

EU warned that flexing military muscle could lead to 'turf wars'

Written by Martin Banks on 20 September 2019 in News
News

The European Union has been warned that renewed efforts to flex its military muscle is likely to put it on a collision course with national governments, NATO and the United States.



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The warning comes after it emerged that the next European Commission, due to take office on 1 November, will include a new directorate general for defence industries and space, a role given to Sylvie Goulard, a former French defence minister.

Incoming Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, formerly Germany's defence minister, is said to want Europe to take more responsibility for its own defence but defence expert Paul Taylor fears the move could trigger "turf wars" with EU Member States, NATO and the US.

Such fears have been further fuelled by the scale of increased EU expenditure on defence.

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While there is no EU army and defence remains exclusively a matter for Member States, the EU has recently taken big steps to boost defence cooperation.

Since 2016, there has been significant progress in the area of EU security and defence, with several ambitious initiatives to encourage cooperation and reinforce Europe's capacity to defend itself.

The Commission has proposed a marked increase in the EU budget for defence and external security: €22.5bn for 2021-2027, compared to €2.8bn for the 2014-2020 period.

If agreed, the draft seven-year EU budget from 2021 allocates €13bn to a European Defence Fund (EDF) to promote cross-border collaboration on defence research and technology projects, plus another €6.5bn to upgrade roads, bridges, rail lines, ports and airports for so-called military mobility and €16bn on space programmes.

“No one in Brussels can send someone to kill or be killed and a military that cannot risk its life or take the lives of others is just a humanitarian operation” **Denis MacShane**

EU leaders say that no EU country can tackle the current security threats in isolation.

French President Emmanuel Macron called for a joint European military project in 2017, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “we ought to work on the vision of one day establishing a proper European army” in her address to the European Parliament in November 2018.

Several defence-related initiatives and mechanisms have been set up in recent years, including the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund.

These initiatives and the proposed increase in funding at the level of the EU and national budgets can be regarded as a “step change” for European defence.

At NATO's Wales summit in 2014, the EU countries that are members of the alliance committed to spend 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence by 2024, though NATO 2018 estimates show that only six countries (Greece, Estonia, UK, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania) spent 2 percent of their GDP on defence.

The appointment of Goulard, who will be partly tasked with coordinating the EU's currently-fragmented defence industry on research and development projects, is the latest sign of EU efforts to

take more serious ownership of European defence.

Brexit party MEP Andrew England Kerr is among those who insist that defence must remain as at present, a national competence, declaring that the EU should “stop putting its political project above all else.”

“Goulard is likely to come under friendly fire from several directions” **Paul Taylor**

The MEP told this website, “NATO has kept the peace in Europe and the bureaucrats in Brussels competing with them will only make their job more difficult.”

Another British MEP, Geoffrey Van Orden, a former senior British Army officer, said, “Europe's primary strategic concern should be to ensure that the United States remains fully committed to its security, not to establish separate defence structures which deliberately exclude the United States.”

“This plays into the hands of those that wish to see Europe separated from its transatlantic allies.”

Taylor said, “Goulard is likely to come under friendly fire from several directions: Member States jealous of their control over national defence budgets, armed forces and defence policy; NATO officials concerned that non-EU allies will be excluded from military R&D projects; and a US administration that wants to sell more weapons to Europe and accuses Brussels of discriminating against its companies.”

A Commission source said, “If Europe is to compete worldwide, it will need to pool and integrate its best capabilities as it is estimated that by 2025 China will become the 2nd biggest defence spender in the world after the US.”

But Dr Denis MacShane, a former Europe Minister in the UK, told The Parliament Magazine, “If the EU is to move to a coherent defence policy this will have to be driven from within the Member States themselves. It cannot be ordained by Brussels.”

MacShane, a former Labour cabinet minister under Tony Blair, added, “No-one in Brussels can send someone to kill or be killed and a military that cannot risk its life or take the lives of others is just a humanitarian operation. So, in the fullest sense Brussels cannot replace its Member States in the ultimate expression of defence policy.”

“What it can do is convince, coax, cajole to have common EU procurement policy, to use the same systems, to develop more common policy. Margaret Thatcher first called for a European CGSP in 1984. 35 years late we are still waiting.”

About the author

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