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Can a Civilian Power Survive in an Uncivilised World?

Abstract

It is often asserted that European integration is a peace project because it made war between former enemies on the old continent unthinkable. However, when faced with outbreaks of violence just outside its borders, the EU has proven to be paralysed, if not powerless. This is because of its cumbersome decision-making process and the lack of military capabilities at the disposal of the EU's centre. Can a civilian power such as the EU assert its influence in an increasingly volatile, if not uncivil, international environment? This article will argue that the process of creating a European army, if undertaken, will be costly and time consuming. In the meantime, the EU would need to rely chiefly on its normative power, which is being eroded by a surge of illiberal politics.

Keywords: European Foreign and Defence Policy, Normative Power, European Army, War and Peace, Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP, Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, International Order

Introduction

The EU has been a civilian power since its inception even though the world around it was anything but civilised (Bull, 1982). The Soviet threat in those times was no lesser than the Russian threat currently, and the American nuclear umbrella could never be taken for granted. The Cold War question of whether the US would sacrifice New York for (West)

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Berlin was then and still is without a convincing answer (Kaiser et al., 1982). And yet, the EU has, in time, become a powerful regional and global actor, if not an empire of a sort (Marks, 2012). Although Europe has never had an army, its economic and normative strength has both attracted and/or frightened many other actors (Clarkson, 2021). Moreover, no other actor, including the most impressive military powers, has repeatedly enlarged its territory the way the EU has (Segers, van Hecke, 2024). Clearly, the EU has proved the point that laws, diplomacy, and economic power can often do more good than swords (Lukes, 2007; Diez, 2013). One therefore wonders why the topic of the common European security and defence has become so prominent after decades of being sidelined, if not completely excluded, from the European agenda (Maurer et al., 2024).

To solve this puzzle, the article will review the evolution of Europe's ambitions and threat perceptions, and try to understand why steadily-growing political expectations in the military field have not been matched by adequate capabilities. In the concluding section, the article will argue that the EU will have to cope with the unstable environment without a sizable military force for some time to come. This represents a greater problem than before because the EU is declining economically, and its normative appeal has largely vanished with the resurgence of anti-liberal politics.

The Security Rationale

The ambition to create a collective European defence has been persistent since the early years of European integration. In fact, shortly after WW2, it appeared that military issues rather than economic issues would form the backbone of the integration project. In 1948, the UK, France, and the Benelux countries created the Western Union [WU], often referred to as the Brussels Treaty Organisation (BTO), to launch defence collaboration between them. A few years later, the headquarters, personnel, and plans of the WU's defence arm, the Western Union Defence Organisation, were transferred to the newly-established North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, a new project was launched simultaneously by Prime Minister René Pleven which included France, Italy, the Benelux countries, and West Germany – the European Defence Community (EDC). The EDC blueprint envisaged a pan-European military (divided into national components), a common budget, common arms, and centralised military procurement and institutions. Although the leading French politicians were behind the EDC project, it was ultimately defeated in the French Parliament which objected to it, likely

due to concerns it was too federalist in its ambition. From then on, the project of European integration progressed chiefly in the economic field informed by a plausible thesis that peace can be enhanced by trade and not just by military strength.[1] The important questions have remained, however. Will trade by itself guarantee (Western) European security? Can individual European countries provide military security on their own? Can Europe always count on the United States to defend its interests and well-being? Or should we rely on a new type of great powers' *directoire* to do the job? An honest analyst would most likely give negative answers to all these questions, and the past events of the last few decades would vindicate this position.

The first major shock came after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was obviously the good news for Europe's security, as Russia withdrew soldiers from Germany and several other states in Central and Eastern Europe. However, European populations living in the space that Russia considered its "near abroad" and their quest for independent and democratic statehood could very likely cause a spiral of violence affecting the entire continent. Moreover, the unification of Germany could not but undo the existing balance of power in Europe. Additionally, there was also a legitimate concern regarding nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists.

Having no army at its disposal, the EU responded to these challenges with a policy of EU enlargement, aimed at stabilising or pacifying the space previously occupied by the Red Army westward of the River Bug (Anghel, Jones, 2024). Those who aspired to join the European "oasis" of peace and stability had to settle their territorial disputes, introduce market reforms, and install democracy guaranteeing the rights of national minorities. Russia was invited to participate in various pan-European cooperative initiatives, while European and American political leaders collaborated to persuade Ukraine to relinquish its nuclear weapons (washingtonpost.com, 2022).

Initially, it appeared as though Europe's power of attraction would magically make the ghosts of nationalism and imperialism disappear. The policy of EU enlargement was even called the greatest asset of the EU foreign and security policy. However, the war that erupted on the ashes of the former Yugoslavia quickly made Europe realise that nationalism was far from dormant. A similar observation can be made regarding Russian-style imperialism, evident in regions such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Chechnya, as well as in Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The informal

[1] It should be noted that between 1955 and 2011, there was also the largely inactive Western European Union (see Rohan, 2014, p. 422).

network of consultations established in the 1970s under the unassuming title of European Political Cooperation clearly proved inadequate in addressing the complex challenges confronting Europe in the 1990s. A common European foreign and security policy was no longer a federalist quirk; it had become a necessity. The question then became how to implement this badly needed project – in which form, by whom, and for which price. The path chosen was not surprising to students of European politics, as the policy adopted was gradual, institutional, and highly ambiguous.

The Security Architecture

"A common foreign and security policy is hereby established" was proclaimed proudly in the 1991 (Maastricht) Treaty on the European Union.[2] A special institutional pillar was created in this field where the principle of unanimity still applied although the Treaty urged Member States to "support the Union's external and security policy actively and unreservedly in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity." The subsequent Treaty of Amsterdam, adopted a few years later, introduced the position of High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, tasked with coordinating and representing the EU's foreign policy. The Treaty of Lisbon abolished the pillar structure and established the European External Action Service (EEAS). The High Representative now leads the EEAS while also serving as Vice-President of the European Commission, with responsibilities spanning areas such as trade, development, neighbourhood policy, and humanitarian aid.

Additionally, there is an expanding "soup" of security-related institutions, with mysterious acronyms but sensible functions. Notable among these are the European Defence Agency (EDA), the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), and the EU Defence and Procurement Incentives Programme (EDIRPA), which aims to encourage cooperation in defence procurement among Member States. Formally, the EU also maintains battle groups – multinational military units, typically comprising 1,500 personnel each, which are integral to the European Union's military rapid reaction capacity (EU RDC).

According to EU official documents, these institutions seek to preserve peace, strengthen international security, promote international cooperation, develop and consolidate democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (European Union,

[2] Title V, Article J of the Maastricht Treaty. The Treaty was formally adopted in 1993, after a lengthy process of ratification by the national parliaments of Member States.

n.d.). The list of specific tasks is more telling. For instance, the ASAP aims at ramping-up ammunition production capacity across Europe and, through this, help Member States refill their stocks and deliver ammunition to Ukraine by anticipating bottlenecks and shortages in defence supply chains (European Commission, ASAP, n.d.). EDIRPA seeks to incentivise cooperation in defence procurement between Member States to jointly coordinate and acquire the most urgent and critical needs with regard to defence products, especially those made more urgent due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine (European Commission, EDIRPA, n.d.).

Some words of caution or clarification are needed here. European security and defence architecture is designed to forge closer cooperation between the EU's Member States. This architecture does not aim at creating a European army with EU battlegroups holding symbolic rather than practical value. According to Josep Borrell, who was the head of most of the above-mentioned institutions, "Defence is and will remain for the foreseeable future an exclusive competence of EU Member States" (eda.europa.eu, 2024).[3] Moreover, cooperation between Member States in the defence field is still rudimental despite some progress having been observed. For instance, only 18% of EU Member States' defence procurement is conducted in a collaborative manner. Since the beginning of the war against Ukraine, nearly 80% of the EU's military equipment has been procured outside Europe (eda.europa.eu, 2024).

To summarise, the EU institutional framework in the field of security and defence represents an impressive architectural design offering the EU Member States the necessary tools to utilise their military capabilities for common European endeavours. Whether these tools are indeed utilised depends on the Member States' free will. Put differently, the EU's impressive architectural object is still hostage to the EU's national whim. Unlike in the pre-1991 period, the EU is allowed and even encouraged to forge common defence efforts, but the sovereigntist turn in Member States' domestic politics makes common endeavours challenging. If Member States prioritise national, often self-interested concerns over the collective good, this new framework may remain largely theoretical.

Threat Perceptions

Actors do not enhance their defence capabilities merely to elevate their ranking in the annual military balance compiled by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (iiss.org, 2024). Indeed, their investments

[3] In 2019–2024 Borrell served as the Head of the European Defence Agency (EDA) and High Representative/ Commission Vice-President.

in this sensitive field are driven by ever-changing threat perceptions. Those perceptions have evolved dramatically in recent years. At the time when creation of the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) was being seriously discussed, the major preoccupation was the unravelling of the cold war "order" with its apparent, albeit unjust, stability. As Pierre Lellouche forcefully argued: "Once again, Europe is characterised by a pivotal and strong Germany, a backward and unstable Russia, and a large number of small, weak states. And again, France and Great Britain are incapable by themselves of balancing German power or of checking Russian instability, let alone restructuring the entire European order around a Franco-British axis" (Lellouche, 1993).

Solutions to these threat perceptions were not sought through military build-up, but rather in diplomatic manoeuvring reminiscent of the time of Bismark and Metternich. For instance, President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Thacher engaged in covert discussions with Soviet President Gorbachev in order to influence, if not entirely prevent, German unification (Fabra, 1991).

The wars in the former Yugoslavia made the EU realise that it needs military means to effectively engage in crisis prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict peacebuilding (Federal Foreign Office, 2008). The atrocities caused by these wars not only raised humanitarian concerns, but also created the perception that Europe cannot isolate itself from any spillover effects of violent conflicts on its borders. The 1998 Franco-British declaration issued in St Malo explicitly called for creating "the EU capacity for autonomous decision-making and action, backed up by credible military forces, in order to respond to international crises when the Atlantic Alliance is not involved" (cvce.eu, 1998). The subsequent decision of the 1999 EU summit in Helsinki to possess, by 2003, the autonomous ability to deploy 60,000 troops in 60 days for an operation lasting as long as one year was taken in the same spirit (European Parliament, 1999). This force, which was agreed upon but never realised, was intended to manage international crises and provide humanitarian assistance to those in need.

The resurgence of Russian imperial power politics culminating with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has made the EU realise that it too could be a target. In fact, the Kremlin conceived the Western help to the besieged Ukraine an act of hostility that ought to be sanctioned. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Layen, spelled out the new threat perceptions and the way to address them quite boldly: "For the first time in decades our freedom is under threat. It is our responsibility to do all that is necessary to protect our European citizens.

Protecting Europe is Europe's duty. I believe now is therefore the time to build a true European Defence Union" (European Commission, 2024).

Official statements reflected public mood since 2022. According to a recent survey, "For 28% of EU citizens, the war in Ukraine was one of the two most important issues facing the EU in 2024 – the other was immigration which, in part, was also linked to the ongoing war" (europarl.europa.eu, 2024). The situation was perceived as particularly worrisome in the Member States bordering Ukraine and Russia. In 2023, 57.3% of Poles viewed wars as the most significant events, highlighting the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (27.1%) (CBOS, 2024). In January 2024, the government of Finland published data showing that approximately 80% of respondents expressed concern over the escalation of the Ukraine war; concern regarding a potential Russian attack on Finland has increased by 5 percentage points to 68% (Finnish Government, 2024). In Germany, "a possible Russian attack worries 46% of respondents" (Bild.de, 2024).

The evolution of threat perceptions demanded new, creative, if not bold EU responses to reassure Europe's citizens about their security. While abstract concerns about the balance of power are one thing, the fear of a potential external invasion is quite another. Concerns about the fate of neighbours requires different solutions than concerns about safeguarding Europe's own security. The question is whether the EU is able to forge policies adequate to the rising threat perceptions.

Capabilities and Expectations

When looking at Eurobarometer data from 2024, one may conclude that the EU fully meets public expectations in the field of security and defence. Indeed, 77% of Europeans are in favour of a common defence and security policy between EU countries, while 71% of EU citizens agree that the EU needs to reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment. At the same time, 69% of EU citizens are in favour of a common foreign policy of the Member States and the same percentage believes that the EU has the sufficient power and tools to defend the economic interests of Europe in the global economy (European Union, 2024b). According to the same survey, 72% of EU citizens support economic sanctions on the Russian government, companies, and individuals, and 70% agree with providing financial support to Ukraine. Six in ten approve of the EU financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine and of the EU granting candidate status to Ukraine.

However, the Eurobarometer surveys do not reveal whether the EU security architecture represents a meaningful defence shield rather than

merely a fragile *façade*. Nor do they explain why citizens supporting common European defence often vote for sovereigntist parties who prioritise national rather than collective interests. Although a common foreign and security policy exists, all important decisions require the unanimity of 27 Member States and, on a number of occasions, even Hungary, a relatively small Member State, has been able to block the EU's common endeavours. Even if all Member States agree to do something within the European framework, they have to rely on national contributions in arms and funding. For instance, the Member States created the European Defence Agency, but they did not fund it. They agreed to create European battlegroups, but they are small, temporary, and dependent on national contributions. The 1999 decision to have 60,000 troops under the European command was never implemented. By 2023, defence expenditures of only eight out of twenty-seven Member States reached or exceeded the 2% NATO target.

Member States' inability to bridge their national differences prevented a bold response to previous Russian invasions, most notably the annexation of Crimea (Howorth, 2017). When faced with the full scale Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022 Member States showed a much better degree of coherence, but this has not resulted in further integration as was the case during the Covid and financial crises (Börzel, 2023). Some authors explained the absence of further integration in the defence field by the limited and asymmetrical security threat perceptions (Genschel, 2022). However, a more credible explanation lies in Member States' determination to retain their sovereign powers, especially in the sensitive field of security and defence. This does not bode well for the prospect of a genuine European Defence Union with its own autonomous military capability.

The public, however, seems to be in favour of a European army. For instance, a 2022 YouGov poll revealed that the majority of citizens in the 16 EU Member States studied were in favour of a European fighting force. Even 34% of British respondents were in favour of such an army, despite 35% opposing it (Smith, 2022).[4] But again, these surveys are unable to explain why the prospect of a European army has not materialised for the last seven decades despite plausible rationale, public support, and mounting external pressures.

Capabilities have both material and ideational aspects. While Europe is not a giant in terms of its military assets, it is by no means a dwarf either. The number of military personnel across EU Member States amounts to 2 million (statista.com, 2024). This is much less than the 3.4 million

[4] The 2017 Eurobarometer poll revealed that 74% of respondents in the Netherlands and Belgium support an EU army. In France and Germany, the share in favour stood at 65 and 55 percent respectively.

extant at the end of the Cold War, but Europe's soldiers are much better equipped than in 1989. Moreover, with a Labour government in the UK, one can expect a greater level of synergy between the EU and the UK than was the case under Conservative governments.

The major challenge for the EU has always been a definition of common interests that emerges from a complicated system of inter-governmental bargaining among states with differing histories, geographies, strategic cultures, and resources. In the past, the plurality of interests emerging from these local differences has made it easier to conduct foreign military operations through different coalitions of the willing and able. Some of these operations have been quite successful; consider, for instance, the Italian-led Operation Alba in Albania. Orchestrating pan-European operations conducted by a truly European army would not only require investments in a common military hardware, but also a greater sense of common purpose than experienced so far (Friesendorf, Neubauer, Schroeder, 2024). Such a common purpose is easier to declare than manifest in combat situations. If the EU struggles to reach consensus on a common foreign policy on numerous occasions, can the armed forces count on a clear mandate for military engagement? Can those Member States that contribute the most personnel ignore the positions of those whose contributions are symbolic? How can the EU prevent military operations from becoming hostage to the intergovernmental bargaining process, which is often complex and lengthy?

The desired structure and purpose of a European army is also prone to contestation. Should the goal be to create a unified EU army, integrating the 27 national armed forces of all the Member States into a single, cohesive force? Or would it be more pragmatic to combine only the more capable national armies, potentially including the UK as well? Perhaps the modest idea of creating a European intervention force is the best solution, at least at the initial stage. This could amount to the implementation of the abovementioned Helsinki Headline Goals of 1999. Would such a force effectively address current threat perceptions? A European intervention force would likely be suited for peacekeeping operations rather than the direct defence of the EU's territory. The latter objective is more ambitious and likely necessitates a nuclear component (Verstraete, 2024). Would France agree to extend its nuclear umbrella over the European space? Would such an umbrella be sufficiently plausible? This brings us, to employ the metaphor, to the elephant in the room – namely, the United States of America and its sizable nuclear deterrence.

The EU is a global competitor to the United States in the field of trade, but in the military domain, the EU is clearly subordinate to

America, with limited, if any, leverage. In fact, many EU Member States, such as the Netherlands and Poland, were traditionally more inclined to outsource their security to the United States rather than to Europe. Not surprisingly, successive U.S. administrations have tended to define their security priorities independently and have expected their European allies to assist in their implementation. This was harshly manifested at the start of the second Trump administration in 2025 (Ross et al., 2025). The EU should obviously resist any unilateral American policies when it comes to the old continent, but the asymmetry of military power between Europe and the United States imposes notable constraints on the ongoing transatlantic dialogue, let alone bargaining. Whether a European army will strengthen or weaken America's commitment to Europe's security is an open question. Much will depend on whether the European efforts are perceived by America as burden sharing with no aspiration to challenge the US leadership in the field of security and defence.

Conclusions – How to Make Europe Secure?

It is often asserted that European integration serves as a peace project, having rendered war between former adversaries, particularly Germany and France, unthinkable. The EU's pacifying impact outside its borders is also being praised. Indeed, the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the EU because "for over six decades [it] contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy, and human rights in Europe" (nobelprise.org, 2012). There is no doubt that the EU has created an economic and legal framework in which peace could prevail. However, when faced with the outbreaks of violence just outside its borders, the EU has proved to be paralysed, if not powerless (Zielonka, 1998). This was certainly the case during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and, to a certain extent, during the wars in the former Soviet Union. The latest Russian fully-fledged invasion on Ukraine has made Europe reconsider its predominantly civilian nature. Can a civilian-power Europe assert its influence in the uncivilised world of today? The EU's major assets such as trade and laws are better suited to policies advocated by Hugo Grotius or Immanuel Kant, but ill-suited to policies that have been advocated by Niccolò Machiavelli or Thomas Hobbes (Hassner, 1994). If Europe is reverting to a state of national ambitions, manipulation, and aggression, a largely civilian power such as the EU may well be doomed. Put less dramatically, a civilian-power EU is poorly suited for coping with an uncivilised environment of today. The question is, therefore, what can be done about this apparent powerlessness?

To start with, a civilian power such as the present-day EU is far from powerless. The EU's economic and diplomatic leverage has proven highly effective in its unstable neighbourhood, especially after the fall of the Soviet empire, and, more recently, after the 2022 Russian invasion on Ukraine (Riddervold, Rieker, 2024). While the EU lacks a standing army, its trade policies and regulatory frameworks have effectively pacified the external environment on a number of occasions, as notably demonstrated in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the armed forces of EU Member States such as France, Sweden, and Poland are far from insignificant. Additionally, nearly all EU Member States are members of NATO, which has effectively protected its members from external aggression for several decades. Of course, NATO membership is not without cost. Furthermore, American and European interests often diverge. However, the EU's efforts to reduce its dependence on the United States cannot be accomplished quickly or cheaply, either in financial or political terms (Heisbourg, 2024). Put bluntly, a divorce between Europe and the United States is not a viable option for Europe at present. The question is, however, whether Europe should seek more military independence from America. Should the EU aspire to be a fully-fledged military actor with its own army?

The first question can be answered in the affirmative in a most definite way. The EU should possess military means to forge its collective interests that can, at times, diverge from those of the United States (Kassoti, Wessel, 2023). The second question, however, requires a more nuanced and potentially ambiguous response. The creation of a European army would require years of substantial financial and organisational investments, and rather than pursuing pompous visions of a European Defence Union, Member States should focus on fulfilling the commitments they have already made in the areas of military production and procurement (Loss, Mehrer, 2023; Wolff et al., 2024). Member States should finally prioritise the creation of a substantial peacekeeping intervention force, which could in time acquire a peace enforcement capability. And there are good reasons to seriously consider the Polish-Finnish-Lithuanian project of the Eastern Shield (polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu, 2024; also Jastrzębska, 2024). Furthermore, the introduction of majority voting in the field of defence should be supported through new treaties. Once tangible progress (rather than declarative progress) is achieved in these areas, the EU can consider advancing further, ideally in consultation with its American ally. Symbolic politics in the field of defence is more perilous than in any other domain. Therefore, it is crucial to avoid making commitments that we do not intend to honour (Nielsen, 2024). A gradual step-by-step approach to Europe's defence is therefore recommended, because elevating public

expectations may lead to a false sense of security. And we should never forget that the EU's true assets are normative, not military (Jones, 2024). If the EU is no longer perceived as a champion of its citizens' freedom and well-being, its capacity to influence the external environment will be significantly diminished. A self-interested and insular Europe would struggle to find support beyond its borders. A divided Europe, preoccupied with its own internal challenges, would be unable to effectively leverage its collective assets. The EU was at its most efficient in global politics when it promoted open borders for goods, money, services, and labour. The EU was highly respected in the world when it championed such causes as democracy, human rights, and diplomatic multilateralism. Abandoning this path would erode the EU's normative strength without necessarily augmenting its material (military) prowess.

The world beyond Europe's borders has become a dangerous place once again, and one wonders whether the EU will rise to the occasion. Europe cannot ignore the prophetic words of the 1954 Robert Schumann Declaration: "Peace cannot be safeguarded without making creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which we are threatened" (European Union, 2024a). If an integrated Europe is confronted with an existential threat, it must begin to take security seriously while also leveraging its normative strengths. The current anti-liberal, sovereigntist turn observed in certain Member States will hinder Europe's ability to assert its influence.

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