Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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There are no "ironclad" defence commitments, even within the EU

Europe's defences don't just suffer from an American or NATO problem, they're much more fatally undermined by a European problem. That is the takeaway not only from the two-day NATO summit that just concluded in The Hague but also from the long preamble.

Europe is politically disunited, economically in the doldrums and, in terms of defence, fragmented. Worse, the continent's leaders are unwilling or unable to lead, its populations are left to wallow in self-indulgent fantasies of national exceptionalisms, and it's on the verge of embracing ever worse extremism that will render any talk of joint and mutual defence moot.

The rapid and seemingly irreversible rightward drift of most major countries on the continent could soon overtake any fledgling effort at joint European defence.

Joint European defence, in any case, is a misnomer, as integration efforts are specifically not aimed at creating a European army or united command structure. In the foreseeable future this will be entirely beyond the pale for most countries.

Under the guise of Atlanticism

The emerging alternative is a system of parallel build-ups of sovereign national forces, in the best case supported by a Europe-wide logistical framework for only some procurement, transport, intelligence, space and cyber capabilities, etc.

Renewed dominance by the PiS in Poland, a RN takeover in France or a further increase in AfD and other extremist influence in Germany will choke a common European defence before it's even born. Add an eventual Reform UK victory in Great Britain, and the basis for pan-European cooperation will be even further weakened.

All these Eurosceptic parties stand a good chance of being in charge within the next five to ten years. And that looming threat is already having an effect on the policies of the mainstream parties that are for now still ruling, including on defence.

> The prospect of a far-right takeover in a major European country also poses questions of shared policy objectives

Even within current European drivers of increased defence cooperation and spending, such as Germany and France, right-wing pressures have led to hedging on the nature and speed of EU defence integration. They have also been responsible for some extraordinary and politically costly manoeuvres, such as Friedrich Merz's 'trick' to lift Germany's debt brake for defence spending.

There have been more signs of the obstacles that far-right influence will place in the way of European defence in the name of national sovereignty and sometimes under the guise of Atlanticism.

The, at the time, far-right-dominated government of the Netherlands fired a warning shot at Brussels over the possible introduction of euro defence bonds.

Giorgia Meloni's Italy has been subtly slow-pedalling EU defence integration and spending coordination. In Romania, which has one of the largest NATO bases in Europe, the alliance dodged a bullet when a pro-Russian, far-right candidate failed to win the presidential elections.

The prospect of a far-right takeover in a major European country also poses questions of shared policy objectives, even if a common defence has been sufficiently strengthened. As noted, a potential Romanian pro-Russian government is unlikely to agree to stop Russian aggression.

Support that builds alliances

A more strongly integrated EU defence could

suffer from the same questions that now hang over NATO, despite the "ironclad commitment to collective defence" that Trump agreed to in the final statement of the summit in The Hague. To most allies, it's not worth the paper it's written on.

Defence alliances rely on self-interest but also on trust. Populists, authoritarians and bullying liars can inherently not be trusted. Far-right nationalists and isolationists resist mutual assistance, at least without an exorbitant quid pro quo.

This equally applies to Europe. A far-right France might not be very interested in jumping to the defence of a Baltic state, just as the US has clearly been politically distancing itself from that obligation in NATO.

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More extreme political fragmentation in general raises questions of shared values and solidarity in case of attack. Would a still centrist Britain be very keen, for example, to help out a country like Poland if it goes down a dark, human rights negating course, or vice versa?

Europe jumped to the aid of the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Many nations fought alongside the Americans in Afghanistan and even Iraq, despite various degrees of domestic opposition.

Were a similar situation to develop today, there's likely to be much less willingness to do the same. While fear of Donald Trump might spur some involvement, it's very different from the strong base of support that builds alliances.

Here, the far-right national sovereignty argument can be turned on its head: some European countries can legitimately wonder whether they want to be tied into a military alliance with potentially Russia-friendly, increasingly authoritarian, or otherwise unpalatable fellow EU members.

An entirely different proposition

It's one thing to sit alongside troublesome partners in a trade bloc, it's an entirely different proposition to tie your foreign and defence policies to such uncertain allies, as is evidenced by Europe's current American predicament.

It's not just the right that threatens defence cooperation in Europe. Spain's left-wing government is currently the only one that refuses to raise overall defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP.

However, the fact that other countries agree to this shows that they regard the Spanish government as a mainstream ally that needs the leeway in order to better counter a growing far-right challenge.

> European defence cooperation is suffering from the EU's underlying disunity and lack of centralisation

Other left-wing parties and personalities in Europe might also pose challenges to increased defence spending and integration, but none of them for now have the electoral momentum that the far-right seems to have.

The Russia-friendly Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany has thus far underperformed, and Mélenchon's LFI in France is facing the splintering of its Nouveau Front Populaire alliance.

But whether challenged from the right or the left, European defence cooperation is suffering from the EU's underlying disunity and lack of centralisation.

A decisive blow

This extends to all levels of such an effort, including the fragmented capital markets landscape that stymies much-needed private investment and the growth of defence-related companies.

While the latter could possibly be fixed, capital markets integration is, after all, mainly a function of the trade bloc aspect of the EU, there's much less likelihood that political integration and centralisation can be achieved in time to fix the continent's defences.

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For the bigger countries, such as Germany, the UK, France, Italy and Poland, it should, with some effort, be possible to each set up a military deterrent that eventually surpasses the Ukrainian army in strength.

That should theoretically mean that they would each individually be able to resist potential Russian or other aggression. They would also still be able to count on the assistance of remaining likeminded allies.

Smaller countries might attach themselves to one of these spokes or could attempt to set up their own regional defensive structure, for example, the Nordic and Baltic countries.

While political polarisation could well stop effective joint or mutual defence, it's much less likely to obstruct the use of common logistical resources, such as satellites for GPS and communications, cyber defences, supply lines, etc.

This is where European cooperation could still play a role. In effect, it would echo the French position of sovereignty and exceptionalism within NATO, but with a stronger pan-European common logistical layer.

The problems with a less ambitious but more realistic development of sovereign, parallel European defence structures will be that it might never attain the levels needed for European operational independence from the US.

The question remains whether more limited European defence cooperation could still be enough to head off Russian or other challenges. What is certain is that Europe's role as a global power, already doubtful now, will have been given a decisive blow.