Can Europeans Take on the Defence of Europe?

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If tomorrow the U.S. pulled out of NATO, what would happen to Europe in terms of security? With the current instability of the geopolitical sphere due to the unexpected reconciliation between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin regarding the war in Ukraine, European citizens are beginning to worry about their ability to defend themselves. The EU wasn't even invited to mediate and take part in the truce negotiations, even though the war takes place on its continent. So why has the European Union leaned so heavily on its traditional ally instead of forming a strong European defence alliance?

Europe's historical reliance on its ally

After World War II, the old continent was left in ruins with weakened military capacities and the urgency to build back Western countries, destroyed by the war. The focus wasn't on the military side, but rather on keeping a stable peace and making this war the last one. But quickly after, as the Cold War began, Western Europe turned to the United States, its historical ally, to keep a military presence on its soil and ensure security against the Soviet threat. In 1948, the British pointed out the need for a "Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance" with the idea of commuting forces to be seen as stronger, especially with the help of the U.S. It's in this context that the Treaty of Washington was signed on April 4, 1949 leading to the creation of NATO, the life insurance Europe needed for its defence.

The rule of the "Three Ds"

The more the European integration progressed, with success in terms of economic and politic integration, the more the idea of an independent defence force rose. On the 3rd of December 1998, France and the UK met in St-Malo to discuss the reinforcement of what could become, later on, an independent European defence force, without the U.S. But that didn't sit well with the Americans. They feared that independent European military capabilities would diminish its influence and control over European security affairs. For them, Europe should indeed have developed its defensive capabilities but exclusively within the transatlantic framework. The idea of an autonomous European defence was unacceptable. In response, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright set out the famous rule of the "Three Ds.": no decoupling of European defence structures from NATO, no duplication of NATO capabilities, and no discrimination against non-EU NATO members. In short, be complementary, not in conflict.

The defence of the European continent

With the idea of separable but not separate, in 1992 the EU set up a new entity with the Maastricht Treaty: the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy; article 24). By bringing together foreign affairs and defence, the EU could reinforce its security policy by coordinating the action of the member states but not develop its own army. Defence would be handled by each country individually with military forces independent of Brussels, keeping it a national competence (the EU cannot interfere, as this is not an area in which it has competence; article 2 of the TFEU). In addition, any CFSP action requires unanimous approval by the European Council (the 27 Heads of State and Government) with no interference from the European Commission or Parliament. Along the same lines, the CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) was launched in 2004 which enables EU member states to carry out joint civilian and military missions in response to international crises, mostly outside its frontiers.

One for all and all for one

With the complementarity between NATO and the CFSP, if one of the NATO members was attacked on its soil, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty stipulates that "an armed attack against one or more members of NATO in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against all members." leading therefore the US to intervene.

For the CFSP, Article 42-7 of the Treaty on European Union emphasizes that "If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power." But if we look closely, it doesn't specify what kind of assistance, so it doesn't necessarily mean a military one. This explains why Russia could agree that Ukraine becomes part of the EU but not of NATO. Moreover, it is specified that the CSDP "shall be without prejudice to NATO's primary responsibility for collective defense." The goal is to reinforce solidarity between EU members, without replacing NATO's defence mechanisms.

Readiness 2030: an example of the EU dynamics

The EU wasn't even taken into consideration to mediate a possible discussion between Ukraine and Russia, and was powerless regarding the shift in geopolitical alliances. The EU saw it as a wake-up call to be ready and more autonomous by 2030. The European Commission announced a massive financing plan worth 800 billion euros for the member states in the form of loans, guaranteed by the EU, to strengthen the European defence industry by facilitating joint purchases and programs. The members states would still be the one paying and investing in their military capacities, the idea was to grant them the financial possibility to do so. Even if the plan was unanimously approved, national divergences slowly started to put a stop to this ambitious project (especially in Spain and in the Netherlands) showing the limits of a common defence plan.

So still to this day, it is fair to say that the defence of Europe is not totally in the hands of Europeans as a whole, but rather in the hands of NATO. National military capacities play a key role in the defence of Europe, especially France, since it is the only EU member to possess independent (non-NATO) nuclear weapons. But NATO's presence on the continent remains essential and desirable for Europe, which still heavily depends on it. NATO plays a central role in geopolitical matters as it is seen as a strong and intimidating alliance, able to face superpowers and their potential threats.