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Europe's weakness denies America a key partner

Transatlantic defence cooperation

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What The Economist hailed as the most important election for decades was possibly the most inconsequential for Europe. Such a conclusion has little to do with the winner of the recent US presidential race. Rather, it is the inevitable outcome of a seriously unbalanced security relationship – a situation perpetuated by those who would rather deny or accept it than confront it.

Europeans' relief at the re-election of President Barack Obama, however understandable, masks both recent experience and future disappointments. Not only is Mr Obama the least "European" of US presidents in recent memory, his administration's policies – including its much-trumpeted "Asia Pivot" – underline a shift in America's relations with Europe that transcends the current White House.

From US complaints in the 1990s over disproportionate burden sharing to Secretary Robert Gates' warning last year that Europe risked "collective military irrelevance," the message has been clear and consistent. Yet, the response has been a litany of new challenges: NATO's mid-life crisis, US unilateralism, European insularity, the "rise of the rest." In reality, transatlantic cooperation suffers from three fundamental weaknesses related to Europe's military capability, institutions, and political leadership.

Eroding military capability

Statistically, Europe still accounts for a third of global non-US defence spending, but such a figure is meaningless when considering that real spending for two-thirds of European NATO has been steadily declining and three-fourths of EU defence outlays support purely national programs. Faced with such stubborn facts, neither NATO's Smart Defence nor the EU's Pooling and Sharing initiative stands much chance of success. NATO's Libya operation was only the latest reminder of Europe's persistent military flaws, ranging from insufficient precision munitions to poor intelligence gathering.

Political fragmentation, institutional paralysis

While Nordic states have made strides in deepening military cooperation, in key defence areas, Europe has no coherent policy or shared investment approach. This explains why Europeans still lack their own advanced unmanned aerial vehicle program even as they continue to support more than a dozen armoured personnel vehicle providers. It also explains why US policymakers see little value in transatlantic defence cooperation. The recent close working relationship between the European Central Bank and the US Treasury, and even between the European Union External Action Service and the

State Department, is almost absent in matters of defence. Moreover, judging from the experience of NATO's Air Ground Surveillance and the multi-national Medium Extended Air Defense System, international cooperative programs face too many hurdles to serve as a model for strengthening transatlantic ties.

Leaderless Europe

None of Europe's largest states appears suited to claim the mantle of leadership. Germany, the world's third-largest exporter, is regressing to economic nationalism after opposing a much-needed jolt to Europe's fragmented defence industrial base, the proposed merger between EADS and BAE Systems. Britain is flirting with the idea of an EU exit at a time when it should be seeking greater influence within the only forum in which its voice still carries some weight. Meanwhile, France is pursuing a "competitiveness pact" against the advice of many who believe only shock therapy can reverse the country's global competitiveness decline.

That Europe's leaders will be forced to embrace defence cooperation, market competition and industrial consolidation is only a question of time. Yet, neither the timing nor the outcome will be within their control, unless they shed, in the words of recently departed EU Military Committee chairman General Håkan Syrén, their current "culture of denial" and take pooling and sharing to the next level.

In his acerbic wit, US critic H.L. Mencken once defined puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." For Europeans, complaints about US unilateralism could soon get exposed as the fear that someone, somewhere, may sooner or later call Europe's bluff.



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