat, should be well within Europeans' grasp (how useful or indeed necessary that would be without a nuclear underpinning is another question) if they make a determined and sustained effort over a couple of decades.

But, during that period, Europeans would have to display the kind of unity of purpose and willingness to pool their defence efforts and resources they have never so far achieved during the 20 years of the "European defence project". This will require a political narrative (or "policy", if you prefer) that both motivates Europeans and avoids antagonising Americans (the US reaction to recently revived talk of a "European army" highlighted the dangers here). Any effort to insure against a loss of US commitment must, first and foremost, avoid precipitating that very outcome. At

the same time, the narrative must focus European defence efforts on fixing the key vulnerabilities that would arise from a weakening or withdrawal of the US security guarantee – while avoiding accusations that Europeans are wasting resources by duplicating US capabilities and undermining NATO.

Thus, while it may be tempting to talk of “the hour of European sovereignty” – the subtitle of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s 2018 State of the Union address – Europeans would do well to stick to the less controversial narrative of “assuming a greater share of the burden of defending Europe”. That said, there is scope for more creative thinking about just how to frame this burden-sharing narrative. It will be essential to move away from the crudely financial (and mercantilist) terms in which the US president conceives of the transatlantic defence relationship. “Because Trump says we must” will never play well as a reason to increase defence budgets. And anyway, as noted above, the real problems of European defence are less about how much Europeans spend than how they spend it. Besides, no matter how much they spend, it will always be less than the US. In response to the NATO secretary-general’s invocation of his new trinity, Europeans need to frame a new burden-sharing offer that is less about cash and more about capabilities and commitments – output, not input.

### How much weight can the CSDP bear?

Aided by economic recovery and a return to growth in defence budgets, the 2016 Global Strategy has been the foundation for new European defence initiatives, notably Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund. Together with a new Capability Development Plan, these initiatives have been widely hailed as constituting a new “Defence Union” for the EU. The hope is that they will work together as a sort of mutually reinforcing ecosystem for developing European defence capabilities: the plan will identify priorities that member states should then take up as PESCO projects, subsidised by the EU budget via the European Defence Fund. Meanwhile, the new Coordinated Annual Review on Defence should improve mutual visibility of member states’ defence investment plans, highlighting opportunities for cooperation and leading to a convergence of systems and processes.

Moreover, the Global Strategy prefigures a new degree of CSDP ambition. As conceived at the turn of the millennium, the CSDP was all about crisis-management operations. This focus avoided conflict with NATO’s primacy in territorial defence – and, anyway, looked to be the way of the future, providing a role for European militaries of greater relevance than preparation for a threat from the east that seemed to have evaporated. But what a difference 20 years make. Reflecting the new strategic reality, the Global Strategy adds to the CSDP’s historical crisis-management mission an emphasis on: building partners’ capacity to look after themselves (a move away from traditional interventionism); and the need for Europeans to “be ready and able to deter,

respond to, and protect ourselves against external threats” (an acknowledgement of the revived Russian threat). The EU needs, its member states agreed, “an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy”.

All this is promising – but it is a good start rather than a job completed. As experience shows, what matters in European defence is less new processes and political declarations than how member states decide, over time, to spend their defence budgets and to prepare and deploy their armed forces. This will, in turn, be decisively influenced by the extent to which chiefs of defence staff across Europe accept the new Defence Union as an effective means to define and meet the priority needs of their armed forces. Even in the CSDP’s initial heyday, when political confidence was high and a raft of new crisis management operations was being launched, most of Europe’s militaries – Sweden was a conspicuous exception – never wholly bought into the CSDP. Ambiguous peace-support operations in Africa, where the risks were a good deal clearer than objectives, had limited appeal; and working with the Americans, with all the most advanced equipment and doctrines to match, had an irresistible allure for European military leaders.

Today, with the Russians back and liberal interventionism discredited or, at least, out of fashion, there is a prevailing sense that NATO is the appropriate forum for serious military business. This sense is compounded by the EU’s failure to follow up the Global Strategy with a compelling level of ambition – a definition of the forces Europeans aim to generate collectively, and for what purposes. A clear level of ambition is the essential starting point of any authoritative capability development process – the sort of methodical analysis which identifies the key capability priorities upon which combined efforts should be concentrated, and generates new collaborations that appeal as much to chiefs of defence staff as to defence industrialists and national armament directors.

The Foreign Affairs Council glanced at this requirement in a few short paragraphs entitled “Level of Ambition” in the conclusions of its November 2016 meeting. But there is nothing here that is of practical use to military planners or as a guide to defence investment. The document avoids the phrase “strategic autonomy”. It references the two new “strategic priorities” of the Global Strategy – building partners’ capacities and protecting the union and its citizens, which sit alongside traditional external crisis management – but makes no suggestion of building autonomous European defence capabilities. The council namechecked a clutch of “priority areas” – old favourites such as drones, communications, and other “strategic enablers”; commissioned more work on modelling scenarios; and encouraged member states and EU military staffs to work with the European Defence Agency on the 2018 revision of its Capability Development Plan.

Fatally, however, all seven of the scenarios used to model capability needs reflect the conservative nature of the 2016 level of ambition and relate solely to external crisis

management. So, no conclusions can be drawn, except through inference, about defending against the Russians in the absence of the US; and the qualitative element is largely missing. (It may not be sufficient to conclude that “we should have enough combat aircraft” if we know nothing about the availability of smart munitions or the aircraft’s ability to deliver them; whether the aircraft/aircrew are able to fly in the dark, or “hot and high”; and whether adequate defensive aids suites are fitted, relative to today’s threats, and tomorrow’s.)

In sum, when the European Defence Agency came to work on the 2018 Capability Development Plan, the key guidance document for EU defence investment in the coming years, the input derived from the level of ambition was of little help. Furthermore, the agency had to add to the “pull” of perceived military need the “push” of technological development – such as that in artificial intelligence and cyber capabilities – and of industrial interests.

Inevitably, the resulting Capability Development Plan is very widely drawn. An intensive exercise in consultation with member states and other stakeholders resulted in the identification of 11 EU capability development priorities and 12 key technologies in the medium term.

Examples of the 11 priorities are information superiority, ground combat capabilities, and air superiority. Each has a plethora of sub-capabilities, all of them identified – rightly, no doubt – as in need of attention. But as guidance, it risks amounting less to “fix these” than to “take your pick”. A similar criticism applies to the first two rounds of PESCO. Though these have launched 34 new cooperative projects, they are a mixed bag in their relevance to Europe’s most pressing military needs; to date, the selection looks more like “a hundred flowers blooming” than the product of careful landscape gardening. Unsurprisingly, an early academic assessment of PESCO implementation found that it has made little progress, due to a lack of prioritisation and lead nations’ often lax management of various projects. (The lead-nation model for running new collaborations was tried in the European Capabilities Action Programme of the 1990s; its failure was part of the reason for setting up the European Defence Agency, to shepherd such efforts. It seems that a reversion to “agency lead” for PESCO projects may be necessary.)

Of course, the new ecosystem needs time to bed down before it can reasonably be expected to achieve significant results. But it is for just that reason that, today, countries that are members of both the EU and NATO tend to attach more weight to the latter’s capability planning system. Thus, if Europeans are to achieve quick results in capabilities burden-sharing, they will have to do so in the context of NATO rather than the CSDP.

Moreover, today’s CSDP does not look like a promising vehicle for demonstrating European burden-sharing in operational commitments. Only six of the 16 current CSDP missions are military and, of these, two are partly civilian

while two others are naval. The early days of the CSDP, when Europeans were prepared to deploy a significant number of ground forces to dangerous environments in countries such as Chad or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, seem a long time ago.

Advice and training are now the mainstays of CSDP activity. And in kinetic operations – be it participating in US-led bombing of the Islamic State group (ISIS) or supporting France’s anti-terrorist activity in the Sahel – European member states now prefer to operate in ad hoc coalitions. Last autumn, when the United Nations applied to Brussels – NATO in the first instance, but also the EU – for contingency preparations to extract its personnel from Libya, it met with a profound lack of enthusiasm. There could be no more telling indication of Europeans’ reluctance to revive CSDP military operations than the fact that – some 15 years after it was first proposed and long after it has ceased to be a bone of transatlantic contention – the essential step of setting up a proper European Operational Headquarters has still not been taken.

The absence of a vibrant operational culture matters, for two reasons. Firstly, because it is energising: there is nothing like a whiff of avgas in the corridors to impart real enthusiasm to efforts to build capabilities and address deficiencies. Secondly, the lack of an operational perspective – and the steadily growing role of the European Commission in European defence affairs – risks focusing the enterprise too much on its industrial and technological aspects, to the detriment of the essential military purposes of defence budgets and armed forces. Certainly, the latest American broadsides suggest that Washington will need early evidence of the real military utility of European defence efforts if it is not to conclude that the new initiatives are just a new disguise for unfair European trade practices.

The point of these criticisms of the current condition of the CSDP is not to disparage recent progress. The European Defence Fund, in particular, has the potential to have a real impact on the long campaign to induce EU member states to integrate their defence investment efforts – thereby providing greater defence capability from their defence resources, and creating a stronger and, yes, more autonomous European defence technological and industrial base.

If, however, Europeans’ overarching aim is to assume an increasing share of the burden of their own defence – and to demonstrate this in the capabilities they develop and the operational commitments they undertake – then the CSDP of 2019 does not provide all the answers. The following sections of this paper propose two separate but complementary initiatives that could achieve this aim without expecting the CSDP to bear all the weight.

## **Strengthening NATO’s European pillar**

A distinct European pillar within NATO is an idea dating back to the last century – as French diplomat Jean-Marie

Guéhenno noted in his 2017 article proposing its revival. Talk of a stronger “European defence identity” within NATO went nowhere in the 1990s because Europeans conceived bolder ambitions – the CSDP as, in effect, a successor to NATO – and because Americans feared that their leadership of the alliance would be undermined by the development of a separate European caucus within it. Neither issue remains relevant: NATO has not faded away as once expected, while the CSDP has not developed as its more enthusiastic proponents hoped; and Americans have come to care less and less about what Europeans do in matters of defence, provided only that they do something. The current US administration may be suspicious of European efforts to build their defence industrial capability, but it is hardly likely to object if Europeans volunteer to assume more of NATO’s military burden.

Various timescales are relevant here. Most urgently, the extraordinary recent confusion over US deployments in Syria and Afghanistan has confirmed that Trump’s instinctive priority will always be domestic political advantage, even at the cost of throwing allies under the bus. A precipitate, total withdrawal of US troops from Europe may seem a nightmare too far, but who can confidently discount a sudden, significant unilateral drawdown?

Some minimum residual American military presence on the ground is essential if the US security guarantee, with its ultimate foundation in the US nuclear capability, is to retain any credible deterrent effect: put crudely, Russia needs to understand that any attack on Europe must inevitably spill American blood. But it does not follow from this that the main burden of bolstering NATO’s military presence in central and eastern Europe, as agreed at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, must fall on the Americans. Nor does it follow that forward basing of allied forces is only of value if those forces are American.

European allies would, therefore, do well to reflect on the possibility that US support for the European Deterrence Initiative could go into reverse – especially now that Trump regards himself as exonerated of any “collusion” with Russia. Indeed, they should anticipate such a development – not by immediately offering to take over current US efforts, but by proposing to emulate them. The US leads one of the four multinational battlegroups that constitute NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (roughly 1,500-strong multinational units based in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, led by the UK, Canada, Germany, and the US respectively), and plays the lead role in the Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea region. In addition, the US is now continuously rotating an armoured brigade combat team comprising around 5,000 personnel through countries covered by its Operation Atlantic Resolve (the three Baltic states, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria), and is prepositioning equipment to support two incoming US brigades. With its rotational combat aviation brigade (which comprises more than 2,000 personnel and almost 100 helicopters) alternating between Latvia, Poland, and Romania – and with American forces frequently conducting

naval, air, and marine deployments and exercises in eastern Europe – the US has a presence, familiarity, and credibility in the region that its western European allies have never had. They should change this now.

Such efforts need not be limited to rotational deployments: Europeans should contemplate more forward bases of their own. Poland’s Fort Trump idea is objectionable both because it heads the wrong way in asking more of the US and because it circumvents NATO. But it at least has virtue in its implicit recognition that the Wales summit erred in stopping short – out of deference to Russian sensitivities – of permanently stationing forces on the territory of former Warsaw Pact allies. Having just invaded Ukraine, Russia would have understood a more muscular NATO response; the Wales summit was to that extent a missed opportunity. Regrettably, this is unlikely to be the last occasion on which President Vladimir Putin presents the alliance with such a challenge. Next time he does so, European allies should be ready with plans to respond with forward deployments. Even a small “Fort Charlemagne” in Poland would be a powerful demonstration of European defence solidarity.

Even more immediately, and despite the uncertainties of Brexit, Berlin and London should urgently consider whether it is opportune to proceed with the planned withdrawal of the last major British combat unit in Germany (an armoured brigade) in 2019.

In the medium and long term, there are other considerations. Two American defence analysts recently floated the interesting suggestion of a European level of ambition within NATO. They argue that “NATO’s current level of ambition is for the entire alliance to maintain the capabilities for collective defense against a near-peer competitor, in what is termed a Major Joint Operation-Plus (MJO+), or to conduct concurrently eight less demanding missions, two at the Major Joint Operation (MJO) level and six Smaller Joint Operations (SJO). Under a new European level of ambition, NATO’s defense planners could be instructed to develop European capabilities needed to conduct one MJO and three SJOs for crisis management with limited or no American support. Alternatively, NATO’s European members could commit to providing half the firepower needed to conduct an alliance wide MJO+.” As it happens, a new version of NATO’s Comprehensive Political Guidance (the relevant alliance document) has just been agreed – so this suggestion may be too late to catch that train. But that is no bar to its adoption and implementation in future.

The great virtue of the idea is that it would link European capability development to the only system for setting defence priorities that, for better or worse, top European military figures are currently prepared to take seriously. As argued above, most of Europe’s chiefs of defence staff never really bought into the CSDP, regarding NATO (even in its period of political near-irrelevance) as the real gold standard of military planning. Military establishments across Europe are more likely to seriously consider a European level of ambition within NATO than CSDP capability guidance

derived from the inadequate and unconvincing post-Global Strategy level of ambition. (This is even the case in Sweden and Finland – which, although they are not members of NATO, have a close partnership with the organisation.) And, critically, a European level of ambition within NATO would tie in important non-CSDP European states, notably Norway, Denmark, and the UK (assuming it leaves the EU).

## Division of operational labour

As well as making a greater contribution to capabilities and forward deployments, Europeans should offer to relieve the US of some part of its operational burden, in areas where American involvement is not essential. Kosovo is a case in point. It was long assumed that here, as in Bosnia, responsibility for keeping the peace would in due course devolve to Europe. Yet the Kosovo Force remains a NATO responsibility, while the EU has progressively run down its rule of law civilian mission in the country. There is seemingly nothing to prevent the EU from volunteering to take over the Kosovo Force, not least since Europeans already provide its force commander and most of its 4,000 troops.

More ambitiously, Europeans could make plain their willingness to do more in Africa. America's tendency to feel that Europe could take greater security responsibility here, "in its own backyard", can be traced back at least as far as the Obama administration's pivot to Asia. Under Trump, the US has talked of withdrawing a significant proportion of the roughly 7,000 military personnel it has deployed in Africa. And the US is, for both financial and ideological reasons, attempting to reduce UN commitments on the continent – most recently, by vetoing UN support for the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The happy arrangement whereby Europe has outsourced much of its security interests in Africa to the UN and various regional organisations is, therefore, coming under increasing strain. Given the inescapable nature of Europe's strategic interests in Africa – as a source both of many natural resources it lacks and of migratory pressures on its southern border – greater European investment in African security and stability is probably inevitable. Europe would be wise to anticipate this shift and make a virtue out of necessity. Better that, after all, than to face demands to backfill for the US in Afghanistan or Syria.

These arguments may raise several objections: is this not just an appeal for a return to the old CSDP crisis-management agenda that the EU now seems to have moved away from? And how would such a focus for European defence efforts help the development of the high-end, war-fighting capabilities that strategic autonomy and the combination of Russian revanchism and American unreliability demand? Are Europeans not going back to objectionable suggestions that their role is just armed policing, leaving serious military operations to the US?

A division of labour narrative certainly suggests that Europeans will have to put more into the promotion of African stability and security through capacity-building – i.e. bolstering local forces – and greater recourse to their

chequebooks. But these uncontroversial steps could and should be complemented by greater European operational activity. And, if the EU does not currently look like a conducive forum in which to discuss and prepare for such activity, then the right answer must be to do so among like-minded Europeans outside the EU framework.

Of course, this is exactly what the European Intervention Initiative has been set up to do. Naturally, it will be up to its participants to determine the direction of work under the initiative. But one obvious option would be to concentrate on the sort of operations that Europeans traditionally undertake. From the Balkans in the 1990s to Libya in 2011 and anti-ISIS operations more recently, this means air campaigns.

Thus, an obvious move would be for relevant member states to form a European Air Intervention Group, to plan and exercise the conduct of future such operations without relying on NATO or US assets. To be sure, this would be a virtual group, as any sort of standing force would be unaffordable and would undermine NATO. But willing Europeans could gain much from planning together how best to constitute an effective air intervention force – without having to fall back, as in the Libya campaign, on NATO or US command and control, air tanking, and smart munitions. Collective exercising would flush out interoperability problems and highlight capability deficiencies, including those in intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance; electronic warfare; and the suppression of enemy air defences. Such an Air Group could also usefully consider what it would take to mount sustained no-fly operations of the kind the West should have imposed on the Assad regime before the Russians became involved in the Syrian conflict. It might even provide the framework, in due course, for common air-policing of European airspace. Today, this may seem a far-fetched notion – but, then, so did the idea of a common European coastguard when it was first floated, in the early days of the EDA.

Formation of a European Air Intervention Group would also be an uncontroversial way to address some of the key challenges associated with territorial defence – and thus to start hedging against the possibility of one day having to fight the Russians without the Americans. Russia has greatly improved its capabilities in the past decade, particularly in anti-access/area denial: its long-range precision strike and air defence systems would hamper NATO efforts to counter a sudden Russian attack through rapid reinforcement and the establishment of air superiority. There is no doubt that Russia would eventually lose a conventional war with NATO. But war-gaming suggests that these anti-access/area denial capabilities, together with advantages of surprise and force concentration, could leave NATO unable to prevent Russia from reaching Tallinn and Riga within 60 hours of opening hostilities.

As Russia exports these new capabilities, particularly the S-400 air defence system, anti-access/area denial

challenges proliferate. A European Air Intervention Group that considered how to deal with them in, say, a Middle East intervention scenario would highlight some of the most critical capability gaps that a Europe bent on greater autonomy in territorial defence should prioritise.

## An unwelcome reminder: The nuclear dimension

For Europeans, perhaps the most unsettling part of greater self-reliance in defence is the requirement to think again about nuclear deterrence. Since the end of the cold war, the subject has largely dropped out of the public – and, indeed, official – consciousness. And that, of course, is how Europeans like it. A recently published [ECFR survey](#) of attitudes towards nuclear deterrence confirms a widespread determination among Europeans to approach the issue with their “eyes tight shut”. But any serious debate about European strategic autonomy has to face up to two profoundly unwelcome and dangerous developments.

The first is the palpable shift in Russia’s attitude towards using a nuclear weapon against NATO. The country’s modernisation of its armed forces, and its increasing willingness to use them, has in the past decade been accompanied by a growing emphasis on nuclear use in Russian military thinking and exercising. Taken together with its development of a slew of new nuclear weapons (at least one of which breaches the INF Treaty) and its deployment of dual-capable missiles in Kaliningrad, the scenario with which this paper opened can no longer be dismissed as wholly fanciful. Russia may deny that it has a formal “escalate to de-escalate” doctrine; but its [embrace](#) of this concept seems clear and poses a specific threat that, after achieving rapid early success with a drive into the Baltic states, Russia could aim to freeze the situation with a single nuclear strike against, say, a key NATO reinforcement node in northern Poland. How confident can Europeans be that Kremlin hawks will view the benefits of such a strategy (not just territorial gains but also, in effect, psychological mastery over Europe) as not worth the risk of an increasingly improbable American nuclear response?

Secondly, Russia’s deployment of a new intermediate-range nuclear missile in breach of the INF Treaty, followed by Trump’s renunciation of the treaty, means that, however reluctant Europeans may be to acknowledge it, the Euromissile Crisis is back. Only this time, the White House is occupied by a president who has so little regard for his European allies’ interests that he did not warn them of his intentions beforehand. And it could be as little as two years before Washington proposes to deploy a new dual-capable ground-launched cruise missile in Europe.

These developments now require Europeans to start thinking hard about nuclear issues again – loath though they may be to do so. Firstly, they must find a way to agree on how they will approach the INF Treaty crisis, with all its implications for not just the continent’s security but also the future of global arms control. Trump’s [recent announcement](#) of new

plans for missile defence, which involve the militarisation of space, chucks another huge rock into the strategic pool. Europeans who accept responsibility for their future security cannot simply close their eyes to these developments.

Beyond this, they need to revisit the old question of whether and how Europe should develop its own nuclear deterrent capability. For, as then French president François Mitterrand’s Defence White Paper expressed it in 1994, “with nuclear power, Europe’s autonomy in defence matters is possible. Without it, it is excluded.” The ECFR report referenced above discusses the “Euro-deterrent” issue in some detail, concluding that the ultimate answer must be for France and the UK to offer extended deterrence to their European partners and neighbours – and for these partners and neighbours to welcome, support, and engage with it. The ultimate model for this is current NATO arrangements for risk- and responsibility-sharing with the American deterrent.

The difficulties with, and objections to, such a course are obvious. And any such development would take years to accomplish. But Europeans should take the first steps now. Broadly, France and the UK should tighten their nuclear partnership and develop their declaratory policy, to make it increasingly clear that they see their partners’ “vital interests” as coterminous with their own. They might also (as suggested in [another recent ECFR report](#)) give thought to developing a new dual-capable, air-launched cruise missile. Meanwhile, other European countries should re-engage with nuclear issues, relearn the grammar of deterrence, and renew strategic thinking that they have been only too happy to outsource to others since the end of the cold war.

## Filling the strategic void

The last point above – the need to re-engage in serious, collective strategic thinking, as opposed to waiting to be told what to do by the Americans – may be the single most important step towards a Europe that is significantly more capable of defending itself. Such a Europe is more likely to survive the twenty-first century as a protagonist rather than prey.

The dilemmas that this paper has addressed persist largely because Europeans lack the institutional and political capacity to think strategically about their shared geopolitical situation and future. Neither the European External Action Service nor the various European Council formations have the bandwidth to deal with both the fundamentally important and the pressingly urgent – as recently underlined by the hijacking of the scheduled discussion of China policy at the March 2019 EU summit by the latest twist in the Brexit crisis. From time to time, the EU recognises and responds to this deficiency through a one-off exercise such as the 2003 European Security Strategy or the 2016 Global Strategy. Both worked well. But between such efforts, collective strategic reflection lapses, centrifugal tendencies reassert themselves, and – in the absence of the time or mechanisms needed to address crucial but slow-burning issues – the default

option has been to outsource the continent's strategic thinking to the Americans.

Nuclear issues are perhaps the toughest and most controversial matters that a Europe with aspirations of strategic autonomy must find a way to grapple with. But they are hardly the only ones. After almost two decades of involvement in Afghanistan, it might be time for Europeans to take collective stock of what has been achieved and at what cost, and to consider whether their individual and collective interests are still best served by treating their engagement in that country as simply a tribute they must pay to Washington. The rising military power of China, marked by its ever-growing global reach and increasingly belligerent attitude towards Taiwan, is another issue that a Europe that aspires to take greater responsibility for its own security cannot ignore forever.

Presumably, it is this vital missing element in any serious European efforts to take control of their collective destiny that has prompted German Chancellor Angela Merkel's recent references to the need for a European Security Council. It may also be what French President Emmanuel Macron had in mind when he echoed the call for such an institution in his recent, widely published "address to the citizens of Europe".

Fundamentally, however, Europe's strategic vacuum may owe as much to psychology as it does to institutional or political shortcomings. After all, it is easier to fall in with Washington's world view than to conduct the sort of European debates that must inevitably expose transatlantic and internal differences. The old fault lines between Europeanists and Atlanticists run deep, and have recently been overlaid by profound differences in strategic outlook – not least between those who look east and those who look south. When some member states see Russia as an existential threat while others view such fears as little short of paranoia, and when some regard turmoil in the southern neighbourhood as something requiring proactive management while others see no need for anything but fences, the temptation to despair of any possibility of agreement, and to leave the leadership responsibility to America, is understandable.

Understandable, but fatal – and unnecessary. The EU would never have got anywhere if it confronted only issues on which there was unanimous agreement. What has ensured progress has been the habits of solidarity and compromise – a readiness to expose and ultimately accept differences in outlook and priority, and then to strike deals that may not totally satisfy anyone but leave everyone better off than they were before.

So it is with the imperative of building Europeans' capacity to defend themselves. Proposals to strengthen the European pillar of NATO in terms of force deployments and capabilities,

and to offer the US some level of operational burden-sharing through a division of labour, will inevitably leave different European constituencies feeling that one or other initiative is misdirected, even retrograde. But they should embrace both, in the recognition of the fact that collective progress towards a safer and more autonomous Europe is possible only with efforts to address the security priorities of all.

## **Uniting Europeans around a shared defence agenda**

Europeans' deteriorating security environment demands that they develop greater self-sufficiency in defence. This will require the right political narrative; a stronger European defence technological and industrial base; an effective way of focusing on agreed capability priorities; a revived operational culture; and a renewed readiness to confront the most uncomfortable strategic issues, including nuclear deterrence.

The right narrative is one of fairer burden-sharing with the US – but with the emphasis not on inputs (money) but outputs (capabilities and operational commitments). This narrative can unite Europeanists and Atlanticists, both hedging against US disengagement and making it less likely.

The recent revival of interest in the CSDP is encouraging. But, at least initially, it will do more for the industrial agenda than for joint capability development. Improvements in readiness and force posture in eastern Europe should be pursued in the NATO context; and European allies should declare a challenging collective level of ambition for their share of future NATO capabilities, thereby strengthening NATO's European pillar and building European conventional self-sufficiency.

Europeans should also propose a burden-sharing division of labour with the US whereby they revive their military activities – taking over the Kosovo mission and assuming greater responsibility in Africa. The European Intervention Initiative should compensate for the de-operationalisation of the CSDP; the formation of a virtual European Air Intervention Group as part of the initiative would both prepare for the most likely future European interventions and bring some key future capability objectives into focus.

Europeans' biggest challenge may be to start thinking for themselves, together, about the big, uncomfortable strategic problems they face. Creating a European Security Council may help with this. Immediately, these problems include the recent body blows to the global arms control regime. The future of nuclear deterrence in Europe must follow, in due course. And persuading today's strategically divergent Europeans to converge on a shared, multi-stranded, and multi-institutional approach to building European defence capacity should be the first order of business.

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