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‘NATO is Brain-Dead’: Time For EU Military Force?

By Wendy He

SYNOPSIS

In terming NATO as “brain-dead”, French President Emmanuel Macron advocated for Europe to develop a military force of its own. More EU leaders have also come out in favour of the idea amid a US in withdrawal mood. Is this the right time for such a move or is this rhetoric at best?

COMMENTARY

IN AN interview with *The Economist* on 21 October 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron painted a distinctively bleak picture of the state of security affairs in Europe. Candidly, he urged for a rethinking of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its traditional role as a long-standing cornerstone of Europe’s defence, going so far as to assert that Europe is experiencing the “brain death of NATO”.

He warned that if Europe continues to meander along, choosing to ignore the reality of an increasingly unreliable American partner in fulfilling NATO’s commitment to the freedom and security of its members, it would cease to be in control of its own destiny. Underpinning this “apocalyptic vision” is a familiar rhetoric he has used before. Europe needs to have a military force of its own and start thinking of itself as a strategic power. Is he right?

Familiar Rhetoric

An independent European Union (EU) military force that would protect Europeans is familiar rhetoric and the idea that EU might eventually deviate from NATO has been discussed long before Macron’s appearance. For the first time, the EU signalled in its 2016 EU Global Strategy a qualitative shift in its strategic outlook; it put forth the idea

of attaining “a certain level of strategic autonomy” and being able to “act independently if and when it is needed”.

This rhetoric picked up steam when German Chancellor Angela Merkel endorsed Macron’s call for the creation of a EU army in November 2018, reiterating the stand that Europe needs to be able to defend itself. At the same time, EU President Donald Tusk alluded to a new era in which American and European relations are at an inflection point due to differences in worldviews and actions.

Tusk echoed the rhetoric of having a European army in the face of an American administration (under President Donald Trump) that seems intent on breaking down the post-World War II order. Increased calls for the creation of an independent EU military force have been recurring and the potential onset of an uncertain multi-polar world has pushed this familiar rhetoric further.

EU’s Military Capabilities Gap

This is not to say that there have been no attempts at enhancing EU’s military capabilities and defence structure. The EU has taken steps to bolster its military capabilities through the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and battle groups. Such initiatives provide platforms for EU member states to work together in planning, investing and developing projects that heighten the functional integration of the military forces.

However, the voluntary nature of such projects means that the member states can remain elusive about defence collaboration. Moreover, by leaving participation in PESCO to the willingness of member states, there is little alignment and agreement on how member states are going to contribute to these projects.

Similarly, the creation of the battle groups in 2004, with an aim to compensate for EU’s lack in permanent military forces, was promising in its inception, but has not been deployed since it became operational in 2007. The lack of political resolve by the EU in these attempts at strengthening the EU’s military capabilities provides a glimpse of the challenges Macron will face if he tries to push for the development of a permanent, independent and unified EU military force.

Underlying these half-hearted attempts at enhancing the military capabilities of EU is the member states’ reliance on NATO. The 2002 NATO-EU Declaration on a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and the subsequent 2003 “Berlin Plus” essentially cemented EU reliance on NATO.

This dependence can be seen from the current presence of 4,500 US troops stationed in Poland and the added confirmation that more troops will be sent to the region. Departure from NATO would mean being cut off from access to NATO’s military planning capabilities and resources – essential support that the EU has grown accustomed to and would need much time to build up on its own.

Time for EU Military Force or Symbolic Rhetoric?

Will Macron’s assertive choice of words take root this time? Europe finds itself facing

an increasingly uncertain geopolitical climate. Recent developments such as America's troop withdrawal from Syria, which effectively led to a hasty invasion into Kurdish territory in north-eastern Syria by Turkey (another NATO-member), undoubtedly contributed to Macron's bold criticism of NATO.

Earlier episodes of Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova likewise spurred the Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, Wolfgang Ischinger to affirm that "the creation of a European army is inevitable". However, such push for an independent European collective defence demands a level of unity and commitment that the EU currently does not seem capable of.

As a whole, the EU is still embroiled in tackling Brexit while contending with the rise of populism and the ongoing migration crisis. The chances that EU member states would rally around brash rhetoric and pull attention away from their respective domestic issues are slim.

As such, Macron's warning words may end up being symbolic rhetoric at best, noted for its audacity, but soon to be relinquished to the back of people's mind until such "familiar rhetoric" starts up again.

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