



A NEW EU-NATO AGREEMENT: YES, BUT IN WHAT CONTEXT?

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The election of Joe Biden to the White House has relaunched European debates on relations with the US and NATO by many think tanks, and generally the arguments put forward end with the consecration of European dependence on the US in defence matters. A good example is an interesting piece entitled [For a New NATO-EU Bargain](#), according to which – following a very pragmatic analysis – NATO is to preside over collective defence, the EU takes care of crisis management, and a coalition of willing states is activated, from time to time, for 'robust' military interventions outside the EU's borders. Dependence on the USA is concealed behind the cover of NATO, as if it were a third organisation alongside the USA and the EU. The North Atlantic Treaty continues to be confused with the North Atlantic Treaty *Organisation*: the latter is the instrument for achieving the goals of the former, but they are not the same thing. In 1966, France left NATO, but not the Treaty, and today it is part of NATO, but not of its Nuclear Planning Group.

Without this distinction in mind, it is difficult to determine whether European defence is actually provided by NATO or whether - as is in fact the case - it depends on the United States and its decision-making bodies. NATO is undoubtedly equipped with an efficient command and mission control structure; it is able to plan and manage large-scale combined and joint missions; it is also a military structure that, with an eye on the US military industry, has brought European armed forces to a high degree of interoperability: all roles on which the EU has not yet achieved its 'strategic autonomy', the real autonomy that we should be talking about. But to claim that NATO *per se* is capable of defending the EU – without the US military apparatus integrated into NATO – is unrealistic: European defence depends on compliance with Article 5 of the [Treaty](#), not on NATO. Besides, today the USA's priority is the Asian sphere, and over time American troop numbers stationed in Europe have reduced from [400,000 men](#) to little more than [52,000](#) (UK excluded) - though it is difficult to establish with precision how many American troops (and bases) are included in NATO, or part of [bilateral agreements](#) .

Talk of a new agreement between the EU, a political community involved in an ongoing integration and consolidation process - as evidenced by the decision to issue European debt that has effectively doubled the EU budget - and NATO, an organisational structure, does not seem to possess a clear political logic. Rather, it should be the EU, on the one hand, and the US, on the other, that discuss the future of NATO, within the broader framework of transatlantic relations. Admittedly, the EU does not yet have its own military structure, and the [Strategic Compass](#) will only be approved next year, but it is necessary to identify the path towards a European defence now: it is the only perspective in which it makes sense to talk about a new EU-US agreement on NATO.

From an institutional point of view, we must begin to make the argument that the EU *per se* should become part of the North Atlantic Treaty, alongside its member states. In some respects, even if these are still symbolic acts, we are moving in this direction. NATO Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg](#) attended a meeting of the European Commission for the first time on 15 December 2020, and on 26 February he met the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, before the meeting devoted to security and defence.

As regards the possible steps forward that can be taken in the military sphere, remember that the German SPD recently proposed the establishment of a first nucleus of a European army, in addition to, not as a replacement for, national armies, calling it 'the 28th army'. In many respects,

the 28th army already exists in the form of [Eurocorps](#), established by an intergovernmental treaty that came into force in 2009 and to which five European countries belong: Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Spain. Italy is only present as an observer. The advantage of this military structure is that it already has an operational command, albeit at divisional level, but sufficient to manage 10 to 20 thousand men.

To date, there appear to be three alternatives for creating a minimum autonomous European military structure: a) the [assignment to the EUMS](#), on a permanent basis, even after the end of their tasks, of personnel and means (including the resources of the national general staffs that ensure their operability) engaged in the 17 missions, both civil and military, that the EU has under way in the world; b) the implementation of the German SPD proposal; c) the transformation of Eurocorps into the 28th European Army, integrating its founding treaty into the European Treaties.

The third alternative could enable the EU to be equipped with an operational structure right away. But this step is being held back by France, which, on the one hand, defends Europe's ambition to have an autonomous defence capability, but on the other, is also hindering the strengthening of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, an embryonic European operational staff that the EU had intended to strengthen with the support of Eurocorps.

If the presence of the United Kingdom in the EU was the fig leaf that concealed all national resistance to progress in the process of European unification, today the main difficulties - as in the days of the European Defence Community (EDC) - come from France. This is the only way to explain the slow progress in the development of the [new generation](#) Franco-German military aircraft (SCAF) due to German resistance to roles and responsibilities in the project and, at the same time, the Anglophile line followed by Italy on the [competing project](#).

The fact is that Macron, in the military field, has not yet been able to make the choice that Helmut Kohl made in the monetary field, by renouncing the Deutschmark in order to allow the birth of the euro. Attributing all responsibility to France alone, however, would not be correct. It is true that, in the precedent of the EDC mentioned, it was the vote of the French National Assembly that scuttled the project, but the hesitation of De Gasperi's pro-European Italy to ratify the treaty facilitated that vote.

Today, Italy could play a decisive role in establishing the European '28th army', particularly with regard to Eurocorps. Italy, as mentioned earlier, is today only an observer in Eurocorps, but could ask to be a full member in the event that it is decided to make it a European military structure, enshrined in the European treaties, and under the command of the EU Military Committee. Starting to promote parliamentary hearings on these issues, at the national and European level, could be an important step in this direction.

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(The opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the CSF)

