

A twenty-first century Maginot Line?

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The EU's Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030

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Introduction

Following a period of sustained arm-twisting by US President Trump that preceded his inauguration in January and a disastrous falling out at the White House for President Zelensky of Ukraine in February,¹ the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, dramatically announced in March that ‘We are living in dangerous times’,² while going on to present an unprecedented €800 billion package to rearm the continent.

The funds, unsurprisingly, depend on suspending budget rules to allow an average 1.5% defence spending increase by member states,³ as well as providing a new loan instrument and allowing money to be redirected from other EU projects to enhance the defence effort. They reflect a realisation by European leaders that it really is up to them to challenge Russia and bring about a peace they had always claimed to be the source of.

But, having somewhat abstractly announced ‘how much’, there remained to be addressed the not-inconsequential question of ‘on what?’ This was to form the substance of a Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030⁴ also announced in March,⁵ then launched by the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, Kaja Kallas, and two other European Commissioners in October,⁶ and approved by the Council shortly after.⁷

The aim all along, in typical EU bureaucratic fashion, has been to project a presumed need to promote joint procurement with a view to ‘reduce costs, reduce fragmentation’ and ‘increase interoperability’.⁸ But the sorry truth is that ‘projects, contracts and financing’⁹ only ever form one element of achieving real security, let alone annual reports and industry summits.¹⁰

As previously explained by MCC Brussels, since its inception, the EU has been a master of technocratic processes while remaining unable to deliver or inspire.¹¹

Despite an aspiration of ‘Creating One European Market for Defence Industry’, as proposed at the end of a short, glossy video to accompany its launch,¹² the Defence Readiness Roadmap is more akin to the delusions of the Maginot Line, the famously extensive – and expensive – fortifications built by France in the 1930s to preclude future invasion, which were readily bypassed by the German army in 1940. Designed to supposedly deter and delay, the lesson of simplistic and idealistic pronouncements and processes, overwhelmed by novel strategy, appears not to have been learnt by leaders still fighting the last war.¹³

Bureaucracy

Foremost among the targets put forward by the European Commission in their Defence Readiness Roadmap are ‘a set of initial European Readiness Flagships that are pan-European by nature’.¹⁴ These are held to need urgent and massive investment in a coordinated manner, as they would ‘benefit the security of Europe as a whole and ... be mutually reinforcing’. They are, initially, a European Drone Defence Initiative, an Eastern Flank Watch, a European Air Shield and a European Space Shield.

The Commission is at pains to describe itself merely ‘as a facilitator’ in this regard, insisting – somewhat self-consciously – that member states will be the drivers of these and indeed that ‘member states are and will remain sovereign for their national security and defence’, while noting however that ‘the complex threat landscape points to the need for member states to act together. The Commission stipulates that it will be for the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy to provide advice and ensure the work supports agreed priorities and objectives.

The European Council will endorse the European Drone Defence Initiative as a priority flagship by the end of 2025 and it will be launched in the first quarter of 2026 with a view to being fully functional by the end of 2027.

Alluding to recent instances of air-space violations across Europe by Russian drones,¹⁵ this explicitly looks to learn lessons from Ukraine – somewhat disparagingly referred to as a ‘steel porcupine’ by the Commission president¹⁶ – in terms of military and technological innovation. In addition,

this is hoped to be adaptable for civil as well as military purposes, helping to deal with border protection, illegal migration, critical infrastructure and organised crime, though political will is surely more important in addressing these.

As anyone with the slightest insight into the workings of EU bureaucracy will know, all this talk of delivering ‘at pace and scale ... in a coordinated way, and with a 360-degree approach’,¹⁷ is just that – talk. EU officials are good at producing reports and using the latest jargon. What they have never done, particularly in relation to defence, is deliver.¹⁸ And, as last year’s report on ‘The future of European competitiveness’ by the former European Central Bank president, Mario Draghi, highlighted – albeit from a perspective looking for still further centralisation and control by the EU’s unaccountable bureaucrats – the continent has steadily fallen behind its competitors in Asia and America in terms of investment and innovation.¹⁹

The Draghi report notes that: ‘The key driver of the rising productivity gap between the EU and the US has been digital technology’, and that accordingly ‘it is important that EU companies maintain a foothold in areas where technological sovereignty is required’, highlighting how ‘AI is an evolving technology in which EU companies still have an opportunity to carve out a leading position in selected segments’.²⁰

But, while its General Data Protection Regulation,²¹ as well as its Digital Markets Act²² and Digital Services Act,²³ allow the EU to influence standards and compliance beyond its borders by fining internet platforms in breach of its rules, as well as controlling AI applications and breaking up companies EU bureaucrats deem too powerful, these are also more likely to inhibit European entrepreneurs than liberate them.

As Norman Lewis indicated in an important report on this for MCC Brussels, there is a world of difference between regulating and leading.²⁴

Only two of the world's 30 largest technology firms by market capitalisation are from the EU. Private funding for AI start-ups in the EU is less than one-sixth that in China and about a tenth of that available in the US. In 2021, just one of the leading 11 global corporates in terms of R&D spend was from the EU – Volkswagen, a car manufacturer. And even VW is looking to base new production overseas,²⁵ while letting Chinese carmakers take over some of its existing production lines.²⁶

The majority of those top R&D spenders are US-based. They have a combined capitalisation today well in excess of the combined GDP of Europe's four leading economies (Germany, the UK, France and Italy). Even the modest proposals made in this regard by the Draghi report – proposals which, lest we forget, several member states immediately decried as impossible²⁷ – do not come anywhere near what would be required to compete in this arena. The notion that a centrally mandated and controlled 1.5%, or even 5%, defence budget increase would make much difference – assuming it were both achieved and spent on real defence, rather than 'Green munitions'²⁸ or combating climate change as some hope²⁹ – is laughable.

Kevin Craven, CEO of ADS Group, the trade organisation representing the aerospace, defence, security and space industries in the United Kingdom, has described the need to double ammunition production across Europe to make up for the absence of US stocks as 'a big ask'.³⁰ Others, such as Joakim Sjöblom, CEO of SweBal (Sweden Ballistics), are lamenting the red tape required by Brussels to enhance capacity,³¹ while Julian David, CEO at TechUK, the UK's technology trade association, says that even outside of obvious heavy equipment like ATACMS, Patriot and HIMARS, the Ministry of Defence would be unable to replace US communications and 'information, surveillance and reconnaissance' capabilities.³²

And it is not simply vast sums that make the difference here. Rather, as Lewis shows, there is an entire cultural and structural ecosystem geared to supporting start-ups and innovation in the US that is entirely absent across the EU. Europe lacks America's willingness to take risks and is underserved by infrastructure – from cables and data centres to satellite networks, such as Elon Musk's Starlink constellation – thereby making it fundamentally dependent upon others. Indeed, as the German defence analyst, Ulrike Franke, recently emphasised, the growing role of private, and accordingly unaccountable, firms and interests within the sector poses a considerable conundrum to states and supranational bodies unable to compete either economically or technically.³³

At a more profound level, the fundamental weakness is a crisis of ambition and imagination. Procurement rules and grants, without a culture of risk-taking and development, can only ever address that which is already, not what has yet to come. This leaves the EU constantly trapped in the present and soon to be past, rather than being in any position to shape the future. It can use its market weight to control others and accrue some of their profits but, as things stand, it is not a player, because passing resolutions and publishing white papers does not create an innovation ecosystem. Little wonder that Mistral, Europe's most valuable AI start-up, looks to a future in Palo Alto.³⁴

Cohesion

As MCC's executive director, Frank Furedi, reminds us: 'At a time when neither France nor Britain can secure their own borders to prevent mass illegal migration, their willingness to secure another nation's borders from an invading army must surely be in doubt.'³⁵ Yet, as it became evident that the US planned to scale back its security support for Europe³⁶ and had no intention of involving European leaders in negotiations to achieve a peaceful resolution in Ukraine, the UK prime minister, Keir Starmer – following meetings with President Macron of France – proposed the possibility of putting 'troops on the ground'.³⁷

As others were quick to point out, this superficially 'principled and bold political move' amounted to little more than 'gesture politics'.³⁸ An emergency summit of 18 EU and other leaders, including Ukraine and the NATO secretary-general, may have announced a 'coalition of the willing'.³⁹ But for all intents and purposes, this amounted to little more than declarations by the UK and France. Even these differed over the details.

More problematically still, as Sir Richard Dannat, a former chief of the General Staff (head of the British Army) advised, Britain lacks both the numbers and the equipment.⁴⁰ With the whole of Europe only able to muster 15,000 troops at any one time, of a minimum 100,000 projected as needed, it is far from evident that the EU has the ability to police a 1,250km long line of contact.

Leave aside the fact that loose talk of an 'irreversible path to NATO' for Ukraine⁴¹ – a possibility first raised some 20 years ago now – and the possibility of placing European troops on the Russian border are precisely

what Putin claims to have motivated his invasion in the first place. It is impossible to view all of this grandstanding talk as anything other than leaders using foreign policy to provide their domestic audiences with a semblance of purpose. This has become even more ridiculous with the recent bluster by the Belgian defence minister, Theo Francken, about ‘erasing Moscow from the map’.⁴²

Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of what was eventually to become the European Union, famously proposed that ‘Europe will be forged in crisis’.⁴³ But it would seem that each time the EU has encountered a crisis, it has been found wanting. It is often in times of crisis that you find out who your friends really are. Such times can teach you more about yourself and the strength of your relationships than about the problem itself. People who are genuinely connected come together. Those that are not fall apart.

Like fair-weather friends, the EU can put on a good show when the stakes are low, such as regulating chemical use.⁴⁴ However, whenever there is a serious problem, its members tend to go their own way. So, in the 2008 financial crisis, Ireland broke ranks to declare it would guarantee all deposits in its banks.⁴⁵ Then Germany did the same,⁴⁶ followed by Denmark, Greece and Spain. During the Covid pandemic in 2020, France and Germany imposed export controls over personal protective equipment.⁴⁷ The EU then had to suspend its own state-aid rules to allow governments to support businesses as they liked.

And now, at the time of its greatest challenge, a war in Europe, the very existence of which the EU was meant to avert, each country has sought to put its own interests first. Some are unwilling to oppose Russia,⁴⁸ others demand more action,⁴⁹ a few have lamented how sanctions are bypassed by their own businesses,⁵⁰ and there is even a push to replace the requirement for unanimity with majority voting to avoid having to win over states deemed recalcitrant.⁵¹ In short, might is right, and chaos rules.

Indeed, the flagship projects of the Defence Readiness Roadmap had all been raised at least a month earlier, and roundly rejected at the time.⁵² Now, in keeping with how European affairs are really organised, each country is looking to make the most for itself from these proposals. So, Germany, for instance, has let it be known that it wishes to lead on the Air Shield,⁵³ and has put forward its own budget to develop its defence industries. But their rationale is as much about economics as it is about military force. It would seem, Furedi noted, that: ‘The powers-that-be have decided that defence is a better focus for economic regeneration than investing in useless Net Zero technology.’⁵⁴

As Holger Schmieding, the chief economist at Berenberg Bank, put it: ‘It is becoming obvious to everybody that defence spending is the way to offset job losses in the car industry.’⁵⁵ But, true to form, Germany’s €377 billion wish-list to build, in the words of Chancellor Friedrich Merz, ‘the strongest conventional army in Europe’,⁵⁶ has already hit a snag. The plan would be to allocate more than €88 billion to its Düsseldorf-based defence giant, Rheinmetall, and its subsidiaries. However, Rheinmetall’s outlet in Sardinia, RWM Italia, has been refused permission by the regional council there to expand ammunition production lines. Citing criticism from local environmentalists and anti-war activists, the regional president asked, ‘Do we want to be in a war economy?’, claiming that such windfall profits for Rheinmetall come at the detriment of social spending.⁵⁷

Some have pointed to other challenges and inconsistencies. If securing Ukraine would take more troops than the EU can deploy, so too will patrolling its skies with drones while countering those of others. The EU has, essentially, little by way of drone capabilities, a fact often pointed to in bemusement by Ukrainian troops who have trained with their European counterparts.⁵⁸ The largest commercial drone manufacturer on earth remains

DJI, based out of Shenzhen, China, with a staggering 74.3% market share.⁵⁹ And, since the early days of the war, aside from developing their own capacity, Ukraine has also relied on small amounts from US suppliers.⁶⁰

Even if the EU were to develop a ‘drone wall’,⁶¹ with jamming technology, interceptor drones and mobile guns, capable of patrolling its 5,000km long ‘Eastern Flank’, the reality is – as all those with skin in the game can confirm – that both the hardware and how this is deployed are evolving so rapidly that, as usual, Europe would arrive late to the party.⁶²

In fact, it was the paucity of munitions and external support that drove Ukraine to adopting this approach in the first place.⁶³ But, as its army of volunteers soon learned, every technical innovation came with a counter challenge from the enemy. The materials used to make drones have become harder to detect on radar. Cameras and acoustic sensors may discern drones, but stopping them means their electronics need to be jammed. Russia adapted ‘by using drones controlled by fibre-optic cables, or using drones that can navigate autonomously, or fly along pre-programmed routes’.⁶⁴ And Ukraine, most infamously, launched an operation delivered by drones concealed in containers that were driven to within proximity of their targets.⁶⁵

Ultimately, it is not drones alone driving all this. Rather, AI has been used to synthesise millions of hours of drone footage to refine ‘target recognition and battle management’.⁶⁶ Both this, and the communications networks necessary to obtain the data at unprecedented speed, remain crucially dependent on external, invariably US, agents – Starlink, Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Oracle. As noted earlier, these dependencies are not about to be overcome by the EU in a hurry, irrespective of how much it is prepared to spend.

Loyalty

From the outset of the Ukraine war, one of its most noteworthy features was the support Zelensky received from his own population. If Ukraine was not a proper nation, as Putin appeared to presume, then the invasion certainly turned it into one.⁶⁷ Demonstrating what ordinary people can do given half the chance, professors, ballerinas and countless others left the safety and comfort of their employment to serve on the frontline.⁶⁸ How many would do that elsewhere across the EU? To do that, people need to believe in something and belong to something. What does the EU offer in this regard?

Ukrainian volunteers – such as Kseniia Kalmus, a former florist turned founder of Klyn Drones, which produces FPV drones for the front line – built arms factories in their garages. ‘Her story is emblematic of a broader phenomenon: teachers, artists, taxi drivers – people from all walks of life – have learned to build or operate drones, write code for the army, or train as aerial reconnaissance experts.’⁶⁹ Civilians with no military experience effectively became weapons developers and analysts, eroding the wall between the armed forces and the citizen. But while the EU pretends to stand for Ukrainian sovereignty, it was, from its inception, critical of nation states and national sovereignty, let alone looking to its civilians, often referred to as mere ‘inhabitants’ or ‘consumers’, to resolve anything.⁷⁰

The EU’s federalist tendencies became clearer as it transitioned from being a narrow economic community into a wider union with political, security and foreign-policy aspirations at the time of German reunification and the Maastricht Treaty, soon after the end of the Cold War. This is what drove its officials to oppose the ‘Leave’ vote in the UK’s 2016 Brexit

referendum – and indeed, every negative vote it has ever faced, whether over its proposed constitution or anything else⁷¹ – on the grounds that any form of euroscepticism was held to both reflect and drive a petit, and potentially problematic, nationalism.⁷²

This period also witnessed, not just a disconnection of citizens from the very limited democratic decision-making processes of the EU, but their effective dismissal as agents of change.⁷³ The people's rejection of this is what lies behind contemporary elite concerns pertaining to supposed 'democratic backsliding' and 'populism',⁷⁴ as well as EU institutions' continued use of a so-called 'cordon sanitaire'⁷⁵ to prevent views and political parties they deem to be unacceptable from holding or sharing power, and which only serves to distance the public still further.

Now, after years of excluding and rejecting their own citizens, European leaders find themselves in the unenviable position of somehow having to appeal to some kind of patriotic spirit, at both national and EU levels, in order to justify their need to mobilise support for increased military expenditure and potential armed conflict.

But values such as loyalty to a nation, a sense of pride and duty, emerge over time. They are the product of informal, organic relations that take generations to build. Formal rules and regulations can never compensate for these. Today, right across Europe – aside from in countries such as Finland and Poland, who know a thing or two about Russia from recent experience – there exists a somewhat febrile attitude, particularly among young people who are unwilling to fight for their country, let alone much else.

Only 11% of Generation Z would fight for Britain, while 48% say it is 'a racist country' – which is hardly surprising seeing as that is what they are taught at school.⁷⁶ In Germany, the figures for those willing to take up arms are only slightly better.⁷⁷ The sorry truth is that projects, contracts and

financing only ever form one element of achieving real security. Even if you were to quadruple defence spending, if no one is willing to fight for you, there would be no consequence. War is just as much about spirit as it is about kit. Probably more so.

In a recent commentary on the four pillars of European defence, Nicu Popescu of the European Council on Foreign Relations rightly identifies ‘securing public support’ as one of these pillars.⁷⁸ But the usual response to the absence of this is to say that things would change if an invasion occurred. Such wishful thinking operates at every level of the EU, and the only reasonable responses are that, by then, it’s often too late, but more importantly, that it might be worth taking young people’s statements of support, or not, at face value.

John Keegan, the military historian and journalist who gave the 1998 Reith Lectures, described war as ‘collective killing for a purpose’.⁷⁹ The challenge today is that most Western democracies have a problem with all three of those elements. The demise of any sense of collective and an undue focus on individual identity are notorious features of the contemporary world. Killing is, of course, frowned upon in general, but we seem to have lost any sense that without struggle, there is no life. Nature itself would take us if we didn’t confront it.

But the most important missing element from Keegan’s list is purpose. ‘Why should I fight’, young people ask, ‘especially for a state I feel no sense of loyalty to?’ Aside from the ‘me, me, me’ aspect of this, what is really at stake is addressing the questions ‘Who are we?’, ‘What are we for?’ and ‘Where are we going?’ It is the failure of Western governments and the EU in particular to win the argument for national loyalty, a sense of duty and obligation among citizens, as well as to provide a clear trajectory, that are the true barriers and that have shaped our cultures in this regard.

Debate over long-term goals for European security were replaced long ago by a narrow focus on options, procedures, risk calculus and performance management. This can create confusion over what we are fighting for. Soldiers fight because they believe that there is something worth fighting for. For that clarity of purpose they need to believe in what they are doing and have a sense of duty to their country, as well as of loyalty to each other. This cannot be compensated for by reports, analyses or planning – still less when the goal is unclear. As the military theorist Clausewitz understood, for that they need the support from those at home sharing the same values and objectives.⁸⁰

When was the last time the EU engaged the public in an open debate regarding what it is for and where it is heading? This failure points to a deeper problem that confronts us. The wars we may yet have to fight might not just be against external opponents. As the angry hoards on our street who supported Hamas – a fascistic, terrorist organisation with the stated aim of eliminating all Jews – recently showed, the internal conflict we have to confront may yet prove the more significant.

The challenge ahead is not one of mere financing and regulations, as the EU declarations might suggest. Many of these are fudges, as building new roads becomes lumped in with increasing security. No, the real challenge is one of personal and collective commitment and loyalty to one's own. War is both unpredictable and transformative. It is not really an arena for committees and Readiness Roadmaps. If our elites fear the challenge of change, while the people are disconnected and written off or dismissed, then we cannot address, still less resolve any conflicts such as those that confront us today.

The European Union is unfit for this task.

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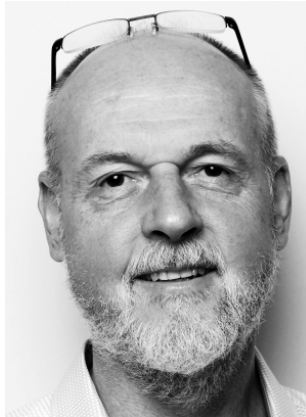
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About the author

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Bill is Visiting Professor to MCC Brussels and Chair of Risk and Security in International Relations at the University of Bath. He previously held posts in British Columbia, Canada and at NTU in Singapore, as well as at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom and in the War Studies Group of King's College, London. Since 2014 Bill has also been a Visiting Professor to the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong, one of China's top-level Party schools.

In 2017, following in the steps of former US secretary for homeland security, Michael Chertoff, and the UK minister of state for universities and science, David Willetts, he became the eighth person and first alumnus to give the Vincent Briscoe Annual Security Lecture at Imperial College London. French by origin, he has lived in the UK for much of his life and currently resides in Oxford with his wife and three young sons, two of whom sing for the Choir of Magdalen College there. He views the establishment of MCC in Brussels as essential for shaking-up institutional complacency, both there and further afield.

About MCC Brussels

At a time of unprecedented political polarisation, MCC Brussels is committed to providing a home for genuine policy deliberation and an in-depth exploration of the issues of our time.

MCC Brussels is committed to asking the hard questions and working with people of goodwill from all persuasions to find solutions to our most pressing problems. An initiative of MCC (Mathias Corvinus Collegium), the leading Hungarian educational forum, MCC Brussels was founded in the autumn of 2022 to make a case for celebrating true diversity of thought, diversity of views, and the diversity of European cultures and their values.

The European Union has dramatically announced an unprecedented €800 billion package to rearm the continent, claiming it is up to European leaders to challenge Russia and bring about peace. But Professor Bill Durodié reveals the 'sorry truth': the EU's Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 is nothing more than bureaucratic delusion.

The EU is a master of technocratic processes but is fundamentally 'unable to deliver or inspire'. Talk of executing the Roadmap 'at pace and scale' is 'just that – talk'. Rather than fostering a culture of risk-taking and innovation, the EU is constantly trapped in the present and past, ensuring it is 'not a player' on the global stage.

The failure is profoundly political: in every serious crisis, the EU's members have tended to 'go their own way', highlighting a complete lack of cohesion. European leaders engage in 'grandstanding talk' to provide their 'domestic audiences with a semblance of purpose', even as they ignore the deepest vulnerability. After years of excluding and rejecting its own citizens, the EU has eroded the necessary foundations of loyalty and duty. War is about spirit as much as kit, and if no one is willing to fight, quadrupling defence spending has 'no consequence'.

The challenge is not one of mere financing or regulations, but one of personal and collective commitment. The European Union is unfit for this task.