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Europeans Defending Europe: a myth, a necessity, an ambition, a hope?

Without overstating the case, 2024 is shaping up to be a pivotal year. It has already been marked not only by the continuation of ongoing conflicts and crises, but also by their geostrategic effects and consequences, the full extent of which has yet to be assessed. 2024 will also be a year of great memorable moments and electoral events, a year of risks and, let's hope, opportunities, particularly for Europe.

Like a leitmotif, or for some an "old chestnut", European defence will be the focus of analysis, but also of a real stress test. With this in mind, it cannot be too early to raise a question that is vital to the future of Europe, and the European Union in particular.

WHAT KIND OF DEFENCE FOR EUROPE?

In a somewhat provocative but stimulating manner, the aim here is to assess the potential of the Member States of the European Union to defend themselves. Is this a necessity, an ambition, a hope, or even simply a myth?

Seen from Sirius, the very framing of this issue might seem surprising. After all, we are talking about a community of twenty-seven countries, populated by nearly four hundred and fifty million men and women who, in the course of recent history that began with the Second World War, decided to unite their fortunes around the shared values of peace and freedom. And this only five years after the end of the conflict, on [9 May 1950](#).

Were the two World Wars that ravaged Europe, decimating young generations, not enough to drive home in the uppermost part of minds

of European nations that freedom and peace are not unalterable legacies? that they were acquired through the courage and blood of our predecessors and that Defence must be their vigilant guardian?

In this respect, the commemorative value of 2024 cannot be underestimated — to echo Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *"It is for the past and the future that we must work: for the past, to recognise its services, for posterity, to increase its value. Those who do not understand their past are condemned to relive it"*. Almost one hundred and ten years ago, on 3 August 1914, the First World War broke out. It was supposed to be short and decisive, the *"the war to end all wars"*. In four years, almost twenty million people died, almost as many civilians as soldiers, but it was not enough to find a viable peace between the enemies who seemed hereditary on both sides of the Rhine. Just twenty years later, Hitler's Germany invaded Poland, triggering the cataclysm of the Second World War, which claimed over forty million lives in the space of six years.

On 6 June, we will be commemorating the *"longest day"* when, [80 years ago](#), the first American soldier (GI) set foot on the shores of Normandy to liberate France, and then Western Europe, from the Nazi oppressor. For the second time in less than thirty years, Americans came to die in Europe to restore our freedom. Fortunately, this time, a group of courageous and visionary men, influenced by the experience of these two wars, spared no effort or imagination to lay the foundations of a world organisation, the UN, in 1945, initially bringing together fifty-one nations.

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Four years later, to contain pressure from the Soviet Union (USSR), twelve countries decided to link their futures within the Atlantic Alliance. Hence 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the [North Atlantic Treaty](#) (4th April) which is as pertinent today as it ever was. This visionary treaty is best known for *Article 5*, which establishes the collective defence of the allies "*all for one and one for all*", the relevance of which is underlined by current events. In particular, they must promote economic cooperation and resolve their disputes peacefully^[1]. They also have a duty to contribute actively to the defence of the Alliance, individually and collectively, by making available the appropriate military resources (article 3), in other words to assume the *burden sharing* as systematically demanded by the various American presidents... with varying degrees of formality...!).

A EUROPEAN PILLAR OF NATO?

In this spirit of rights and duties, and given the geostrategic context of a high-intensity war in Europe, is it necessary to stress the relevance of NATO's European pillar as a guarantee of solidarity, credibility and resilience?

Through a striking coincidence of events, 2024 will be a year rich in elections around the world: 76 legislative or presidential elections involving more than half the world's population. Never in history have so many voters been called to the polls. This is particularly true for the European Union, with the elections to the European Parliament from 6 to 9 June, and for the United States, with the presidential and legislative elections on 5 November. In both cases, the stakes are high in a world marked by fierce competition between the major powers, particularly the United States and China, and their struggle for power. Against this backdrop, the European elections have a strategic importance that can be summed up in one simple phrase: "*Do Europeans want the Union, their Union, to be able to take its rightful place and make its voice heard in the concert of great powers?*"

Defence is certainly not the only lever to achieve this, but it is no less essential, as demonstrated by the considerable and constantly increasing defence spending by the United States (over €800 billion), China (over

€225 billion), India (€67 billion) and Russia, admittedly in war economy mode, (€111 billion, or almost 5% of its GDP). In regard to the European Union as a whole, this [budget](#) totals some 270 billion €, i.e. around 1.8% of the sum of the GDP of the 27 Member States. And that is the question for the European Union: is the total sum, which is already too small, at least equal to the sum of the parts? Unfortunately, not. Efforts are too dispersed to create an overall dynamic, to produce major unifying projects, to invest in research and innovation and to support the [European Defence Technological and Industrial Base](#) (EDTIB) and rise to the challenges. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the European Commission's initiatives in this area. For the period 2021-2027, almost €8 billion (of the €13 billion requested) has been granted by the Member States and approved by the European Parliament in support of the [European Defence Fund](#) (EDF). With the revision of the multiannual financial framework, it has just been topped up.

AID TO UKRAINE

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, 5.6 billion € have been devoted by the European Union to military aid under the [European Peace Facility](#) (EPF), but the ceiling has since been doubled to €12 billion, not including the direct contribution from the Member States, estimated at €21.4 billion. We might also add 500 million € for the [action in support of ammunition production](#) (ASAP) which is so critical for Ukraine.

Will the European elections in June jeopardise these efforts? Will the new Commission and Parliament endorse the €100 billion fund proposed by Commissioner Thierry Breton to stimulate European defence industry output and cooperation between Member States, companies, and other players? This would be a major step towards strengthening the European Union's "strategic autonomy" and European countries' ability to provide for their own defence, while at the same time allowing their economies, skilled jobs and growth to benefit from these investments.

At present, the dependence of the vast majority of Member States on the United States in terms of military

^[1] Greece and Turkey joined the Alliance together on 18 February 1952

equipment is a risk that the forthcoming American elections could accentuate still further. Admittedly, both potential candidates, President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, leave little hope for their allies in terms of a real concerted economic policy as provided for in the Washington Treaty. However, the election of the latter would open up a period of uncertainty for many European countries as to his commitment to NATO and his support for Ukraine, as confirmed by his very recent public statements.

It is therefore high time for the European Union - which has just granted a budget of €50 billion to Ukraine - to prepare for the worst-case scenario, which would see a significant reduction, or even an end, to the Americans' pro-Ukrainian commitment. It is therefore interesting to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the military capabilities which Europe has provided to Ukraine over the last two years of the conflict.

If we wanted to sum up the situation, the armaments supplied to Ukraine by the Europeans are, on the whole, suited to their needs, and some have even been extremely useful and effective. On the other hand, they do not cover the whole spectrum required for high-intensity warfare against a major power. Worse still, Europeans are finding it extremely difficult to supply sufficient quantities of this equipment over the long term and, unlike Russia, their industries are not really on a war footing.

On the positive side, we do have so-called "deep strike" capabilities such as the French SCALP cruise missile or its British equivalent, Storm Shadow, but they are limited in number. It is worth highlighting the innovative skills demonstrated by the Ukrainians, who have been able to adapt these cutting-edge weapons to their Soviet-origin combat aircraft. Artillery has also played a key role in this conflict, both in the offensive and defensive phases. The French "CAESAR" guns are particularly appreciated, even if their use is being hampered by the shortage of ammunition, which the Europeans and Americans have difficulty in supplying in sufficient quantities. Some 130 German "Leopard 2" tanks have replaced the old T72s of Soviet origin. To ensure their essential anti-aircraft defence, the Ukrainians can count on American, German and Dutch

Patriots, as well as Franco-Italian SAMPT Mamba systems and, for short-range defence, German IRISIS T missile launchers, French Mistral and German Gepard anti-aircraft armoured vehicles, and for surveillance and detection, the GM2000 multifunction radar.

These examples show that Europeans are capable of deploying a range of modern, effective weapons systems... but in insufficient number. The same applies to ammunition of all kinds, particularly artillery shells, which are being consumed in large quantities, even though the European Commission's ASAP plan should start to show its effects - with the target of 1 million shells per year - in the coming weeks.

A LACK OF RESOURCES

Obviously, we cannot conclude from this brief inventory that European countries would be capable of defending themselves alone in the unlikely event of a Russian attack. For Europeans, the quantitative problem is compounded by the capability deficits that this high-intensity war is highlighting, particularly in terms of missile defence, electronic warfare, intelligence, drones in general, anti-drone warfare and deep strike ground systems (such as HIMARS and ATACMS).

Another critical issue in the European armaments inventory is the extreme dependence on US industry for the supply of strategic capabilities such as combat aircraft (with the notable exception of France).

This phenomenon is accentuated by the need to replace old Soviet equipment (given to the Ukrainians) by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This dependence obviously concerns the supply of associated armaments and the essential technical support for American equipment. It is accentuated by the impact of new technologies, particularly the digital versions, which are central to these new-generation weapons systems. The most striking example is undoubtedly the massive acquisition by Europeans of the F35 fighter aircraft (more than 500 have already been planned for in Europe). We are talking about software, microprocessors and, by extension, artificial intelligence (AI) models for future weapons. We are therefore acutely aware of the challenge that Europeans face

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in acquiring a certain level of strategic autonomy at a time of innovation, widespread digital transformation, automation, the race for nano-processors, generative AI and even quantum AI. Mastering these disciplines and technologies is certainly a defence issue, but it is quite simply the future of the European project, its industry, its jobs and its place in the world that is at stake.

DETERRENCE

Given the confrontation between the great powers, the current high-intensity war and Europe's future status in the strategic debate, the issue of nuclear deterrence cannot be avoided, even if it is a highly sensitive one. Following the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union in 2021, France finds itself as Europe's sole nuclear power. This independent national nuclear deterrent, which guarantees our vital interests, has been the core of French sovereignty for sixty years.

At the same time, NATO has developed, without France, a nuclear posture based on airborne weapons supplied and controlled by the United States (B61-12) and deployed by the air forces of several allied countries. So, any uncertainty about the US commitment to NATO considerably weakens NATO's nuclear deterrent.

Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, the French President recently reaffirmed that "*the*

French nuclear deterrent also comprises a European dimension". We cannot deduce from this, as some have claimed, that France would be prepared to "*offer its nuclear deterrent*" either to NATO or to Europe, but to deny that there is a link between the vital interests of our country and those of the European Union would be tantamount to denying our country's very membership of both the European Union and NATO.

More than ever, the issue of Europeans defending Europe cannot be reduced to radical, quasi-theological positions. It must face up to the realities of a rapidly changing world in which our interests and values are at risk. Do we Europeans want to withdraw inwards or continue along the path laid out by our predecessors after two devastating wars? Are we ready, as they were, to invent a common future of peace and prosperity and to defend it together?

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