

Cécile Fabre

In defence of EU armed forces



Proposal

The EU should turn its existing (though never-deployed) armed battlegroups into fully operational and deployable armed forces.

Motivation

Independent armed forces would help promote both regional stability and humanitarian military action without having to do so either within NATO structures or within the constraints of UN peacekeeping operations.



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When faced with humanitarian crises abroad or confronted with military threats to its fundamental interests, the EU seems toothless. Even though it strives to conduct an integrated foreign and defence policy, it does not have properly resourced armed forces of its own. Whether there should be a European Standing Army has been fiercely debated since the early days of the European project. In 1948, the United Kingdom, France and the Benelux signed the Treaty of Brussels establishing the Western Union, which was both a defence alliance and a mechanism for social, economic, and cultural relations. Although the founding of NATO in 1949 deprived the WU of much of its bite, France, Italy, West Germany and the Benelux attempted to create a European Defence Community in 1954. The resultant treaty was rejected by the French Parliament in 1954, and thus was never implemented. Nevertheless, the decisions to set up a European Defence Agency in 2004 and to create rapid reaction forces (called EU battlegroups) in 2007 were seen as a step in that direction. Since then, 23 member states decided in 2017 to create a Permanent Structured Cooperation in the field of defence. In June 2018, the European Defence Agency formulated and adopted the EU Capability Development Plan in close consultation and collaboration with member states.

I believe that there is a moral case in favour of a European Standing Army (ESA) as a means to promote the EU's legitimate interests and to further humanitarian aims. After defending the proposal, I will deal with some of the objections that have been raised against it. I use "army" as shorthand for "traditional" armed forces as well as non-traditional means of warfare, such as cyberwarfare, under the control of the European Council and Parliament.

The case for a European army

The 1,500-strong battlegroups are fully operational, yet they have never been deployed to conflict zones. Deployment requires a unanimous decision by the Council – a decision which, it is often said, has been hampered by a lack of political will and financial constraints. Moreover, there is opposition on the part of member states to divert more financial resources away from their own national defence to pan-European defence. Finally, member states consider themselves too bound within NATO structures and UN peacekeeping operations to consider “going it alone” in an integrated and coordinated way.

This is shortsighted for two reasons. First, EU member states, and thereby the EU itself, are facing severe threats. Some of those threats are directly external, such as cyberattacks on their infrastructures or international terrorism. Others – such as nationalist movements within the EU exploiting fears about refugees fleeing war and violence – are internal yet caused in part by external factors. Clearly, member states cannot effectively counter external threats single-handedly. Indeed, not only does the international, transborder nature of those threats call for a coordinated response, but so does the fact that those threats go to the heart of the European project. A political community that has its own institutions, that in some important sense is sovereign within its external borders, and that is committed to developing a Common Foreign Security Policy should not have to rely on *ad hoc* forces. It should have a standing army to defend itself. To put the point in moral terms, its members owe it to one another to do this.

Second, the EU stands for universal human rights. Its member states, and many of its citizens, believe (or, at any rate, claim to believe) that they are under strong moral obligations to protect fellow human beings from gross human rights abuses. Indeed, the EU has contributed to peacebuilding operations, humanitarian rescue missions, and peacekeeping forces. But here, too, it has proved reluctant to do so single-handedly; and, once again, it can only act in a piecemeal, *ad hoc* manner. This needs to change. A political community that truly *is* committed to the

global realisation of human rights must give itself adequate means to do so, including military means, on pain of being guilty of moral failure.

Some objections

In summary, an EAS would help promote regional stability and humanitarian aims. This is a controversial proposal. During the Twelve Stars online debate (01/07/2018 on Reddit's Change My View forum), commentators raised three kinds of objections.

First, they objected that the proposal could never be implemented for essentially two reasons: (a) there is no political support amongst member states for subjecting their defence policy to the EU's; and (b) there are no resources available for the proposal – be it financial, material, or human.

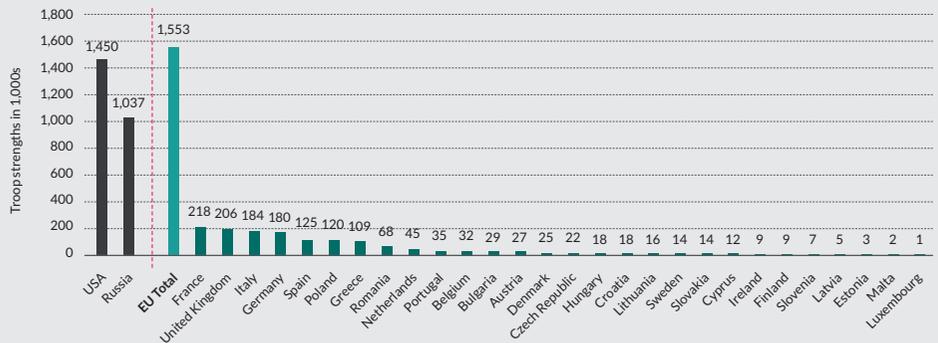
The lack of political will is a serious problem, as it is the prerequisite for establishing an ESA. However, even if it is true that political will is lacking (as I readily accept), it does not follow that the proposal itself has no merit. Indeed, my claim is that member states *ought* to accept the creation of an ESA out of their own interest in preserving the EU and, more widely, regional stability, as well as out of their commitment to humanitarian aims. In other words, my claim is that they ought to develop the political will to do so. To say that they lack such will does not undermine that claim unless it can be shown that they will forever be unable to do so (in which case the proposal is indeed moot.) I very much doubt that this can be shown; after all, European history is littered with achievements that once upon a time seemed completely unfeasible.

The problem of resources is also a serious one, all the more so as once the United Kingdom leaves the EU, France will remain the only large member state with a military matching its demographic and economic potential (not to mention nuclear capabilities.) Without such resources, the EU army will lack equipment, its soldiers will not be trained properly, and there will be too few of them to be effective.

Only when combined are the troop strengths of EU member states as large as those of the US and Russia, respectively

Active military personnel of individual EU member states, the US, and Russia

(Source: European Defence Agency)



Ought member states to increase their military capacities to resource the ESA? And ought they to divert some of their existing resources to the latter? I would say yes to both. To be sure, they might not be willing to do either. Here too, however, my claim is that they ought to be willing to at least strive towards finding the needed resources. The fact that they are currently not willing to properly resource the ESA does not in itself show that they ought not to do it, unless it can also be shown that those resources will forever be unavailable, or that available resources ought always to be used for other goals, such as alleviating poverty. I doubt that additional resources will forever be unavailable, at least as long as the European economy keeps growing. Moreover, given the threats the EU faces, it is not plausible to suppose that establishing an ESA must *always* be the last funding priority.

A second set of objections accepts for the sake of argument that the proposal is feasible, but it maintains that the ends of protecting the EU from threats, maintaining regional stability, and promoting humanitarian goals can be realised by other means. After all, those critics insist, member states are already able to deploy military force outside NATO and UN

peacekeeping forces. More importantly still, they can do so within both structures. So, what would they gain from an EAS?

The objection seems to prove too much. After all, the US is not expected to have its own military fully absorbed within NATO – precisely because it is a regional superpower. But so, in one important sense, is the EU, and it is hard to see why they ought not to seek the benefits of greater military integration and of independence from another military superstructure.

Suppose that I am wrong and that there is nothing the EU cannot already do within the auspices of NATO and the UN. This still would not be enough to reject the proposal. For the question, then, becomes: Under what kind of military structures can the EU *best* protect itself and its member states, and realise its humanitarian goals? *If* it turns out that an ESA is not the best option, then the proposal should be abandoned. However, we do not know whether this is the case. If the EU does not at least try to establish such a force, it runs the risk of failing to protect its vital interests and those of others. I suggest that it should not run such a risk.

A final set of objections goes even further and holds that an ESA not only would not be better, but in fact would make things worse. Two worries are sometimes raised here. First, an ESA would weaken NATO, which ultimately would be to the EU's detriment and would also impair the latter's ability to mount humanitarian operations. Second, it might be used by EU institutions to oppress allegedly recalcitrant member states, and to maintain a European stronghold over the African continent.

In response, I accept that the risk that the proposal would weaken the EU's and member states' willingness and ability to contribute to NATO is a cause for concern. However, given that NATO's purpose is, in part, to strengthen European security, an ESA might instead help NATO to achieve this rather than hindering it from doing so. Moreover, if it turns out that NATO is no longer fit for that purpose, we should not remain as wedded to NATO as we are. *Ideally*, the EU should seek to cooperate as closely as it can with the United States, as its member states have done through NATO for the last 69 years. But under current geostrategic circumstances, with

a White House seemingly intent on tearing up multilateral institutions, it might be advantageous to the EU to loosen the grip of its military dependency.

Finally, I find it hard to imagine that, once endowed with a standing army, the European Council and the European Parliament would deploy troops populated with French and German soldiers through the streets of, say, Budapest to bring the Hungarian government to heel – and vice versa. *If* this turned out to be a genuine risk, then this clearly would be a strong argument against the proposal. However, the Union’s commitment to human rights and the rule of law seems too deeply entrenched for the establishment of a standing army to be an instrument of military tyranny, at least within its borders. Granted, it is less hard to imagine that the Union would use its army as a neo-colonial tool of domination over Africa. There is no absolute guarantee, in other words, that the EU will always respect human rights. Yet there is no guarantee either that France, Poland, Italy or Germany will not use their own armed forces in this way. If that is not regarded as a reason for them to dismantle those forces, it should not be regarded as a reason against an ESA.

Conclusion

In defending the establishment of a European Standing Army from a moral point of view, I have in effect urged the EU and its leaders to bring to fruition the project that they formulated in late 2017/early 2018. To some, the proposal seems a dangerous folly. To many, it seems irredeemably utopian. And yet, the *construction européenne* itself is an exercise in utopian thinking. Indeed, the French novelist Victor Hugo argued in favour of what he called “the United States of Europe” as early as 1849. He was not the first to conceive of the idea, but the phrase is apparently his. Most of his contemporaries thought he was utopian to the point of delirium. Yet, was he *wrong*?

For background information on how the proposal fits with the EU’s political agenda and procedures, see www.twelvestars.eu/CMV/Cecile-Fabre.