

## European Defence in the Post-COVID World

by Stefano Cont

As recognised by Clausewitz's famous works on war, the "defence dimension" of each organized community – whether a state, a federation or confederation, etc. – is intrinsically linked to its "political dimension". It therefore makes little sense to discuss European defence without opening a wider debate about the future development of the EU's overall political dimension, and more specifically of the so-called "instruments of power" which would be necessary to make the Union a fully-fledged actor on the world stage.

The EU project is often described as an eternal work in progress, a "beautiful yet still incomplete masterpiece", primarily because of its inability, with a few exceptions, to reach shared decisions, thus effectively exercising its full power potential. It has been said that the European Union could "potentially" become a fully-fledged member of the looming multi-polar

system of global governance, provided that it not only develops its economic power, which is insufficient on its own, but also diplomatic, informational and military capabilities. Such domains are currently non-existent at the European level, remaining largely the remit of individual member states, thus undermining the EU's external projection capacity.

The reforms required to make the EU a more important and influential actor on the global stage are undeniably fraught with difficulties. As argued in a previous analysis, a key challenge is that of reunifying diverse geopolitical realities, preventing further politico-economic fragmentation in Europe. To achieve these goals, and foster increased unity of intent on the EU's strategic objectives, we should rediscover those foundational principles of "elective affinities" and "strategic utility" on which the Union is built, rather than

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intensifying the EU's bureaucratic and regulatory structures.<sup>1</sup>

This path would require a strengthening of the democratically elected bodies, beginning with the European Parliament and its power to legislate. Nevertheless, the current situation calls for realism and for a more pragmatic approach. Aside from leadership skills, these goals require strategic thinking and long-term vision and planning, setting the agenda on relevant topics and identifying precise objectives.

An effective common European foreign policy could exist focusing only on a select number of macro priority objectives – truly shared by all the member states – which would lay down the foundations for establishing the necessary diplomatic, informational and military instruments. The main problem remains how these objectives are identified and decided. Again, the main road remains a democratically elected parliament, but in the short-term decision-making arrangements within the European Council based on qualified majorities could also be explored.

Focusing on the defence domain, improved capabilities can be developed only by overcoming, first of all, disagreements between supporters of NATO and those who back the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and by going beyond the erroneous conceptualizations of these instruments as being in competition

with each other. What is often not fully grasped is the large diversity between these two institutions, well-illustrated by the difference between the concepts of "defence of Europe" and "European defence".

In the former case, the "defence of Europe" cannot but be transatlantic in nature: a renewed NATO hence retains its strategic relevance as an alliance between sovereign and traditionally democratic countries. The picture changes when it comes to "European defence", an area that relates to the development of a more advanced integration of member state capabilities in the context of a "Union" which is normatively "much deeper" than NATO itself. In this latter case, it is essential to focus on inter-dependence, giving up a certain degree of national sovereignty in order to build a higher degree of European sovereignty.

As far as programmatic choices, there are three equally important priorities to pursue: building new and accessible operational capabilities, achieve better and more efficient military spending and strengthen the technological and industrial base for military and defence procurement in Europe.

The first priority is to build an operational capacity which can quickly and effectively be made available when needed and equipped with clear and simple provisions for decisions, financing and integrated command. Setting aside the idea of a common "standing army", it makes more sense to focus on building concrete capacities and, above all, mechanisms for making capabilities available. Among the

<sup>1</sup> Stefano Cont, "Geopolitical Shifts and the Post-COVID World: Europe and the Multipolar System", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|43 (June 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11734>.

possible solutions, the most viable seems the establishment of a “purpose-oriented army”,<sup>2</sup> a concept that was useful, for instance, at the beginning of American independence.

Funded at the “federal” level, the American Continental Army, which fought against the English, was not meant to have a permanent structure. It is important to stress that also in the United States, the establishment of a common permanent army was eventually achieved only many years after the creation of a fully-fledged federation. The objective of a “purpose-oriented army” is just to have a united command, to provide a rapid response element capable of fulfilling the “purpose” for which it has been created and, lastly, to coordinate and integrate disparate forces and capabilities over time, as happened with the different state militias in the US case.

The development of the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) could have possibly led to such objective. The Lisbon Treaty (Articles 42.6, 46 and Protocol 10) provided the legislative instrument and appropriate criteria. Unfortunately, a different path was chosen, which is very “inclusive” and definitely more ambitious in theory, but which will hardly lead to the achievement of the objectives outlined in these priorities.

It is hard to believe in the actual feasibility of all the 47 PESCO projects

<sup>2</sup> A “Purpose-oriented army”, refers to an army created and ready to be mobilized to fulfil precise tasks, in contrast to a “national army” which is permanently established and serves a variety of possible purposes.

launched so far, which seem designed to please everyone rather than to develop real (and adequately financed) capabilities. Moreover, the decision to bypass the criteria limiting access to PESCO to those member states “whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions” (Article 42.6) will prevent the use of such capabilities in order to achieve shared objectives in the future.

The noble goal of inclusivity, despite aiming at the development of greater common capabilities,<sup>3</sup> does not meet the real needs of initiating and conducting effective actions when needed or of exerting a deterrent effect on potential competitors, precisely because it mirrors the fragmented foreign policies within Europe and the lack of “more binding commitments” for all 27 member states. The objective, as defined in the Lisbon Treaty, could presumably be reached in an easier way by a more limited number of states, which are more homogeneous and cohesive in terms of priorities and goals to be achieved. Such states could pave the way for others to join in on initiatives whenever they deem them appropriate.

In this perspective, improving European defence was also hampered by a misinterpretation of Article 42.7 on mutual assistance in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks carried out in Paris

<sup>3</sup> A gradual, but continued increase of the defence expenditures, 20 per cent for acquisitions, 2 per cent ratio defence expenditure on GDP.

in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Such article, inserted in the Lisbon Treaty following the terrorist attacks on Spain in 2004, envisaged measures of “collective defence” for European countries, along the lines of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. When Article 42.7 was invoked by France, the solution was to give France the opportunity of leading a series of negotiations on a bilateral basis in order to identify potential aid to be provided, thus depriving the article of its most important purpose. If interpreted correctly, this article would have offered the European Union the possibility of giving itself a concrete common objective, hence developing a “purpose-oriented army”.

Turning to the second priority, this concerns the efficiency of military spending, which is not to be conceived as a further reduction of defence investments, but rather as an instrument to increase available capabilities. It is desirable, and also practically feasible, to achieve a certain degree of “role specialization” among member states in many sectors, especially those linked to logistics and advanced training, in order to reduce fragmentation and wasteful duplications. It is also conceivable to reach a definition of common “operational needs”, which would facilitate cooperation in the production and sharing of the most expensive and technologically advanced systems.

<sup>4</sup> Article 42.7: “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, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations charter” (emphasis added).

The third and last priority focuses on strengthening technological and industrial foundations in Europe, being the true element which gets to the core of the biggest nations’ economic sensitivity and “sovereignty”, but also touches upon the legitimate ambitions of smaller states. Also in this event, however, the experiences gained from European industrial collaborations highlight how the most effective results are the product of cooperation among a number of participants united towards a common goal. Indeed, here too, the true solution must be sought in specialization and, hence, in system inter-dependence.

If, hypothetically, all the member states produce a system (either big or small) or an essential component of a bigger system, their sovereignty would be safeguarded by the logic of interdependence. This period of crisis has indeed disclosed the existence of deep forms of interdependence among different states in several economic sectors, such as for instance in the car industry. Proceeding along this path is therefore possible and presumably convenient. Nevertheless, it requires all stakeholders involved – whether big or small – to give up some sort of “autarchic” aspiration which, however, would not in any event be economically viable.

The question remains whether today it is still possible to quickly change the already undertaken course or, instead, it will be necessary to await that the ongoing series of events will come to nothing, as happened for instance in



1999 for the “Helsinki Headline Goal”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the current crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 emergency could become an opportunity to rethink the process already underway and to implement more pragmatic and efficient solutions not only pertaining to the economic field, but also the diplomatic, informational and, especially, military sectors.

As stated above, a number of key elements are required in order for this to happen: strategic and forward-looking vision, leadership skills and, above all, figures capable of building consensus on these topics and acting effectively and consistently within existing European structures to promote such a vision.

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<sup>5</sup> In December 1999, EU leaders meeting in Helsinki established the Headline Goal – defined as the autonomous ability to deploy 60,000 troops in 60 days for an operation lasting as long as one year to conduct the “Petersberg Tasks” of humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping and peace-making. The deadline for the operational capability of the Headline Goal was December 2003.

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