

# The Development of European Defense Autonomy under the background of Ukraine Crisis

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## Abstract

As an important component of strategic cooperation among EU countries, European defense autonomy runs through the process of European integration and has been developed rapidly after Macron came to power. After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, European countries fully realized the weakness of their own defense capabilities and strong dependence on the outside world, and defense autonomy was again put on the important agenda. However, due to different internal interests, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and the frequent interference of the United States, the EU's defense autonomy may not be smooth sailing. In the crisis, Europe's center of gravity is shifting eastward, and the forces of "Weimar Triangle" are returning. If Poland can be fully emphasized under the minimum consensus of jointly maintaining the security of the EU, friendly exchanges between Germany, France and Poland can be promoted, and both traditional and new forces can be taken into account, the realization of defense autonomy may turn out to be a turning point.

## Keywords

Ukraine Crisis, Defense Autonomy, European Security.

### 1. European defense autonomy policy has a long history

As Mark Eyskens, a former Belgian minister of state, considered, "Europe is an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military earthworm." [1] Defense autonomy is the premise of European strategic autonomy, and reliable defense capability is a necessary condition for Europe to seek strategic autonomy. For a supranational organization like the European Union, the building of defense capabilities clearly depends on efficient and high-quality defense cooperation among member states.

#### 1.1. The twists and turns of defense cooperation

Stage of initial attempt (1950s-1980s) : European integration began, to some extent, with defense cooperation. In 1950, France launched the European Defense Community Project, which, together with the Brussels Treaty Organization, became the initial attempt of defense integration in Western Europe [2]. Five years after the end of World War II, the Fourth Republic of France was mired in partisan struggles, the formation of the Cold War pattern, and the domination of NATO made the Western European Defense Union lose its role as a military entity. In order to accelerate the construction of Europe, countries put the focus of development on economy, and the defense community project stalled. Since then, the defense cooperation in Western Europe has been separated from the European integration process for a long period of time.

Stage of reexploration (1980s-1990s) : In the 1970s and 1980s, European political integration led to the start of defense cooperation. In the context of the escalating arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union and the intensifying East-West confrontation, in order to

reduce military dependence on the United States and better safeguard its own security, the Single European Act enacted in the mid-1980s for the first time included political cooperation in the treaty and actively promoted the consultation on defense and security policies and strategies. This active exploration laid a foundation for the further development of Western European defense alliance in the 1990s and provided new impetus for the EU to build a political union including common defense.[3]

Stage of pragmatic development (1990s- the end of the 20th century) : Half a century after the end of World War II, with the upheavals in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany, defense issues returned to people's attention: strengthening the EU's defense capability and formulating a coherent and effective security policy are not only vital to the development of European integration and its internal security in the new era, but also an inevitable requirement to improve the status of the EU as a whole in the changing global political landscape. Based on the above consideration, Treaty on European Union put forward the common foreign and security policy that "will include all alliance security related problems, including the final formation of a common defense policy" ; it states that the Common Foreign and Security Policy deals with "all questions relating to the defence of the EU", thus bringing defense into the scope of the EU's common foreign and security policy for the first time.

## **1.2. Rapid development of defense cooperation**

At the end of the 20th century, the Kosovo crisis exposed the EU's inadequate ability to deal with crises and its over-dependence on NATO. The EU members held a series of emergency summits and made a solid step towards independent defense. In December 1998, the leaders of Britain and France held a summit in St. Malo and issued a joint declaration on European defense.

In 1999, the Council of the European Union held the Cologne Conference and the Helsinki Conference, put forward the concept of Autonomy of Action and detailed it. In 2003, the Iraq war led to the European Security Strategy, the EU's first overall security strategy. This strategy guided the Security Policy coordination of EU and its member states in the following ten years, including the Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP. The EU finally established a more institutionalized common security and defense policy with the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.[4]

With the rise of East Asia and the change of international power pattern, the United States pays less attention to Europe and gradually shifts its security focus from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region. In November 2011, the Obama administration put forward the "pivot to the Asia-Pacific" strategy; after Trump was elected US President, he repeatedly made statements of "America first" and "NATO obsolete", declared that he would withdraw from Europe and asked Europeans to shoulder more defense responsibilities themselves. Since 2015, Europe has faced non-traditional threats such as the refugee crisis and terrorist attacks. In addition, after the UK left the EU, the EU has lost nearly one quarter of its military strength and its overall defense capability has been weakened. All these mean that the EU must shoulder more security responsibilities independently.

In June 2016, the European External Action Service released a global strategy for foreign and security policy entitled Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe and the concept of "strategic autonomy".[5] But since the CFSP is a maximum common divisor negotiated at the level of member states rather than an exclusive EU policy, "strategic autonomy" is more of a strategic vision.

Since his election as French president, Macron has put defense back on the agenda. "In defence, our goal must be a European with capacity to act autonomously, as a complement to NATO's military power" , he said in a 2017 Sorbonne speech. With the activation of Permanent Structured Cooperation, PESCO in 2017 and the establishment of the Defense Fund in 2020,

there have been some advances in European defense capabilities, but differences in troop levels and different perspectives on security issues have limited cooperation projects to marginal areas such as medical support, radio frequency security, logistical transport, etc.

## **2. The Ukraine Crisis accelerated the construction of European defense**

"The conflict and the power game in Europe force us to arm ourselves with real strategic autonomy," Macron said in a speech to naval forces aboard the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle on December 19, 2022. The great strategic competition between China and the United States and the war in Ukraine have pushed terrorism, the Middle East and Iran's nuclear program to the background, and European countries have adjusted their defense policies one after another. As the Ukraine crisis escalates, the United States has regained its central role in European defense pattern, seeking to form a strong alliance to counter China militarily, diplomatically and economically, and restoring NATO, an outdated organization criticized by Trump and considered "brain dead" by France, to its original role as a bastion of combat. But France and the rest of Europe clearly do not want to take the extreme risk of getting caught up in a confrontation between two superpowers. In order to cope with possible security crises and improve the EU's own defense capabilities, the EU has made great progress in defense independence since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which is reflected in the investment of defense funds, the introduction of common policies and the improvement of cooperation projects.

### **2.1. In terms of defense investment.**

European countries have been gradually falling behind due to their low defense expenditure (less than 1.5% of GDP), and with the development of technology and the fierce competition in the international market, the production of more advanced weapons inevitably leads to the increase of research and development costs. In response, the European Commission has launched an \$8 billion Defense fund to finance technological innovation and cooperation between European defense companies over the period 2021-2027. At present, 700 million euros of the first 1.2 billion euros will be used for major projects such as fighter jets, digital ships and defense missiles; 200 million euros for key technologies such as artificial intelligence and networking; 50 million euros for space.

France is also well aware of the importance of strengthening its defense: Macron announced during a visit to the Mont-de-Marsan (Landes) air base on January 20, 2022 that France will spend 4.13 billion euros in 2024-2030 on the military. The last time the government invested on such a scale was in the 1960s, when Charles de Gaulle, then president, decided to overhaul the military and take part in the atomic race. This move has two main goals: first, to actively respond to external threats and safeguard national security; The second is to maintain France's status as a world power.

### **2.2. In terms of the introduction of common policies.**

the European Council has designated 2022 as the European Year of Defense. In early mid-March, the leaders of 27 EU countries adopted the Versailles declaration, determined to build "European sovereignty" from the four aspects of "enhancing their own defense capability, reducing dependence on external energy, consolidating economic foundation and strengthening investment". In the declaration, they reiterated the words "autonomy" and "independence" for many times. Emphasizing responsibility for one's own security. In late March, the EU adopted its first action plan of A Strategic Defence nature A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, [6]this plan sets out a roadmap for the EU's security and defense work in the next five to ten years, including the establishment of a 5,000 rapid reaction force by 2025, strengthening the defense system including new combat areas such as space and sea. It also

resolves to increase investment in military equipment and research and development of high-tech weapons, and strengthen military cooperation with Allies and partners,[7] clearly endow the role of EU as "security provider" and "security actor".

### **2.3. In terms of the improvement of cooperation projects.**

since 2016, with the direct goal of "defense autonomy" capacity building, the EU has activated a number of defense cooperation mechanisms among its member states, including Permanent Structured Cooperation platform, Capability Development Plan (CDP), Coordinated annual review on defense (CARD), European Defence Fund, Organization of Military Planning and Operational Capability Command (MPCC), European Peace Facility (EPF) and other complementary mechanisms.

After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Poland, Romania and other eastern European countries provided support for Ukraine's cyber defense, relying on the EU's network rapid response team program of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) .[8] Among the Nordic countries that tend to be militarily neutral, Denmark formally joined the EU's security agenda through a referendum in June 2022, which also reflects the effectiveness of the EU's promotion of strategic independence in the security and defense field in recent years.

## **3. The achievement of European defense autonomy is an arduous task**

Due to the following factors, it will not be easy for European defense independence to be realized and there is a long way to go.

### **3.1. First, the promotion of defense autonomy depends on the support and recognition of this initiative within the EU.**

From the perspective of the EU itself, former French President Francois Mitterrand once said, "France is our country, and Europe is our future." Most Europeans believe that the concept of state will eventually become a thing of the past, and the deepening development of the European Union is the proper meaning of history. As a supranational organization, the EU's internal identity is inseparable from the vision creation, policy decision-making and implementation of its leading institutions. Within the EU, there are many member states, which have different views on European defense autonomy. Some member states are very active, such as France; Others advocate reliance on the US-led NATO alliance. So while the vision is good, implementation will be difficult.

For example, Eastern European countries and Central and eastern European countries have always been pursued by European powers and are often regarded as trading chips of neighboring powers. The tortuous historical fate makes them have a strong psychology of vigilance against European powers and a sense of nationalism to safeguard their own interests. Their proximity to Russia also puts them under greater security pressure than western European countries. As István Bibó, a Hungarian historian, cautions: "Talk of national death or 'destruction' may sound like an empty phrase in the West, but for eastern European countries it is an immediate reality." As a result, vulnerable eastern European countries are deeply suspicious of the EU's own defence capacity building and prefer US world leadership and nuclear umbrella protection. Another example is Northern Europe. After the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, some neutral countries in northern Europe sought to join NATO one after another due to their proximity to Russia.

The Franco-German axis is the main promoter of European defence autonomy, but there is also a certain divergence between the idea of "European strategic autonomy"--the current French mantra -- and the minimalist view of power that has prevailed in Germany since 1945. Although Germany remains a leader in Europe, its strategic vision is limited to defending commercial interests and its "Audiocratic liberalism".[9] The expression "European power" is also confined

to specific statements of intent by certain leaders. Strategic arms cooperation is also difficult: faced with the military threat of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Eurofighter Typhoon and France's Rafale have been around for years. The sixth generation fighter project SCAF and the ground combat System MGCS tank jointly developed by Germany and France are still castles in the air. However, the Bundeswehr's purchase of F-35 fighter jets from the United States cannot hide its dependence on the Atlantic Alliance. In the final analysis, the federalist view promoted by France is incompatible with the realist position of Germany.

### **3.2. Second, the key to the EU's defense independence lies in the enhancement of national military power and the establishment of a pan-European defense industry cluster.**

"It is time to get serious about European defence," Josep Borrell, the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs, said in an article in *Le Monde*, stressing that the 27 EU countries must unite their political will and invest more in defence to jointly safeguard security. For years, European politicians and think tanks have published studies calling for increased defence spending and greater military co-operation within the EU.

In 2004, the EU established the European Defence Agency (EDA) to support member states' joint defence research, development and procurement projects. But after the 2008 financial crisis, many countries cut back on defense spending, reducing the share of their budgets devoted to cooperative investment; And because of its longstanding pacifism, the EU has lacked a common defence policy, with ammunition reserves that could last only a week in the face of a Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On May 18, 2022, the European Commission proposed to use the European budget to subsidize member states' combat readiness and promote internal joint arms procurement. Similar to the collective procurement of COVID-19 vaccines, this would not only protect smes from competition, but also make it easier for similarly-equipped militaries to coordinate their operations, ultimately promoting strategic autonomy by gradually buying weapons made in Europe rather than imported from the United States.

But governments often accept joint procurement on the face of it, but in reality continue to buy domestically to support their own industries. In addition, the current European military assistance to Ukraine has reached 4 billion euros, the cost of green energy transformation in Europe has increased by 200 billion euros after Russia's energy supply is cut off, and the estimated cost of receiving refugees of 17 billion euros and the economic expenditure of aid to Africa are also calculated. Under the background of inflation, Europe is already heavily in debt, and it is difficult to increase the defense expenditure.

In terms of its internal military capabilities, France, which prides itself on having the continent's first army, has also failed to show what it should have done in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. France's defense industry actually has a certain degree of defense independence, but its defense and industrial technology base still has shortcomings: first, France is dominated by innovative smes in this field, but these enterprises are not affected by foreign acquisition policies, so it is generally difficult to put the defense plan at the core of its growth strategy. What's more, France relies heavily on US and Chinese technology for some parts of its defence equipment[10], making it more or less susceptible to extraterritorial law. According to some studies, France is likely to become the second or even third largest military power in Europe in the next decade or so, as the German government's military budget increases and Eastern European countries bordering Russia (mainly Poland) rise. While Franco-German tank co-operation remains sluggish, anti-missile defence plans by Germany, the US and Israel have attracted many European countries.

Admittedly, the Ukraine Crisis has marginalised Europe's internal defence -- co-operation with NATO, coupled with a bilateral military pact with Britain, is not the most sensible option, but it is more practical.

### **3.3. Third, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought about a structural shift in geopolitical power and shaken the foundation of the European security order.**

In the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, central and eastern European countries led by Poland seem to have replaced the axis of France and played a more active role: Poland was the first EU country to provide military support to Ukraine, and the idea of joint purchase of ammunition proposed by Estonian Prime Minister Kallas in the European Commission also fully demonstrated his political leadership; All this sounds the alarm of geopolitical change.

But the Barcelona Treaty with Spain, the 60th anniversary celebrations with Germany and the Franco-British summit also show that the French do not seem to have moved beyond the mindset of 20 years ago, in which eastern Europeans were mostly "Atlanticist" or "neoconservative"[11]. In the name of defending an independent Europe, the "old state" of France should leave them alone and work for peace.

One year after the outbreak of the Ukraine Crisis, the revival of the Franco-German axis's influence is not obvious either. France's diplomatic mediation in the crisis did not play a role in easing the situation, but hoped that its major trading partner "Beijing can play an important role in Ukraine's search for a peaceful path"; with sanctions against Russia, deepening energy crisis and high inflation, Germany's Green Party have agreed to a return to burnt coal after electricity prices rose tenfold. The traditional power is not reliable, more and more people are turning to America: according to a January 2023 poll by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 32% of Germans and 52% of Danes see Washington as their "ally" rather than just a "necessary partner," up from 19% and 35% respectively in 2021. The concept of "ally" is already prevalent in Scandinavian countries.

From a global perspective, the United States is undoubtedly a powerful driver of geopolitical change. As Ukraine's largest donor to date, the United States has announced more than 73.18 billion euros in grants to Ukraine since January 2022, 60 percent of which goes to military spending. President Biden has travelled to Poland and Kiev, cheerfully declaring that NATO is "stronger than ever" and that America's support for the Europeans is "unwavering". At a time when the traditional West is in decline and a China-Russia axis is emerging -- or rather, a "new Cold War" Russia-Ukraine rivalry that transcends Sino-American rivalry -- the EU and its transatlantic axis have no choice but to stick together.

### **4. "Weimar Triangle" return, European defense will turn a corner[12]**

Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Europeans have roughly divided into three groups: those who are deeply concerned about threats from the East, those who are deeply concerned about destabilizing factors from the south, and those who feel that they have never faced any threat. With the change of the world situation and the progress of military science and technology, the development trend of defense issues will be that defense will become a competition among a few global powers, while most other countries have actually lost their independent defense capabilities and become vassals of military powers.[13] Therefore, a strong defense capability is the guarantee for Europe to realize strategic autonomy and maintain multilateral order. Despite the current differences in specific European defense policies, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has at least led to a certain consensus within the EU that in the long run, relying on any power for security is unreliable, and that strengthening internal military cooperation and building up Europe's own defense forces is a priority.

Europe's centre of gravity is shifting under the crisis. In the above analysis, policy identity, capital input and geopolitical pattern changes are the main obstacles to the independent construction of European defense, among which Eastern European countries all play an important role. If European defence autonomy is to be truly achieved, the involvement of

eastern European countries is essential. It is worth noting that Poland, as a representative of Central and Eastern European countries, has a sense of crisis for its own security, good public support for the development of EU defense and active defense input. Its outstanding performance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is of positive significance to the building of EU defense capacity. If we can strengthen exchanges between Germany, France and Poland while maintaining the "Franco-German axis" cooperation, and reduce ideological differences, the situation may change. Is a return to the Weimar Triangle possible?

After the end of the Cold War, the European Union hoped to establish a peaceful and unified Europe through its eastward expansion strategy. Poland is the typical representative of Eastern European countries and the center of gravity of its eastward expansion strategy[14]. In 1991, at the proposal of the German Foreign Minister, the foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland held a trilateral meeting in Weimar, an ancient city in eastern Germany, and established a mechanism for regular annual meetings. Since then, the regular meetings of the three sides have gradually transformed into meetings of heads of government in various fields including security, defense, economy and culture, thus being called the "Weimar Triangle".

The Weimar Triangle has promoted the relations between Poland, France and Germany and injected new vitality into the building of the European Union. However, in the subsequent Iraq War, the "New Europe" with Spain, Italy, Denmark and 10 former Eastern European countries as the core was more in line with the United States on major international issues, but ran counter to the anti-war "old Europe" with France and Germany, and the mechanism of the "Weimar Triangle" was greatly weakened. Under the background of Russia-Ukraine conflict, Poland is in line with the promotion of defense autonomy policy from the perspectives of national plot, its own strength and relations with other great powers. It is a force that cannot be ignored in the new pattern of European defense.

#### **4.1. In terms of national plot, geographical conditions determine the fate of a country.**

Poland is located in the middle of Europe, between Germany to the west and Russia to the east. The Polder Plain was undefended and difficult to defend itself. Since the 18th century, Poland has been the biggest victim of the rivalry between the neighboring powers. The two world wars of the 20th century, one ended with the restoration of Polish independence in 1918 and the other with the invasion of Poland by Fascist Germany in 1939. Special historical experience makes Poles highly sensitive to national independence and national sovereignty, attach great importance to security issues, and keep alert to neighboring powers, especially Russia. While Germany's military capacity has declined by 90% since 1989, Poland's military spending has steadily increased, rising to 3% of GDP since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

#### **4.2. In terms of its own strength, land size, population and economic strength of Poland laid the foundation for its status as a major country in Eastern Europe.**

Among the Eastern European countries of the European Union, Poland covers an area of 322,600 square kilometers, equivalent to about one third of the area of other Eastern European countries combined, and has a population of more than 38 million, ranking eighth in Europe. Poland is currently the seventh largest economy in the European Union and 22nd in the world. Poland's GDP per capita reached \$17,840 in 2021, and its household savings are more than double the global average and growing at an annual rate of 15 percent. Poland also has the largest stock market in central and Eastern Europe.[15]

Poland was also on the front lines of change during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. As one of the few European countries with a military force, Poland has actively provided humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine, taken in nearly 2 million refugees and put forward three

initiatives for action: "The first is to continue to strongly support Ukraine in terms of political and military equipment, the second is to send a strong signal to Ukraine and give it a clear prospect of joining the EU, and the third is to strengthen sanctions against Russia, including energy sanctions." In addition, its stable democracy, relatively mature market economy and regulated administration and judiciary set an example for other Eastern European countries, demonstrating the influence of regional powers.

#### **4.3. In terms of relations with major powers (US), the unilateralist policy of the United States made it necessary for Poland to attach importance to defense autonomy within Europe.**

After the end of the Cold War, Poland repeatedly shifted its diplomatic and security priorities to the United States and intended to become "the most important ally of the United States in Europe after Britain." But after Mr Obama took office, the US briefly abandoned plans to build missile defence bases in the Czech Republic and Poland. After Biden took office, he repeatedly accused the Polish government of interfering with media freedom and undermining the rights of women and sexual minorities, causing tensions between Poland and the United States. If the conflict between Russia and Ukraine had not erupted, the Biden administration would most likely have continued to snub the current Polish government.[16] In terms of public opinion, the Polish public is also more positive about the internal defence of the EU. According to a German Marshall Fund survey conducted in 2022, 60% of Poles believe the EU plays a very important role in national security, more than Germans (41%) and French (30%). Only 14 per cent of Germans want their country to be "more involved in military action" and 68 per cent oppose Germany playing a "leading military role in Europe".

As for the opposite ends of the Weimar Triangle, there is little doubt that the Franco-German axis will remain Europe's main power for a long time to come. The Elysee Treaty is the foundation of the Franco-German axis and the source power of the construction of European integration, as well as an important premise to promote the construction of European defense and economic revival.[17] The Treaty of Aachen is an important step forward in Franco-German cooperation. The coming to power of Emmanuel Macron, Brexit, the impact of COVID-19, the strategic turnaround of the United States and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine have all provided opportunities for Franco-German cooperation. Despite their differences and sometimes shaky axis, France and Germany have often been able to compromise at critical moments to ensure the direction of EU action,[18] unite other EU countries.

Professor Kohler Koch, a famous expert on European integration and a German scholar, believes that in the EU, France and Germany are often at opposite ends of interests, so once the two countries reach an agreement on a controversial issue, they can lead the EU forward. This is the enduring spirit of the "Franco-German axis" in the European Community and the European Union.

## **5. Conclusion**

Of all the shocks Europe has faced over the past 15 years -- including the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migrant and refugee crisis, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic -- the Russia-Ukraine conflict is undoubtedly the biggest to hit the continent. Now, Ms. Von der Leyen said, the "real moment" had come to address Europe's strategic autonomy, and Europe should seize the moment to end its external dependence. As representatives of the major powers in new and old Europe, Germany, France and Poland, although not necessarily the most ideal trend of cooperation from the perspective of old cooperation traditions, practical needs or regional influence, it is beneficial and harmful to try cooperation and unite defense forces on the basis of minimum consensus on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.



It is also worth noting that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has expanded the defense issue from pure defense and security to all aspects, including cyberspace. Since the conflict began, 128 government organizations, including those of the European Union and the United States (mainly NATO members), as well as 111 entities in Russia have been attacked in some form, and almost all international actors have been affected in some way or another.[19] It presents the situation that the network strategic attack activity and the real military action interweave, the scale is unprecedented. Even as Russian troops massed on Ukraine's border, hackers went ahead and crippled the systems of Viasat, a US satellite communications company, cutting off the Ukrainian military, public services and many businesses.

Cyber experts have long predicted that attacks on IT systems and related infrastructure would become more sophisticated and destructive, with severe impacts on critical infrastructure and industrial systems such as energy, communications, transport and production. With the deepening of geopolitical crisis and the progress of technological means, cyber attacks will continue to become specialized, industrialized and collectivized, which will bring higher economic, social and political costs, and the defense of the European Union may face more severe challenges in the future.

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