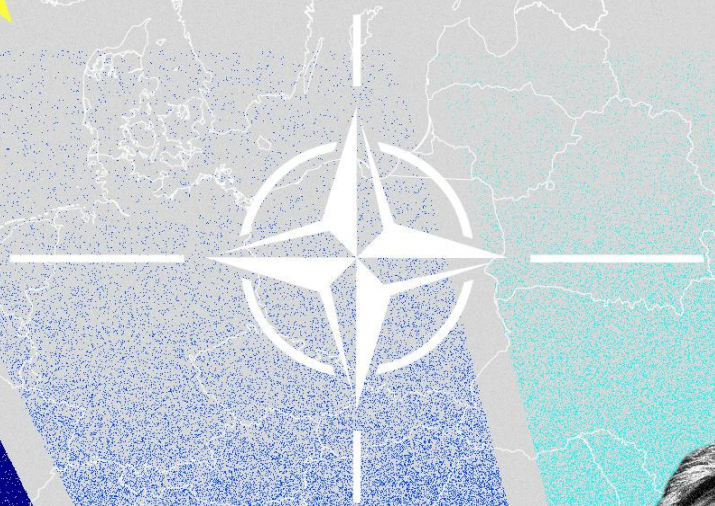


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THE PAST AND FUTURE OF A
UNITED EUROPEAN FORCE

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The past and future of a United European Force

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Abstract

Since the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the idea of establishing a joint European military force has been on the table. There were times when the “Six” of the Old Continent almost reached that goal, but in the end, the fear of giving up such an important part of sovereignty prevailed. The present study aims to give an analysis on the macro level of what steps the European Union has made toward joint defence and discusses the possibilities of further strengthening these ties in the shade of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 once again amplified the voices calling for the establishment of a unified European military force. The idea is not new. It was already raised in the second half of the 20th century by the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951. At that time, supporters of such an enterprise usually argued for it, claiming that a joint military body would minimize the risk of an armed conflict between the involved parties, namely France and Germany. At the same time a united European force might more effectively deter the Soviet Union from further westward expansion. The project, known at the time as the Pleven Plan, aimed to establish a European army of several tens of thousands of soldiers serving alongside national forces but operating under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It would have been created and run from a common budget under a joint command, led by a European Defence Minister. The realization of the Pleven Plan would have also fulfilled the US' intention to rearm West Germany.¹ In 1952, in Paris, the founders of the European Coal and Steel Community – France, Italy, West Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands – signed the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community.² In order for the organization to start its activities, the ratification of the national parliaments was necessary. In France, however, the political leaders changed their opinion and began to see a large-scale surrender of national sovereignty in the treaty. Finally, they decided not to adopt it.³ Therefore, the common defence of Western Europe continued to be guaranteed within the framework of NATO. This has not since changed.

Defence and Closer European Union

The Maastricht Treaty⁴, which entered into force in 1993, established the European Union based on three pillars, of which one was a common foreign and security policy (CFSP).⁵ Until then, the cooperation in these sovereignty-sensitive areas among the member states of the European Economic Community was *ad hoc* and usually limited to negotiations. After the creation of the CFSP, the main place to form an EU foreign and security policy became the Council of Ministers. Moreover, Article B of the common provisions of the treaty already foresaw the possibility of creating a European joint defence in the future.⁶

16 years later, the Treaty of Lisbon⁷ sought to fundamentally reshape the European Union. The pillar structure became a thing of the past, and the CFSP was updated. As part of the treaty, a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was accepted by signatories to the treaty.⁸ In 2011, the diplomatic body of the European Union, the European External Action Service⁹ (EEAS) was founded. Its main tasks are to implement the EU's foreign and security policy and to maintain diplomatic relations with non-EU countries. It is headed by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Lisbon did not create a common military either, but at the same time, the ambitions for intensifying the union's defence capabilities increased. In addition, EU battle groups¹⁰ were established. These are rapidly deployable military units containing approximately 1500 soldiers, with independent operational capabilities. Not later than the tenth day of the green light from the European Council, BGs must be ready to intervene within a six-

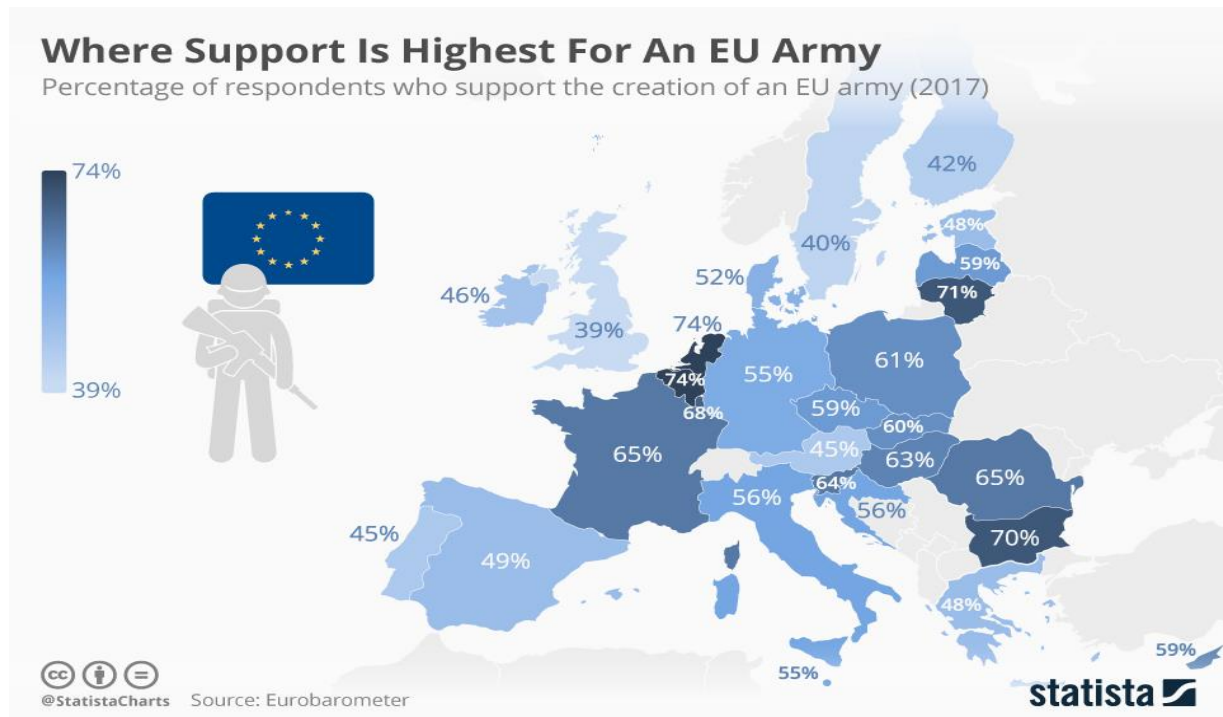
thousand-kilometre radius of Brussels. The battlegroups are financed through the Athena mechanism.¹¹

The two main European challenges of the second decade of the twenty first century were the 2015 migrant crisis and the United Kingdom's departure from the union. In response to these issues, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, already warned in 2016 of the importance of establishing a collective European military force based on a common structure, regiments and command language with the primary task to protect the eastern and southern flanks of the continent. In his speech at a free university in Bálványos (Romania), the Hungarian PM envisioned that the EU would not be able to survive in the long term without a common army. In addition, he emphasized the importance of integrating the military industry into the wider regional economic policy.¹² Orbán's serious commitment to the common defence issue is indicated by the fact that in the past decade, an unprecedented procurement of defence equipment began in Hungary in parallel to which the country's defence industry which has also been dynamically developing and expanding.

Recent Developments

In June 2016, the Global Strategy of the European Union was adopted.¹³ The document set out three strategic priorities: responding to crises and external conflicts, building the capacities of partners and protecting the EU and its citizens.¹⁴ The European Defence Fund¹⁵ was established in 2017, the purpose of which is to increase and help finance the joint defence research and development activities of the EU member states.¹⁶ All of these measures point in the direction of the future emergence of a common European army.

However, there was no political demand for this at the time, and public support for the issue proved to be highly variable. In this context an EU-level survey conducted in 2017 told an interesting story. The survey measured the level of support among the population of each member state for the establishment of a unified European military force. The results was revealing: while 74 percent of the population in the Netherlands and Belgium supported the creation of an EU army, the population of the majority of countries turned out to be much more divided on the issue. In relation to the Visegrád Four, 63% of Hungarians supported the idea, while citizens of Poland favoured the proposal the least (55%). Not surprisingly, the idea was least popular in the United Kingdom (39%), which had already decided to leave the community at the time. However, it is certainly a thought-provoking phenomenon that the British were followed in rejecting the idea by Sweden (40% support) and Finland (42% support). Significantly, these countries have now broken with their previous policy of neutrality because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, they also both applied for NATO membership in 2022.¹⁷



Source: *Statista*¹⁸

On 24 January 2019, in Aachen, on the anniversary of the signing of the Elysée Treaty on the historic French-German reconciliation, the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, and the then Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, signed a new agreement on Franco-German cooperation and integration, which complements the treaty signed by Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer on Franco-German friendship¹⁹ 56 years earlier. According to the Aachen Treaty, the two European powers commit themselves to the development of Europe's military capabilities and coherence, and to coordinating work in this area. All of this includes the continuous approximation and coordination of doctrines at the strategic and tactical levels. According to the document, the defence ministers of the two countries will henceforth meet at least once a month.²⁰ The signing of the treaty is a clear declaration that the common European project will not be undermined due to Brexit.²¹

During the -administration of US President Trump (2016-20), the idea of setting up a common European army emerged again. This time, it was proposed by France in the person of President Emmanuel Macron, but the chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, also publicly supported it.²² Although at that time, none of the European powers had planned to allocate more resources to the development of the armed forces, they felt that solely relying only on the protective umbrella of NATO and the United States could be a luxury in difficult times. Since then, these times have arrived, and in response to the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, European countries are announcing plans to modernize their armed forces and purchase of new military equipment.

Conclusion

However, all this military spending will be done on a national basis, often in competition with European allies. The establishment of a joint European Union army is therefore still not clearly on the European agenda, and it is unlikely that there will be any major changes in the promotion of a common force in the near future. The area is both sensitive and complex, and in addition to a satisfactory settlement of the sovereignty issue and guaranteeing the states' own military security, European states also have other interests. At the top of this agenda is the need to supply the individual member states' national military industry. At the same time, as long as the allied European countries continue to use different varieties of equipment, field interoperability will remain hard, and logistics – primarily maintenance and repair – a nightmare. All this can be clearly observed in Ukraine, where the backbone of the armed forces is made up of devices donated from the West. These assets are rarely identical, and this applies to the type, usage, often even to the ammunition.

If the common European force were to become a realistically achievable goal, it would have to be preceded by a professional-based negotiation process, where agreed standards would be defined and unified. All of this was previously typical of the members of the Warsaw Pact Organisation, which used not only compatible but almost identical equipment. However, in democratic conditions, in today's protectionist world, this is a hardly credible option. What really remains is national armament and self-help. And, as we know from twentieth century history, this can easily lead to an acute security dilemma.

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