



A European Army as Common Defence for the European Union? An Invitation to Debate

di Lorenzo Federico Pace *

1. Although the war of aggression against Ukraine began in February 2022, it was only in 2025 that a sense of urgency emerged regarding the need to discuss the future of the European Union's common defence. As is well known, this urgency arose as a consequence of statements made by the Vice-President of the United States in February 2025 during the Munich Security Conference («There is a new Sheriff in town»), as well as of the numerous and divergent positions expressed by the President of the United States concerning the future commitment of the United States to intervene in defence of NATO members. This situation has determined uncertainty as to the nature of the intervention that the United States would guarantee in the event of circumstances triggering the application of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty – an assurance upon which all EU Member States had based their confidence in the existence of an effective and operational form of common defence for the Union.

In the debate on the future of common defence, one of the pivotal issues is the identification of its objective. The central question is whether that objective should be the creation of a European army distinct from the armed forces of the Member States.

This editorial seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of whether such an objective is feasible, taking into account the evolution of the European integration process and the current normative framework of the Treaties.

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2. In order to address the central question – whether the future of the European Union’s common defence lies in the establishment of a common European army distinct from national armed forces – it is necessary to recall the reasons underlying the birth of the European integration process. As is well known, European integration did not originate with the aim of creating a military defence on the European continent, but rather to organize the internal relations among European States in a peaceful manner. This necessity stemmed from the so-called “contradiction between State and market”, which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, and from the consequent crisis of the nation-State as a form of peaceful organization of the peoples of the European continent (art. 1(2) TEU) that led to the outbreak of two world wars.

The response to this crisis was the establishment of a supranational organization – first the ECSC, then the EEC, subsequently transformed into the EU. The EU is characterized by the autonomy of its legal order *vis-à-vis* those of the Member States, as well as by the autonomy of EU law with respect to both international public law and domestic law. In this sense, European Union law is Union law *simpliciter*. Nevertheless, the Treaties do address military matters in certain respects (for example, Article 346 TFEU).

As is well known, following the establishment of the ECSC there was an attempt to create a supranational organization with military defence objectives: the European Defence Community (EDC). The aim of this organization was the creation of a European army to protect its Member States and, in the view of one of its strongest proponents, Alcide De Gasperi, it represented a fundamental step towards the creation of a political Union. It is no coincidence that Article 8 of the EDC Treaty provided that, in the event of an amendment to the Treaties, the organization should transform itself either into a federation or into a confederation.

The European Defence Community was never established, not only because of France’s refusal to ratify the Treaty – already signed by the six States – but also because of the existence of NATO as an international organisation with military objectives, which already constituted a form of common defence for the European continent, albeit under the aegis of the United States.



Even subsequently, when the Member States decided to incorporate common foreign, security and defence policy into the European integration process, these policies were developed in the form of intergovernmental governance rather than supranational governance.

One reason that may justify this choice can be identified in the concern to preserve the statehood of the entities participating in the European integration process, namely the Member States. Indeed, one core attribute of statehood – monetary policy – has already been conferred upon the European Union through the Treaties, thereby limiting the sovereignty of the States themselves, for well-known historical and political reasons. The attribution at Union level of competence in military matters under a supranational governance structure could call into question, *inter alia*, the very justification for the continued existence of the Member States.

3. Before providing an answer, grounded in the dynamics of the integration process, as to the possible future establishment of a common European army distinct from national armed forces, it is perhaps necessary to reconstruct the development of European defence during these particularly turbulent recent years.

As is well known, Article 42(2) TEU provides for the future establishment of a common defence following a unanimous vote of the European Council – a requirement that raises significant difficulties, not least in view of the military neutrality of certain EU Member States (Austria, Ireland, Malta). By contrast, Article 42(7) TEU already establishes a formal collective defence commitment among EU Member States in the event of aggression, modelled on Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. This latter provision thus appears already to offer an answer to what will – barring different future developments – constitute the future of EU defence: namely, a defence of the Union based on the armed forces of the Member States.

From this perspective, common military defence among EU Member States already seems to be organised according to the principle of so-called “quadrants of interest”, divided into Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern areas of the



Union's territory. It is no coincidence that within the “Eastern quadrant” of the European Union, the one closest to Russia, two States – Poland and Finland – stand out in terms of military posture. Poland has increased its military expenditure to 4.5% of GDP, while Finland, for historical reasons dating back to the period in which it constituted a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, maintains one of the most densely available armed forces in the EU relative to its population size. Finland has also abandoned – again for reasons linked to its relationship with Russia – its “historic” military neutrality, joining NATO in 2013.

Technology likewise appears to support this model of collective defence of the European Union through the armed forces of the Member States. One need only consider, for example, the so-called “Michelangelo Dome” project developed by the company Leonardo: a European strategic, multidomain defence project based on artificial intelligence and founded on the coordination of national military systems.

Even the recent evolution of the European Union's legal framework appears to indicate a development of the EU's common defense through the individual national defense systems, always in pursuit of the core objective of European integration: peace and the well-being of European citizens within the framework of common values among Member States (Article 3(1) TEU).

Reference may be made to the SAFE project, within the context of the “Readiness 2030” initiative, which provides for €150 billion in funding for national military investments as EU public debt, albeit subject to expenditure constraints similar to those of Next Generation EU. In addition, approximately €650 billion in investments in national military systems are envisaged through the activation of the “general escape clause” and the consequent exclusion of such costs from the limits of the Stability and Growth Pact – though this creates, or rather deepens, disparities between States with high fiscal capacity, on the one hand, and States burdened by high levels of debt, on the other, which are consequently constrained in the scale of their public expenditure.

Having regard to all the foregoing, the idea of establishing a European army distinct from those of the Member States, as a natural evolution of the European integration process, appears to be a legacy of an approach that viewed the



ultimate objective of integration as the creation of a new continent wide State – a kind of “super-State” – with its own autonomous military defense. To date, the Member States have rejected this possibility, maintaining the European integration process within the framework of integration among (formally) sovereign States.

4. A final observation concerns the fears – rightly expressed by some – that the development of EU defence based on the military capacities of individual Member States could in the future trigger a crisis of the integration process itself. Such concerns are not unfounded: one may recall, for example, how the militarisation of Prussia at the beginning of the eighteenth century ultimately led to the crisis of the Holy Roman Empire and to its dissolution in 1806.

If such apprehensions are not misplaced, the characteristics of the current European integration process may nevertheless prevent history from repeating itself. This is, first and foremost, due to the presence of the internal market, which – despite its own competitiveness crisis and the excessive recourse to State aid to address the crises of recent years – remains the indispensable solution to the “contradiction between State and market” that emerged on the European continent at the end of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the existence of a strong and integrated internal market at continental level could constitute a rebalancing factor *vis-à-vis* a predominantly state-centred development of military defence in Europe, such as that which currently appears to be taking shape.