European Union of Defence

18 MARCH 2024

AntoniaLaura Pup



Creating a dedicated Defense Minister post for the European Union, as well as a Single Market for Defense – these are some of the ambitious proposals prepared for the 2024 elections by the European People's Party (EPP), EU's largest political party and the one from which European Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen hails. From "good on paper" state to reality on the ground, the European Union has several outstanding defence issues, and such a proposal needs a sustained reality check.

The latest data shows that only 11 out of 30 NATO member states have met the requirement of allocating 2% of GDP to defence, a pledge made at the Wales Summit exactly ten years ago. Most of these NATO member states that have not implemented this pledge yet are, in fact, EU member

states, mostly the ones from the western part of the Union. Governments in Berlin and Paris, both advocates of the EU's strategic autonomy, allocated less than the pledged 2% to their militaries in 2023. The European Union is not doing well in terms of military innovation either, being in the shadow of Washington and Beijing, and continuing to lack consistent dialogue with the business community, which complains about the increasing number of regulations that are holding back competitiveness.

Establishing a distinct commissioner for defence, a proposal to which EPP adds the abolition of the national veto of the member states for security policy decisions at the European level will likely stir up the pot in favour of sovereign nationalists. Why is that? Defence is one of the few sectors that European nation-states value as their own, with no shared powers with the European bodies, making the military a strong symbol of national identity. By bringing this proposal into the agora right before the EU elections, the Christian democrats will stand a good chance of seeing it backfire, allowing the far-right politicians to continue to chant that the EU progressives are aiming to strip away their national interest and imposing military decisions without consistent consultation.

A Union of Defense would also imply a more integrated security identity, something the European Union lacks in great respect. While it is true that the great support offered by the EU institutions to Ukraine since the outbreak of the war matters, we, the Europeans, only seem to unite when we think we only have one enemy. In fact, we have not one, but plenty. Different member states hold different views on how they perceive threats, and a concrete example in that sense is how they see the EU's engagement with China. On one hand, we have the Czech president Petr Pavel who had his first phone call after being elected with the Taiwanese president – a bold choice that stepped on Xi's nerves. On the other hand, you have Emmanuel Macron who advocates for the European Union not to be trapped in the Taiwanese issue, and the governments in Germany, France, Spain, and the Netherlands, that continue to have their 5G networks run by Huawei despite the recommendations agreed in EU's cybersecurity toolbox. Creating a Union of Defense sounds good in theory but is impossible to achieve without defining our shared security options and a common vision of how we perceive "threat": not only in relation to Russia but in relation to whoever might challenge our European values.

Indeed, there is nothing scarier at this moment for a European than to look at the polls in the United States and eye the president who aimed to pull out of NATO as the most popular candidate, while the Ukrainians are shedding blood to defend the core transatlantic values on the ground. If Trump is serious about his isolationist proposal, a more consistent EU defence pillar will start to feel like a "must have", not a "nice to have".

However, when designing the future architecture of European security, one must be pragmatic at all costs. Pragmatism obliges us to see that a European Union of Defense, facing systemic challenges such as inadequate

defence spending, strategic ambiguity, and divergent views on how we perceive threats will only make us more vulnerable, not stronger, and will contribute to the amplification of populist's narratives across the European Union, weakening the transatlantic bond in the process.

EPIS