

From NATO to European Military: A Herculean Task



Picture Credit: Flamingotech

“Good alliances are made of strong, capable partners”

These words, spoken by former U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper, hold profound significance for countries striving to ensure their national security by forming robust military alliances. A truly strong alliance has no weak links; each member must be individually capable and committed. Extreme variation in military prowess within an alliance can impose undue burdens on a few nations, potentially leading to an uneven distribution of responsibilities and, in crises, the possible collapse of the alliance itself.

Unfortunately, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is one such organisation, where the United States often finds itself sharing the major burden of securing Europe. This is not due to a lack of capacity among Western European nations, which possess cutting-edge technological resources to build formidable militaries. Rather, it appears these nations have delegated much of their security responsibilities to the U.S.

Historically, the U.S. has been the backbone of NATO, ensuring European defence against any threat especially Russian aggression. However, the US under President Trump has made it clear that he intends to end what he calls Europe’s “free ride,” insisting that European nations take responsibility for their own security. With the exception of the UK,

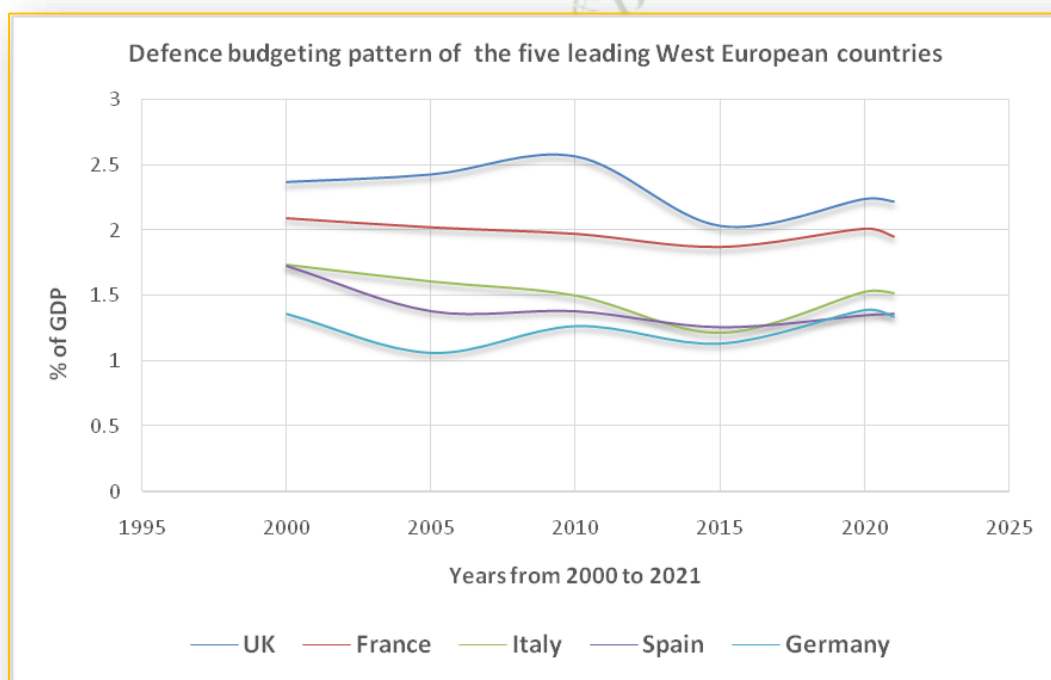
France, and Italy, few European countries possess a military infrastructure capable of resisting any perceived Russian threat without U.S. support.

The only logical way out of this quagmire is creation of an unified European military that is a perfect alternative to NATO.

Threats drive nations to build their militaries. Threats also drive nations to form alliances.

A successful strategy necessitates a balanced blend of both approaches; i.e. all countries having a strong military of their own and ensure their compatibility with other militaries in the continent so that an unified continental force can take the place of NAT. Regrettably, in the case of Europe, particularly among the economically advanced Western European nations, the years following the Cold War saw an ever-increasing reliance on the warm EU-NATO relations, while substantially reducing investment in their military. This shift stemmed from the desire to capitalize on the newfound peace following the collapse of the Soviet Union. European nations sought to leverage what was termed the "Peace Dividend," redirecting funds allocated for defence towards pressing social and developmental initiatives.

The accompanying chart illustrates a notable trend in defence spending as a percentage of GDP among the five major Western European powers. Before the 1990s, these countries allocated considerable portions of their budgets to fortify their military capabilities. However, with the end of the Cold War and a diminished perceived threat, it became natural for nations to significantly decrease defence expenditures. Nevertheless, it's crucial to recognize that such shifts in strategic doctrines were made possible by the presence of overarching military power of the United States, which provided assurances of continued security.



This study focuses on the truncation of militaries of the Western European countries, the implications of such drastic moves, and the short and long-term benefits of setting up a Unified European Command in the face of rapidly emerging threats not only in the European theatre but also on the global stage.

Unified European Military

The basic argument behind creating a joint military is the need for collective defence. Individually countries can collaborate, complementing their strengths. The East European countries which are members of the European Union can be in a position to amalgamate their manpower with the superior technological platforms available to countries in west Europe.

If Europe can economically unite itself through the European Union, and even work out a common currency, why not create a standing united EU military for its security?

In their pursuit of capitalizing on what was termed the Peace Dividend, the strategic planners in West European nations either faltered or wilfully ignored the ramifications of the power vacuum following the Soviet Union's collapse. The onset of peace and calm across Europe led these countries to mistakenly perceive the transition from a bipolar world, balanced by two superpowers, to a scenario where only one superpower remained dominant. With the US at the helm of NATO in Europe, Western European leaders grew complacent regarding national security concerns.

However, it must be kept in mind that history is replete with instances of voids left by the collapse of dominant powers being replaced by others.

Unexpected turn of events

While European countries basked in the comfort of Peace Dividend, they were rudely awakened in 2017 by President Trump's assertion that the United States could no longer bear the sole responsibility for Europe's security. Trump questioned why American taxpayers should bear the burden of security for prosperous Europeans. Though Trump's successor, Biden, reversed many of his policies, opting not to cease US military aid to Europe, post-Trump, Europeans realized that they can no longer take the US security cover for granted. Having said so, President Biden's lenient views on Europe's security helped the countries buy some time to reorganize their policies toward national security. Europe started seriously looking into ways to adhere to NATO stipulations of defence expenditure equivalent to 2% of GDP expected of the member countries.

But with return of President Trump to office in January, 2025 matters have come to a head again.

In February 2022, Europeans faced yet another jolt as Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, shattering over three decades of peace and tranquillity in Europe. This abrupt collapse of peace sent nations scrambling for safety. Sweden and Finland, who had long resisted joining NATO despite sharing borders with Russia, found themselves rushing to NATO headquarters in Brussels hastily seeking its membership.

On February 28th, 2025 a diplomatic fracas broke out at the White House during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit, leaving the world in shock. The meltdown between Zelenskyy, U.S. President Donald Trump, and Vice President J.D. Vance played out before the media, raising acute doubts about Ukraine's future as it continues to endure relentless Russian attacks for the fourth consecutive year.

Ukraine's defence remains fragile and heavily dependent on U.S. military aid. As anticipated, just days after the public confrontation, Trump suspended all U.S. arms assistance to Ukraine. Additionally, the CIA has halted critical battlefield intelligence-sharing with the Ukrainian military. Reports also suggest that the Trump administration is pressuring the British intelligence agency MI6 to follow suit. With mounting U.S. pressure, Zelenskyy is increasingly left with little choice but to negotiate peace on American terms—a move he has resisted from the start.

Besides the war in Ukraine, conflicts are simmering in various regions around the world, potentially impacting Europe both directly and indirectly. After a period of relative peace, the Middle East has once again descended into violence. Meanwhile, tensions between China and Taiwan continue to escalate daily. This raises a critical question: Is Europe equipped to handle these crises independently, or must it depend on the United States for security support?

By entrusting its security concerns to the U.S., Europeans may have severely compromised European sovereignty.

Depleted Assets & Reduced Manpower

Maintaining a military is a continuous process. It involves not only human resource management but also technology upgrades and maintenance of stockpiles of arms and ammunition, medicines, strategic fuel go-downs, and food rations. The Ukraine war seems to have exposed the technologically advanced European countries, as to how susceptible they are to wars and conflicts. The rush to exploit the Peace Dividend has left glaring gaps in their present military structure compared to the last days of the Cold War.

For instance, the British military in 1990 stood at 306,000 regular and active personnel. Presently the number has almost been halved to 174,000. Today the number of French military personnel is a mere 41% of what it used to be in 1990. At the end of the Cold War, the Royal Navy used to maintain fifty-one battle-ready destroyers and frigates and twenty-nine submarines. Today the figure stands at lowly seventeen and eleven respectively. Compared to the British, the French Navy has been much more frugal in its drive to reduce its assets. The French had 25 destroyers and frigates along with 15 submarines in 1990 compared to its present strength of 22 destroyers and 9 submarines.

Not only the British and the French the other West European countries had fared no better. The Swedes used to boast the world's fourth-largest air force in the 60s. Today it has just 212 military aircraft at its disposal. Compare this to the current fourth-largest air force, the Indian Air Force which maintains 2,296 aircraft in its fleet. The Swedes have also reduced their manpower by thirty-three percent.

No compromise in technology upgrades

Contrary to their desire to squeeze the maximum juice from the Peace Dividend by significantly reducing the numbers of military assets and personnel, Europeans surprisingly are unflinching as far as the advancement of defence technology is concerned. Remarkably, the military platforms with which they equip their substantially reduced military be it ships, aircraft, battle tanks, etc are of cutting-edge technology that rivals the best in the world. The defence items produced in the UK, France, Sweden, Germany Spain, and Italy are highly pursued in the international arms market.

Similarly, there has been no compromise as far as the training of their military personnel is concerned. High levels of education in these countries have allowed their soldiers to easily get tuned to top-end military training that is mired in technology. In the era of AI and drone warfare such training is mandatory.

The only issue with Europeans in the face of emerging threats is their drastically reduced military infrastructure which over time can turn out to be their Achilles heel.

Unification of European armed forces to address the drawbacks of downsizing

Size does matter

Undoubtedly, superior technology provides a significant advantage to any nation's armed forces. Yet, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has demonstrated that sheer numbers can be decisive. By the end of 2023, Russia had launched 7,400 missiles and 3,400 Shahed suicide drones at Ukraine. This barrage has overwhelmed Ukraine's air defence systems, with the country's civilian population bearing the brunt of the Russian attack. Presently Russia occupies over 20% of Ukrainian territory.

In contrast, consider the massive barrage of 300 missiles Iran launched against Israel on the night of April 13, 2024. Another similar attack with 200 missiles by Iran on Israel took place on October 1, 2024. Despite the scale of these attacks, they failed to make any impact on Israel. A swift and coordinated response from U.S., British, and Israeli forces effectively neutralized the Iranian missiles, showcasing the effectiveness of not only advanced but also collaborative defensive actions that ramped up numbers at lightning speeds.

A standing unified European military backed by superior technology and augmented numbers can be a strong deterrent for its adversaries.

Impediments

It would be an understatement to claim that defence cooperation between the EU countries will be challenging. There are many hurdles to face. While it's tough to foresee every obstacle in advance, this study has attempted to identify some of the key challenges ahead.

1. Political Will.

Despite its benefits, persuading nations to relinquish control of their military forces—both personnel and assets—for a unified military structure demands considerable political will, tact, and the ability of leaders to inspire their citizens to embrace a broader vision. While this transformation will undoubtedly take time, decision-makers must be prepared to make tough decisions. The European Union must take the lead in this endeavour. Initially, specialists must come together to design the fundamental framework of this military structure. The very act of experts convening to discuss the outlines of such a structure will indicate the European Union's commitment to this cause.

2. NATO presence.

However, the presence of NATO, which primarily safeguards European security, may hinder the development of a distinct European army. The reality is that NATO's existence is a key reason Europe has not already established a joint military. For some, this could mean duplicating infrastructure. Yet, as previously mentioned, NATO's future role is likely to be more influenced by domestic politics in the United States rather than by Europe's specific security needs.

3. National pride.

National pride also poses a significant challenge in establishing a European military. A historical example is from World War II when there was significant debate in the U.S. over whether an American general or a British officer should lead the Allied forces in Europe; ultimately, General Eisenhower was appointed as the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. Similar challenges may arise in the context of a European military, which must be addressed through robust institutional structures. The selection of military leaders should be based solely on merit.

4. Vendor challenges.

Once the unified military structure is established, selecting vendors for the supply of costly equipment and platforms can pose a significant challenge. Companies are anticipated to engage in vigorous lobbying efforts with their respective governments to promote domestic products for the unified military, thereby influencing the economies and job markets of their nations. These industries not only generate employment opportunities but also play a crucial role in the socio-economic prosperity of the regions in which they operate.

5. Technology & Nuclear issues.

Addressing the diversity in the capabilities of different nations poses a significant challenge, particularly within a unified military framework. Some countries boast advanced technology, while others lag. Integrating this variability into a cohesive military strategy presents a real dilemma. Moreover, France and the UK possess strategic advantages in the form of nuclear arsenals. Determining how these assets can be leveraged to safeguard other nations and extend deterrence capabilities requires careful consideration and resolution.

The Europeans before had exhibited a strong desire and will to try and amalgamate their economies despite the varying cultures and politics of different countries. Their determination led to the creation of a common European currency. Now is the time for them to exhibit the same resoluteness to create a common military.

Past Efforts

Efforts to unify military forces in Europe are not new. In 1999, a semblance of a unified EU defence policy started taking shape with the introduction of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which primarily focused on creation of joint forces for overseas operations in alignment with the United Nations Charter's provisions for using international forces as peacekeepers in conflict zones. In addition to supporting NATO's joint missions, the CSDP encompasses the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which involves 26 of the 27 EU members and aims for incremental structure of military integration, potentially paving the way toward a unified European military.

The question remains: Could PESCO evolve into a comprehensive European military with its unified command structure and fully integrated forces across the army, navy, air force, space, and cyber force? Can such a military organization have its own recruitment systems, training protocols, and chain of command? Although achieving these goals may seem ambitious, they are not beyond reach.

Currently, there is significant discussion both within governmental circles and publicly about the appropriate form and function of a potential European military force and how it might serve all EU members effectively. For now, member states appear generally satisfied with the functioning of both the CSDP and PESCO. However, time is of the essence. With the upcoming U.S. elections and the potential re-election of Trump, coupled with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine the progress of which seems to be favouring Russia, the strategic implications for Europe are substantial. It may be prudent for Europe to consider a broader vision and begin establishing its military force.

No one but French President Macron could underscore so bluntly the need for Europe's military when he said recently "the days of Europe . . . relying on the US for security are over." He goes on to add "The rules of the game have changed. And the fact that war has returned to European soil and that it is being waged by a nuclear-armed power changes everything. The very fact that Iran is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons changes everything."

Conclusion -Europe's Military Preparedness: The Stark Reality

Getting a taste of reality, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen recently announced an \$800 billion military mobilization plan for the EU. However, this initiative comes from a group of nations that have traditionally spent less than 2% of their GDP on defence, relying on the U.S. for security. In 2023—the second year of the Ukraine-Russia war—EU countries collectively spent only \$327 billion on defence, amounting to just 1.8% of their total GDP. In contrast, the U.S. spent \$916 billion, representing 3.5% of its GDP.

So where do Europeans go from here?