

[Analysis] Common European Defense. Ukraine's (Big) Failure (v2)



(B2) Involved in supporting Ukraine, the Europeans have failed to convert the test to advance in their common defense. Today, faced with an offensive and disruptive Trump, they find themselves disarmed with only one perspective: to spend more. A decoy.

Toutes les conditions étaient pourtant réunies ces dernières années pour franchir un cap (cf. encadré). Les 27 chefs d'État et de gouvernement (+ le Royaume-Uni), réunis en conclave, lundi 3 février à Bruxelles (lire : [\[Avant-Première\] Ce dont les 27 vont discuter lors de la « Retraite défense »](#)), vont tenter de rattraper le temps perdu. Il est temps ! [Article en pdf](#)

A lost momentum

Massive and unexpected support

In February 2022, the massive Russian military intervention in Ukraine was a political and security shock for Europeans. It sparked significant mobilization. On all levels: civil (energy, refugees, humanitarian aid, etc.), political (opening of accession negotiations) and military. In a united and surprising way for Europeans, often quick to procrastinate or divide, the reaction was rapid and concrete. Marked by a certain pragmatism and a clear political sense to support Ukraine against Russia. Read: [\[File 92\] NATO and EU face military intervention in Ukraine](#).

Mobilization of instruments

Europe, civil, is getting into battle order, military. The existing instruments (neighbourhood, energy, civil protection, European Peace Facility) are being used to the maximum of their possibilities. The political will is there, on the Community side as well as on the side of the Member States. The financial means are there. In an extraordinary way (1). This important reaction is essential to avoid the Ukrainian collapse, predicted by American planners and most Europeans. But it remains insufficient to allow victory against the Russians.

Military inadequacy demonstrated

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict starkly reveals Europe's shortcomings, which even the best-endowed countries such as France cannot escape (read: [four French gaps](#)). The Europeans and NATO allies remain unable to provide Kiev with all the heavy means they are asking for, particularly for anti-aircraft defense. Reasons given: not to deplete their own defense and not to outbid each other in the conflict. The means therefore arrive in dribs and drabs in Ukraine, unable to protect all the cities and civilian infrastructure. Even when faced with more down-to-earth needs — such as drones used en masse on the battlefield — the Europeans are unable to provide in volume. Other players (Turkey, Taiwan, etc.) provide. The Ukrainians take over, creating their own industrial fabric.

Strange absences

Beyond the tools immediately usable for the war in the East, the European reaction, intense and rapid, was not followed by a qualitative leap.

Grandma's remedies

Certainly, some solutions have been put in place. Such as a certain flexibility of [European Investment Bank loans](#) for the civil-military sector or a new programme aimed at strengthening the European defence industry, the aptly named [OEDIP](#) (2). But these solutions remain piecemeal and, to tell the truth, very dated. For some, they date from discussions initiated in the 2010s! (3). Certainly, some ideas have been posed, debated, such as the [defense strategy](#). But late, and without any operational-level thinking and even less of a political surge.

Atonal strategic thinking

From a strategic point of view, European Defence thus remains within the pre-Ukraine framework: a juxtaposition of national policies, without a common spirit of defence. The principle "*of a progressive definition of a common defence policy* » included in the Treaty (TEU) in its article 24 (read: [Memo Sheet](#)) remains a dead letter. Intoxicated by their intense effort for Ukraine, obsessed by the (small) Hungarian problem, blind to a probable arrival of Donald Trump at the White House, the 27 do not dare to take the step. European strategic thinking remains limited.

Good words

For several months now, however, there has been a proliferation of fine speeches. European defence, common defence, European pillar of NATO, etc. These terms are used excessively. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, has accustomed us to this ritual of grand words and fine phrases. He is not the only one. The German Olaf Scholz or the Polish Donald Tusk proclaim principles. The presidents of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, and of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen,

launch slogans. These sometimes very lyrical outbursts are not followed by a structured, global initiative.

Piecemeal initiatives

No European leader has had the courage, or even the idea, to propose a realistic, ambitious plan, in sequenced and rapid stages, initiating a discussion and decisions, allowing the transition to a higher level. The lesson learned from the Ukrainian war is nevertheless obvious. Without a common system combining anti-aircraft defense, air cover (planes and drones) with a rapid land, sea and cyber reaction capacity, and without a common nuclear deterrent, there can be no deterrence of a possible aggression.

Nipped in the egg

All these developments were within reach, with a limited sharing of sovereignty: a single sky, a European iron dome, even a sharing of nuclear power. Instead of integrating to make a constructed whole, in a sort of common deal, they were immediately criticized by one or the other or died in the egg, for lack of having been clearly expressed (read: [\[News\] Air defense: Emmanuel Macron criticizes the German approach without proposing a concrete alternative](#)) By remaining hopelessly divided into so many national forces, Europeans have weakened their capacity for influence (against the USA) and resistance (against Russia).

The illusory increase in spending

In the absence of a project, Europeans are taking refuge in a single idea, which looks more like an escape than a reality, and are rushing headlong into the trap set by their neighbours and competitors.

The % mantra

The first leitmotif that comes up in the mouths of several leaders - such as the Estonian Kaja Kallas and the Polish Donald Tusk - is: spend more! The Polish Prime Minister thus defends a target of 5% (read: [\[Verbatim\] 5% of GDP for defense? For Donald Tusk, Europe simply has no choice!](#)). A nice round figure that makes no sense taken in isolation... except to respond to a request from Donald Trump. For some countries close to Russia, it can meet certain needs. Countries that benefit, moreover, from a certain European windfall. But for the others, this doubling or even tripling of their defense budget is unrealistic. Economically unsustainable and very difficult to justify politically in constrained national budgets (4).

The illusion of spending

For three years, the Europeans have not remained inactive: 10 billion for France, 32 billion for Germany, 20 billion for Poland (83 billion zlotys). Has all this produced an effect? Not obvious. At best, it has served to keep the national industry running. At worst, to buy off the shelf from the Americans (a lot), the Turks and South Koreans (a little). Spending more is useless without spending better, without defining the objective to be achieved, distributing the effort and reorganizing the European armies. In short, developing a new modern European security architecture, in a concerted manner.

Myopic trust in the American ally

Hoping that planting a flagship figure will convince Trump to be more lenient..., therefore seems like a chimera. As long as we do not spend American. The USA does not want the Europeans to organize their

defense: they want them to buy American. By forcing a drastic and rapid increase in spending, they are directing spending. The United States is sure of itself, assured, on all segments, of being able to assume this increase in power, with tested and available equipment (aircraft, missiles, technology, etc.).

Strategic blindness towards Russia

De façon anachronique, les Russes partagent la même vision (que les Européens dépensent plus). Mais avec un but différent : provoquer une fragmentation européenne. Poutine utilise la même tactique que Reagan avec la guerre des missiles visant l'URSS, il veut épuiser les Européens économiquement et provoquer par réaction des changements politiques (5). Avec un mot d'ordre : ayez peur ! (6). L'invasion de l'Ukraine est un élément fondamental de cette stratégie. Le sabotage des câbles sous-marins (communications, électricité) en mer Baltique, les assassinats politiques ou les campagnes de désinformation / manipulation des médias la complètent. Un discours offensif parachève le tout, dans une gestuelle typique de la guerre froide, qui va jusqu'à la menace de l'arme nucléaire.

(Nicolas Gros-Verheyde)

A surprisingly favorable context

In recent years, particularly between 2022 and 2024 (7), all the criteria favourable to major decisions have converged in an extraordinary way. As if a fairy had leaned over the cradle of Europe.

- First, significant external pressure, forcing or allowing decisions to be made that were unthinkable the day before.
- Secondly, a certain political consensus among the Member States on defence. Despite some hitches, particularly in Hungary but not only, there was unity.
- Third, a circle of European leaders who are ready to move forward. In the four major countries, between the liberal Emmanuel Macron in France, the social democrat Olaf Scholz in Germany, the socialist Pedro Sanchez in Spain and the conservative Giorgia Meloni in Italy, there is (in theory) a desire to move Europe forward.
- Fourthly, a European quartet (European Commission, High Representative, European Parliament, Council of the EU) ready to make the most necessary proposals.
- Fifth, a financial tap that is open almost uninterruptedly (1).
- Finally, a certain benevolence across the Atlantic to see Europeans managing certain world problems. Without forgetting a certain consensus among the population to move forward on this subject.

Despite all this, nothing remarkable has happened. As in many international crises, instead of looking at the world, Europeans are navel-gazing and gargling with false good solutions.

1. The European Peace Facility has seen its ceiling of 5 billion euros (2018 prices) over seven years (2021-2027) triple, rising to 15,5 billion (2018 prices). To which must be added the exceptional income from frozen assets (1,4 billion). That is nearly 18,5 billion in real prices (compared to 5,7

billion originally). In two years, the increase is dizzying.

2. Program presented in March 2024, endowed with 500 million euros per year (1,5 billion over the period), this instrument has still not been adopted at the beginning of 2025 and should not be operational before the end of 2025.
3. Lire: [\[Decryption\] The roadmap for the 2013 defense summit: 18 months later, what is the assessment?](#)
4. For France, this would require finding 85 billion euros, and for Germany, 123 billion euros, or for Italy, 75 billion. Even to reach the 3% target, this would require finding between 25 billion and 35 billion (at constant GDP). Estimates based on the latest NATO report on defense spending.
5. The rise to power of the far-right FPÖ in Austria should be a cause for concern. It comes on top of that of Robert Fico in Slovakia. Andrej Babiš is on the verge of power in the Czech Republic, and Călin Georgescu is not far from it in Romania. A large part of Central Europe is turning pro-Russian.
6. Un motto qui est un peu l'inverse du « N'ayez pas peur » du pape Jean-Paul II lors de son investiture en octobre 1978 qui a résonné dans plusieurs pays de l'Est, notamment la Pologne, son pays d'origine, comme un appel à la résistance.
7. The year 2024, marked by the electoral campaign and the renewal of European institutions, was a "lost" year.

Read also: [Book "European Defense at the Time of War in Ukraine"](#)

Mis à jour pour préciser la référence à Jean-Paul II et l'article avant première sur le Conseil européen informel

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