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The Time for European Defence Has Come: Rome Must Step Up to the Task

by Nathalie Tocci

When it comes to European defence, more has been achieved over the last year than in the past decade. Some would go as far back as 1950, the fateful year in which the French Pleven Plan on a European defence community was rejected by the French themselves. In turn, the Union's founders devised a roundabout to make war on the continent unthinkable: the integration of coal and steel, which kicked off the functionalist logic at the heart of the European project six decades ago. Seventy-seven years later, talk about a European defence union is rife within and beyond the Brussels bubble. But what does such a union consist of? Why is it coming about now? And how should Italy position itself in this process?

The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) presented by High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini to the European Council in June 2016 triggered renewed work on a security

and defence union. As noted by the EUGS: "The EU Global Strategy starts at home"¹: the first priority for the EU's role in the world is the security of the Union itself, achieved through systemic defence cooperation. The implementation of the EUGS in its first year concentrated heavily on security and defence. The establishment of a permanent headquarters – a military planning and conduct capability in Eurocratese –, and the preparatory work to activate a coordinated annual review on defence between member states, or a permanent structured cooperation between a group of member states (PESCO) are all mentioned in the EUGS. These are necessary tools to travel

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, p. 18, <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/node/331>. For an inside account of the EUGS see Nathalie Tocci, *Framing the EU's Global Strategy. A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World*, Cham, Springer-Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

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the long and bumpy road towards a European security and defence union, which would feature more systematic defence cooperation as a first step, potentially going all the way to a common defence, as allowed for in the Lisbon Treaty.

But why is all this happening now? An unprecedented alignment of the stars is making European defence integration a concrete possibility for the first time ever. Insecurity is rising, and Europeans can no longer pretend, as Robert Kagan once put it, to live on Venus. Thankfully, neither do we live on Mars. But we do live on Earth, and there are plenty of security threats and challenges on our planet, notably in and around Europe. European citizens get it. Poll after poll points to the fact that security, or rather insecurity, now tops citizens' concerns. The ascribed source of that insecurity varies. It is largely based on geography: threat perceptions in Vilnius, Warsaw, Stockholm, Paris or Rome will always be somewhat different. But the fact remains unchanged: security has become a top priority across the Union. Added to this is the fact that majorities across all member states support "more Europe" when it comes to security and defence. Europeans understand that in the 21st century, member states, including the largest ones, are simply too small to guarantee security. Only a joint effort can do the trick.

To this deteriorating strategic environment, four other factors ought to be considered. The first is the prospect of Brexit, which has removed what many believed to be the major break on European defence. I always believed that London was an obstacle in recent

years to specific facets of European defence – such as a permanent military headquarters or the activation of a PESCO. But the UK was neither the only nor arguably the major obstacle to progress on European defence. Unlike myself, the fact that many did see London as a major obstacle – regardless of whether they were right or wrong – has triggered a new dynamic since the Brexit referendum, one that is breathing renewed impetus into the prospect of European defence cooperation.

Second, comes the election of Donald Trump. Again, this is a story about perception more than reality. The position of the current US administration concerning European defence is not diametrically opposed to that of its predecessor. Americans have been asking their European allies to pay up on defence for years. This was a message that was sent loud and clear by the two Obama administrations. It was a message that Europeans, in the midst of the economic crisis, generally neglected, notwithstanding the 2 percent defence spending pledge made at the 2014 NATO Wales summit. With a US President as erratic, confused and confusing as Donald Trump, it is a message that Europeans can no longer ignore.

Third is the role of the European Commission. Up until the Juncker Commission, the "D" word was considered somewhat dirty in the Berlaymont. Today not only is the Commission a vocal advocate of European defence, but it has put its money where its mouth is. The 5.5 billion euro European defence fund proposed by the Commission,

comprising both defence research and capability development, provides a concrete financial incentive to translate lofty aspirations for systematic defence cooperation into a practical reality.

Fourth is Germany; a country that partly due to rising insecurity and a more fragile transatlantic bond, and partly due to the availability of financial resources, has decided to invest heavily in defence. Germany being Germany, the government requires a compelling narrative to explain such a decision to the public. Framing a decision to invest in defence in NATO terms does not go down well in view of the current incumbent in the White House. In the absence of a national(ist) narrative precluded by Germany's 20th century history, framing Germany's defence policy in a European context has become an imperative in Berlin.

Yet post-war Germany does not have a strong defence tradition. Moreover, in light of its leadership role in Europe – which goes well beyond defence – Berlin's temptation is to try to include all member states in its plans for European defence. This may well preclude the establishment of an ambitious European security and defence union and is why a fifth and final star in this evolving constellation is Emmanuel Macron's France. During President Hollande's last semester, France became uncharacteristically passive on European defence, viewing it as an excessively bureaucratic endeavour, insufficiently focused on concrete deliverables, be it the development of capabilities or the willingness to use them. Following Macron's election, and as evidenced by the outcome of the

Franco-German ministerial meeting in July, not only is the Franco-German engine back on track, it is concretely active on European defence. The German predilection for inclusiveness has now combined with the French push for ambition.

What about the rest, and in particular what role should Italy play in this fast moving saga? Particularly since the UK referendum, Italy has been consumed by its ambition to create a new triangle at the heart of the European project between Paris, Berlin and Rome. Indeed, there are good reasons why, and certainly many good topics on which, such triangulation would be welcome, including on defence. Yet there is a second role that Rome historically played in Europe, one that has unfortunately been forgotten over the course of the last two decades: that of a balancer and a consensus builder amongst other member states. When the Italian ambition to enter the inner workings of the Franco-German engine becomes an obsession that obfuscates other lines of action not only is the European interest harmed, but the national interest is damaged too.

The stakes for a European security and defence union are high, and the game has started. It is a game that Rome can and should play to the full. However, it must do so with self-confidence, institutional coherence and strategic vision. It is a tall order to do this as the country sleepwalks into national elections, but one that Italy must strive to fulfil. European defence has traditionally been one of the pet projects of the Italian political class, and certainly one to which Italy, due to

its defence industry and foreign policy orientation, can greatly contribute. The train for a Europe of defence is leaving the station. Now is the time to jump on and steer it to destination.

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