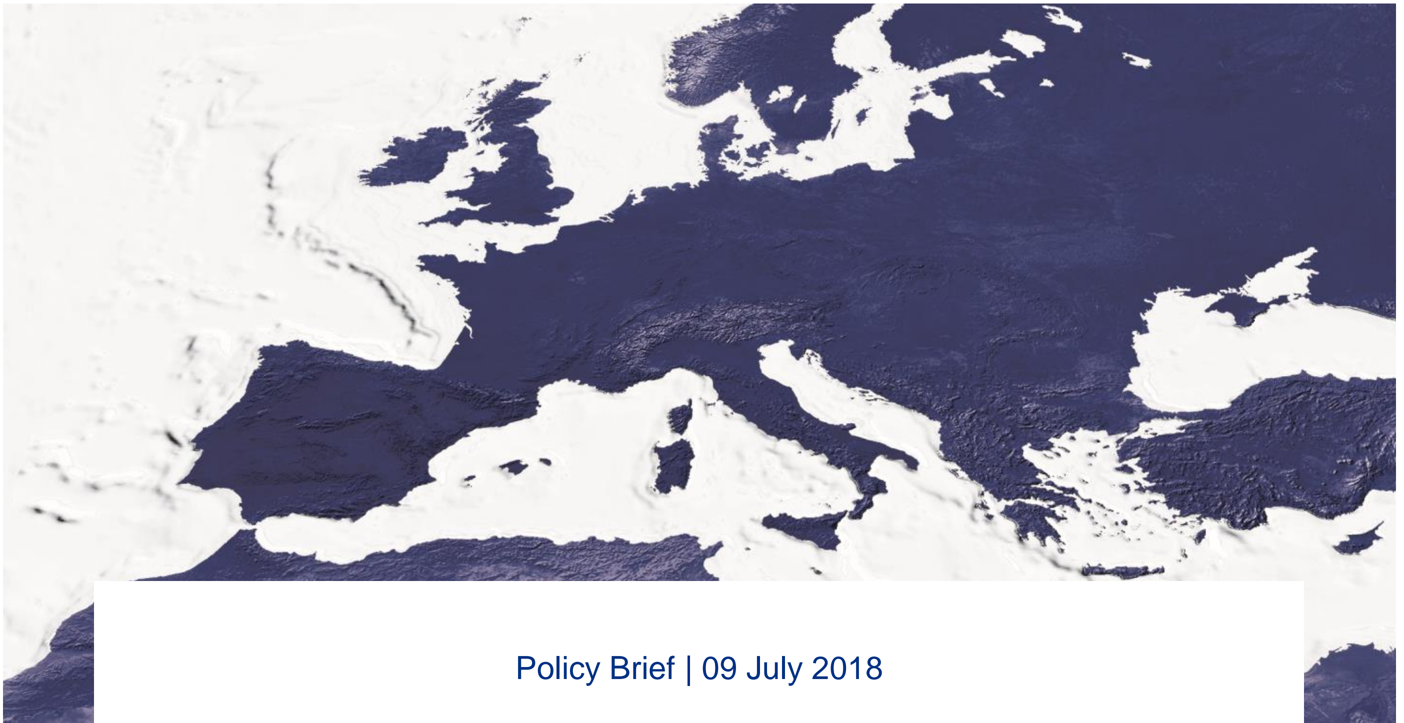

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Security as a common good

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme

Is Europe ready to take its fate into its own hands? Both politicians and citizens ask for more security as a common good – time to finance a truly European security policy.

Shortly before the Nato summit scheduled for 11-12 July, US President Donald Trump criticized that the EU was "set up to take advantage of the US". He has a point there. Since 1989 and the end of the Cold War, Europeans have been profiting from the so called "peace dividend" and cut their deficit spending far beyond the agreed 2 percent of the GDP. Is Europe ready to take its fate in its own hands, to quote Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel? The moment is advantageous, as this paper argues, since both politicians in their speeches as well as citizens in the polls are asking for more security as a common good. This agreement should open new doors to financing a true European security policy.

The need for security is currently a common theme in all the relevant surveys of Europe's citizens. One Eurobarometer survey in 2017 showed that 70% of all respondents expect "increased EU intervention" to protect external borders, and 68% expect it in the area of foreign and defence policies.

In the Eurobarometer survey conducted in autumn 2017 on "The Future of Europe", three of the 10 concerns most often cited by Europeans as the "greatest challenges" – migration, terrorism, and security and instability of neighbouring regions – were clearly related to foreign and security policy.

These responses are similar to those in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's eupinions survey on "Globalization and the EU: Threat or opportunity?" of July 2017. The issues that respondents there saw as policy priorities for the coming years were fighting terrorism, managing migration, protecting citizens' rights and securing peace.

Among the people surveyed, security is often more important than economic growth or a better alignment of monetary policy. EU citizens thus expect their own countries and Europe as a whole to deliver a policy response to the growing need for security.

It is just as difficult to separate external from internal security in the survey responses as it is in everyday politics – and exactly that is what makes security a "common good" in the EU.

The term is as old as it is fuzzy, and it has been a part of political philosophy – as *bonum commune, bien public* – since antiquity.

As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, "sSome canonical examples of the common good in a modern liberal democracy include: the road system; public parks; police protection and public safety; courts and the judicial system; public schools; museums and cultural institutions; public transportation; civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech and the freedom of association; the system of property; clean air and clean water; and national defense."

What are the EU and its member states doing today to meet the security needs of their citizens and thus better serve the common good?

Nowhere has the community of 28 EU member states had such a difficult time coordinating and cooperating in a consensual, sovereign manner as in the field of security and defence policy.

As recently as 2017, our study "How Europe can deliver" came to the following sobering conclusion in its chapter on European defence policy: "The current fragmentation results in significant diseconomies of scale. For example, the armies of the EU member states currently deploy 89 different major weapon systems, while US forces utilise just 27. (…) Furthermore, a European army would also give a boost to the internal market for defence goods." (p.11)

It has been easier for EU member states to unify their currencies – and declare them a common good benefitting everyone – than their armies.

As the study "How Europe can deliver" showed, defence spending by the EU's three largest members – Germany, France and the UK – has been declining since the 1990s compared to gross domestic product (GDP). "Nominal military expenditures in Europe have been stagnating for years", the study concludes (p.109).

That, however, is not the entire picture. The main problem is not stagnating or sinking defence expenditures, which in the case of Germany are far too low to keep it from meeting the agreed goal of 2% of GDP for security and defence. More problematic are the many ways in which the Europeans' efforts are senselessly fragmented. According to figures published by the Stockholm-based SIPRI institute, the UK spent $47 billion on defence in 2016, France $58 billion and Germany, despite any deficiencies, more than $44 billion. As a result, these three countries alone allocated roughly $150 billion to defence, much more than the $66 billion that Russia spent.

Thus, in projecting power, Europe is not so much lacking money as greater credibility. None of the commanders in Syria, let alone the Kremlin, are shuddering with fear at the thought of a European army.

Against this background, the coalition agreement signed by Germany's governing parties on 12 March 2018 can be read as self-criticism: "Europe today is making insufficient use of its political and economic potential and is doing so in a manner that lacks self-confidence. We need a new culture of responsibility which increases the credibility of Europe as a partner in the Western world and strengthens our position vis-à-vis rising powers." (p.142, in German)

Six months earlier, on 26 September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris in which he called for achieving quick progress in European security policy, making him one of the first to do so). He clearly viewed security as a *bien public,* a common good, calling it a "key to [European] sovereignty".

Macron: “The first key, the foundation of any political community, is security. In Europe, we are seeing a two-fold movement: gradual and inevitable disengagement by the United States, and a long-term terrorist threat with the stated goal of splitting our free societies. In these areas, Europe is at last aware of its fragilities and the need to act in concert.”

A few weeks later, on 13 November 2017, 23 defence ministers from EU member states signed the joint notification on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the area of European defence policy. German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen called it a “further step towards a European army”.

Antonio Missiroli, long-time director of the EU Institute for Security Studies noted at the end of 2017: “Still barely predictable only a year ago, PeSCo could now indeed become a game changer for European defence cooperation. The flurry of initiatives that have entered the EU stage over the past few months testify to a fresh momentum in which even relatively old concepts and proposals are taking a new shape.” ()

Is PESCO indeed the “game changer” that will allow Europe to realise its often evoked but rarely implemented security and defence policy? Will the 25 governments who are now party to the agreement go to work and tackle a subject that has for decades been an object of mistrust and a reason for inertia?

One could hardly be blamed for having doubts. After all, many past efforts never made it beyond goodwill and eloquent words. At the same time, however, the challenges confronting the EU have increased considerably in the recent past, something reflected in the survey results cited above: the unpredictability of the new US president; the calculated provocations of Vladimir Putin, from Crimea to Syria; the crises and conflicts on Europe’s doorstep in the Middle East; the links between a terrorism that is often homegrown and the Middle Eastern crises; the challenges stemming from mass displacement and migration. All of this is forcing long-dithering Europeans to act quickly.

When it comes to security, Europe suffers not only from a blatant lack of action; a sizeable communications gap also exists between policy makers and the public. At first glance, it all seems so simple: In uncertain, troubled times, people want more security. And this offers political leaders the chance to finally replace their (often tired) words with vigorous action.

Security as a common good – in future, that could be the basis for a shared understanding between the EU’s policy makers and its citizens.

And this common good should also be made – to return briefly to the study “How Europe can deliver” – a completely different, high-profile priority in the Union’s new medium-term financial computations. With that, it would become a key element and, in coming years, perhaps even a predominant part of a joint European budget.

And this expenditure would quite logically be financed by a new, earmarked (!), EU-level defence tax. If national taxes could be reduced as a result – due in part to the sizeable savings that could be achieved through communal defence procurement procedures – it would undoubtedly be warmly greeted by the public, given their increased desire for security.

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