

The European Union, a New Basis for Common Security

Article by Félix Blanc

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As global powers grapple on the world stage and new threats emerge, decades on from the creation of NATO the international security landscape is increasingly unstable. Political scientist Félix Blanc argues that it is time for the EU to take an ambitious approach to security which makes dependency on the US and incoherence between member states a thing of the past. To ensure genuine strategic autonomy for the EU, the new legislature will have to define a common security and defence doctrine which confronts the question of nuclear deterrence.

Seventy years after the creation of NATO on 4 April 1949, and despite the USA's stated wish to step back from the front line, the European Union is still not speaking with a single voice to guarantee the continent's security. In 2011, NATO's Libya intervention showed the capability gaps of Europe's armies, as well as their dependence on the US. It also demonstrated the lack of European consensus on the use of armed force – a situation which had first become clear during the Yugoslav wars. Russia, after two decades of growing tension in its relationship with NATO, has exploited European divisions in order to advance its pawns on the EU's eastern border, as well as in Syria, Libya and several countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including Central African Republic.

For its part, the US has exploited the same divisions by demanding that its European allies participate more fully in NATO, which America sees as the only legitimate framework for organising European military cooperation. Meanwhile other powers are developing their own strategies, with increasingly destabilising results. China is a particular preoccupation for France and Great Britain, which both have a military presence in the Pacific. And there is also Turkey, threatening the security of the EU's eastern frontiers, in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

A shifting strategic environment

This new strategic environment is weakening collective security. It can be seen with the undermining of the treaties which have regulated the nuclear arms race between the United States and Russia since the end of the Cold War. On 2 August 2019 the US officially withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) signed in 1987 with the USSR. Although Russia has taken the blame due to its deployment of the SSC-8 missile system, the withdrawal is explained above all by the USA's 'pivot' towards Asia, begun under the Obama administration. The American government now sees a rising China as a major strategic threat to the security of the US and its allies, with nearly 80 per cent of China's conventional and nuclear arsenal based on INF-type hardware. American superiority in the Pacific, a legacy of the Second World War, is threatened by the Chinese army's strategy of denying access to its coasts. Hence the US's announcement, immediately following its withdrawal from the INF, of a land deployment of tactical nuclear missiles in Asia.

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Today there remains only a single bilateral disarmament agreement from the 1990s: the NEW START treaty, ending in 2021, which caps the number of American or Russian nuclear warheads at 1500. The European Union risks finding itself in a situation where US-Russian strategic competition on European soil is completely unregulated. That situation would be comparable to the 1960s, when the arms race reached its apogee, with more than 30 000 nuclear warheads ready to be deployed. The American decision to withdraw from the INF might also be explained by a desire on the part of President Donald Trump to give Russia a green light to develop its nuclear arsenal, so as to force America's European allies to contribute more to NATO's deterrent capacity, to the detriment of their own security and defence policy.

Reconfiguring the transatlantic partnership

Against this background of growing strategic uncertainty, the European Union must redefine the terms of the transatlantic partnership and propose an ambitious strategy of de-escalation in order to obtain a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons based in Europe. Public opinion supports this. What is still lacking is a common European doctrine which would take into account all the implications of such a reorientation in NATO strategy. A recent study by the European Council on Foreign Relations shows that the nuclear deterrent strategy does not enjoy consensus support in Europe. Public opinion is of course very hostile to the presence of American nuclear weapons on its soil, and the hostility is shared by part of the political elite. For example, last February four MEPs (three of them women) managed to enter a military base at Kleine-Brogel in Belgium to denounce the presence of American nuclear bombs on European territory, a keystone of NATO's deterrent.

Moreover, a majority of Europeans does not consider Russian nuclear weapons to be a major threat to their security, and is willing to envisage other scenarios for guaranteeing collective security. While a reflexive NATO orientation remains very strong in a number of EU countries, including Poland, Romania and the Baltic states, the American ally is no longer seen unanimously as the sole guarantor of collective security. The recent Munich conference revealed that Germany was beginning to question the current shape of the transatlantic partnership, and to envisage strategic autonomy for the EU as a powerful vehicle for its own foreign policy.

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These changes, observed both in public opinion and among the EU's leadership, provide a space for European diplomacy to propose a plan for nuclear de-escalation to the world community. Planned for 2020, the conference to review the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is a good opportunity to advocate an alternative solution to the now-obsolete INF by demanding the withdrawal of American tactical nuclear weapons stationed in four EU countries (Germany, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands), in exchange for an inspection of Russian installations and the withdrawal of the Iskander missiles which Russia recently installed in the Kaliningrad enclave. In this context, a diplomatic initiative supported at least by Paris and Berlin might propose a new treaty to prohibit intermediate nuclear weapons. This treaty would take over from the mutual disarmament initiative launched by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, while opening it up to other states, such as China, Iran, India and Pakistan, which were not part of the INF. It would complement the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), voted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, which has been signed by 70 countries and ratified by 26. This treaty appears to be currently at an impasse, since all the nuclear powers, as well as the NATO member states, have boycotted its adoption.

France and Germany, both members of the UN Security Council and pillars of Europe's political construction, thus

have a historic responsibility. They must combine their efforts so as to preserve multilateralism and construct a new architecture of collective security. The Treaty of Aachen, signed on 22 January 2019, consecrated the ‘indivisible character’ of Franco-German security interests. But resistance will need to be overcome on both sides. France jealously guards the world-power status guaranteed by the nuclear bomb and its seat at the Security Council. As for Germany, very often it continues to count on NATO and the United States to guarantee Europe’s security in order to save on defence spending.

A European doctrine on deterrence

A strategic European doctrine on deterrence is needed in order to anticipate the consequences for the EU’s security of a withdrawal of American tactical nuclear weapons. Bruno Tertrais, deputy director at the Paris-based think tank Foundation for Strategic Research, recently showed that the idea of European deterrence, on the NATO model, was feasible if France and possibly Great Britain – depending on the result of Brexit – were to accept taking the US’s place in guaranteeing the continent’s defence, within the framework of the transatlantic partnership. He argued that this scenario, compatible with the NPT, would allow the creation of an autonomous European pillar as part of NATO’s strategy of planning and sharing nuclear deterrence. Such a scenario could also protect against a possible breakup of the Atlantic alliance following a unilateral US withdrawal or a rejection of American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe by one or several EU countries (for example, Germany or the Netherlands). This would be acceptable if it allowed a simultaneous and significant reduction in the nuclear weapons currently deployed in Europe, to be guaranteed by the creation of a new zone free of tactical nuclear weapons, stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals. Such an advance would help avoid nuclear proliferation in the neighbourhood of the European Union, such as in Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently questioned the NPT’s legitimacy.

By preparing to ensure its own security, including in the nuclear sphere, the EU could emerge from such a crisis stronger and more mature. In demanding the withdrawal of American and Russian nuclear weapons from the European continent, the EU would be defending its own interests while forging its own nuclear security doctrine. To do this, EU member states must no longer accept aligning themselves with the American decision to withdraw from the INF, and must systematically take responsibility for NATO declarations. A reorientation of NATO’s position is a precondition for negotiating with Russia for the withdrawal of all tactical nuclear weapons from European soil. Such a reorientation collides with the reality of Europe’s security and defence policy, which in recent years has seen a new impetus following two ambitious measures proposed by the European Commission for its next multi-annual financial framework (2021-27): the European Defence Fund and the military mobility plan.

Budgeting for security

Officially, these two instruments aim to guarantee “the strategic autonomy of the EU”, as announced in 2016 by the EU’s High Representative for FASP, Federica Mogherini, in her general strategy for the EU. In reality they risk accentuating the EU’s dependence on the United States, since they were designed essentially to complement NATO’s current capacities by avoiding duplication and competing arms systems – for example, the EU has three types of fighter plane. With an initial budget of 500 million euros for the period 2019-20, the European Defence Fund was approved on the night of 22-23 May 2018. A budget of 13 billion euros was planned for the next multi-annual financial framework (2021-27), which the new MEPs will need to approve.

Among other things this fund could support a Franco-German cooperative effort to produce a fighter plane to replace the Rafale by 2040, which would have important implications for the French nuclear deterrent force. The vote by MEPs will take place amid controversy over the opening of the European defence market to non-European companies, and in particular American ones. During negotiations in Brussels, Gordon Sondland, US ambassador to the EU, threatened reprisals if Brussels were to raise obstacles preventing the American defence industry from

taking part in this cooperation initiative. This debate is all the more important given that a major part of NATO's nuclear deterrent budget today falls on countries such as Belgium and Italy, which have bought fighters like the F-16, capable of transporting American tactical nuclear missiles. MEPs will therefore need to ensure that the European Defence Fund does not, under cover of rationalising European industrial cooperation, end up simply accentuating the EU's dependence on the norms and requirements of the American defence industry and on the NATO strategy of nuclear planning and sharing.

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There also remain doubts over the 6.5 billion euros allocated under the European Commission's forthcoming transport budget to promote the use of EU infrastructure by NATO troops. At the joint declaration of the European Council president, the EU Commission president and the NATO secretary general, on 10 July 2018, this objective of military mobility was made a priority for the purposes of cooperation between the EU and NATO. This civil-military initiative, supervised by the transport commission in Brussels, makes 6.5 billion euros available for adapting European infrastructure for purposes of 'military mobility'. This improvement of European military-transport capacity will need to be funded by member states when rebalancing NATO spending to the amount of 2 per cent for each member state (EU members today represent only 20 per cent of the NATO budget).

In more concrete terms, this will mean standardising contradictory regulations across the 28 EU countries, widening or strengthening bridges and tunnels which are too narrow or too weak for NATO's heavy machinery, and also simplifying customs formalities for military operations by harmonising rules concerning the transport of dangerous military goods. According to the report on military mobility adopted by the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee on 7 December 2018, "three of the four participating nations which deploy forces in the framework of NATO's enhanced forward presence on the eastern flank will be outside the European Union from 2019". Therefore, infrastructure will also need to be built in order to guarantee the permanent presence of NATO troops on the continent and the transport of reinforcements from the US, Canada and the UK.

Here too, this military-mobility plan appears dictated by strategic considerations related not so much to the security of the EU and its member states as to the operational demands of an organisation whose main contributors, operationally and financially, are not EU members. It was clearly not European strategic interests that dictated a project aimed explicitly at promoting the passage across the European continent of military vehicles belonging to non-EU armies. In addition, this plan raises purely strategic questions, given that today it is widely accepted that the foremost military threats are to be found in asymmetric or hybrid conflicts, and not the conventional type involving large-scale movements of troops and tanks across continents as during the Cold War.

Towards a collective security architecture

More than three years after having made the concept of 'strategic autonomy' the keystone of its strategy, the EU and in particular its new Commission find themselves at a crossroads. Presented as major advances for the EU, the European Defence Fund and the military mobility plan in fact risk strengthening the influence of the United States and NATO on Europe's security and defence policy. These new devices look set to complement NATO's current strategy of nuclear sharing and planning by ensuring the long-term dependence of the EU's armies, industry and strategic infrastructure on American military and industrial interests. The European Parliament thus has a historic

responsibility. It must make the financing of the European Defence Fund and the military mobility plan conditional on the EU and its members obtaining genuine strategic autonomy.

The European Defence Fund and the mobility plan must serve a coherent European strategy which does not pass over the question of nuclear deterrence, which underlies NATO's budgetary demands. This strategy must allow for a rapid response to the growing threat of a new nuclear arms race between the United States, Russia and China, but also to all the various threats accumulating in the EU's neighbourhood and occasionally inside the EU too. Strategic autonomy for the EU will therefore mean defining a common security and defence doctrine which includes a plan for nuclear de-escalation.

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In this sense, a Franco-German initiative on nuclear disarmament would allow other members of the EU to become aware of their common interests. Such a European strategy of de-escalation would also open a space for multilateral discussion in response to the threats to collective security posed everywhere by authoritarian unilateralism, as demonstrated by the diplomatic impasse in Syria following the war crimes committed by President Bashar al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies, as well as by the US withdrawal from the Vienna Iran nuclear accord, which has fed conflicts in the Persian Gulf and the humanitarian disaster in Yemen.

This common strategy would also allow the EU to develop tools of concertation to avoid the disastrous consequences of their absence in the face of new threats, as two recent examples show. In Ukraine, differing positions on the Russian threat and on the role for NATO to play in resolving the crisis made the EU impotent when confronted by the annexation of Crimea and the military stalemate in the Donbass. In Libya, rivalry between France and Italy recently helped accelerate the partition of the country, against a background of European paralysis in the face of the migrant crisis.

Faced with these new threats, the European Union must propose to the international community a collective security architecture based on multilateral cooperation, peaceful conflict resolution and preventive disarmament. These three pillars were the basis of the reconciliation between Europe's peoples, who had long been torn apart by continental and world wars. The European Union now has the responsibility to make them into a platform which might constitute, beyond its borders, the basis of common security.



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