



Can Europe arm itself?

February 29, 2024 **E. Wayne Merry** *AFPC Insights*

Related Categories: Europe Military; Warfare; NATO; Russia; Ukraine

Ten years after Moscow began its war against Ukraine and two years after the latest invasion of its western neighbor, the European Union is asking if it should coordinate efforts to bolster Europe's military capacity in light of Russia's uncertain future ambitions. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has proposed that the EU should itself subsidize weapons procurement by member states and create a new special commissioner to coordinate this effort.

In part, this initiative reflects the reality that many EU states have done precious little in the past two years to strengthen their own defenses, even if some have been very generous with munitions and money to Ukraine. Europeans enjoyed a long "peace dividend" after the end of the Cold War and allowed not only their force structures but also their military industries to atrophy. Exports outside of Europe kept key producers in business, but most European governments behaved as if their own continent would never again experience actual war or need to deter a potential aggressor.

The initiative also reflects von der Leyen's desire for a second term in her current job. She can point to her own experience as German Minister of Defense (2013-19) by way of qualifications in the security field, although she probably hopes nobody looks too closely at her meager achievements in that post. Her proposal may also be a reaction to the recent focus on Europe's neglect of defense spending that has emerged in American electoral politics.

INTERNAL RESISTANCE

However, the proposal has provoked mostly negative reactions from European governments and defense industries which, even if they may favor greater defense spending, do not want a larger role for Brussels or yet another EU commissioner.

As is common in the European economy, defense is a highly fragmented sector, with national governments fiercely protecting their respective companies and employment structures. This is nothing new. Anyone with a Cold War memory can recall the nightmare of incompatible weapons systems within NATO. It took many years and much effort by the United States even to get its European allies to agree on basic standards in communications technology and weapons calibers.

Within the Warsaw Pact, by contrast, Moscow could and by and large did assign its own standards to everyone else. Most NATO members regarded their militaries and defense industries more as jobs programs than as national security because, after all, defense was the responsibility of the Americans.

These differences have persisted. Since the Cold War, America's defense industry has experienced severe consolidation and downsizing. In Europe, however, every important defense company qualifies as a "national champion" that must be protected tooth and nail, not from Russia but from competition on the continent itself. Hence the fear (perhaps legitimate) that von der Leyen's initiative might introduce an element of rationality into European defense procurement and lead to a loss of jobs and even companies. Given that she is proposing a significant boost in overall European defense procurement, one might think the various national champions would see a pot of gold at the end of this EU rainbow. Yet their experience with Brussels may lead most companies to fear decisionmaking at a level they cannot control.

OLD HABITS DIE HARD

The key question in European defense procurement, then, remains one not of security but of money. Even if Russian President Vladimir Putin were to publicly promise to send his tanks to the Atlantic as soon as he has finished with Ukraine, European governments would still not all rush to prepare to defend themselves. Some (like the Finns, the Turks, the Dutch and the French) doubtless would. Most, however, would continue to rely on the United States as before, and remain immobilized by the simple reality that serious weapons are expensive.

Even Europeans who are willing to contribute to Kyiv's needs may recoil at restoring their own force structures to anything like what they once were. Indeed, the immediate response to the von der Leyen proposal of EU subsidies for military procurements has been that it would divert funds from other EU programs, like healthcare.

In addition, almost nobody in the defense business wants another bureaucracy in Brussels to answer to. There already exists a European Defense Agency within the EU which is supposed to coordinate weapons programs, not to mention the mechanisms of NATO itself. Most industry bosses have enough to deal with within their own governments, and would not welcome another decision-making level in the notorious bureaucratic swamp that is Brussels.

There is no question that many European countries badly — very badly — need to restore their force structures and defense industries. However, they now need to do so within a time frame shorter than it would take to establish an EU-wide procurement system and czar, let alone to alter the bloc's funding priorities. That makes von der Leyen's grand plan more aspirational than achievable.

E. Wayne Merry is Senior Fellow for Europe and Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.