



Recent comments by both French and German leaders have resurrected the idea of a 'European' Army. This idea re-appears from time to time and has previously been opposed by the UK, when it feared this would detach Europe (and Britain) from the US and NATO. But, the advent of Donald Trump and Brexit mean that this idea has resurfaced to a receptive audience, at least among the political classes, writes Nick Watts.

As with anything in politics, timing is everything. Chancellor Merkel said that a 'European' army would complement NATO, not undermine it. But she is leaving the stage and Macron is driving this initiative. As Europe pauses to recall the centenary of the armistice that ended the Great War, thoughts turn to what could happen in the future. The lessons of the Versailles peace treaty are not lost on the European political classes. A bad peace stoked German resentment. Fear of Bolshevism fed an appetite for strong leaders, and the US retreated to isolationism. Weak states newly created, after the collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, fell under the sway of powerful neighbours.

The NATO Alliance which prevailed during the Cold War, served to link the US nuclear deterrent to European security. Because of this, Europe became comfortable with low defence spending, relying on the US to protect them. The end of the Cold War changed that: NATO struggled to re-discover its relevance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mr Putin has renewed the NATO Alliance, and Mr Trump has renewed the idea of a European Army. The Globalised world, however, doesn't stop at the Polish border. The rise of a resurgent China has spurred Asian states to increase their own defence expenditure, and encourages the rise of strong politicians, who put their own interests first. Technological change has done much to erode the advantage that 'advanced' economies once had. The cyber threat is real and pervasive. Open economies are vulnerable to interruptions of energy supplies and communications, which come via fibre optic cables on the sea bed. GPS signals can be

masked.

So how does a European army fit into this new world? Not easily. To achieve 'victory', however that might look in the 21st century, requires unity of purpose. The history and geography of Europe tells us that states neighbouring Russia are wary of her. They are either fiercely independent, or inclined to accommodation. There would be no consensus within the EU 27 for concerted action against Russia. This has been shown by the response of individual EU Member States, following the imposition of sanctions on Russia, after the annexation of Crimea. Putin has been careful to play a bad hand very well. The Russian economy is reliant on Gas exports to Western Europe. There is also a good understanding of the political arithmetic in countries where governments comprise fragile coalitions. Just as China uses debt diplomacy to win friends and then coerce them in Asia and Africa, so Putin uses a combination of energy diplomacy and 'fake news' to sew dissent in some European countries.

The idea of European strategic autonomy is spelt out in large letters in many EC publications, so the resurrection of the 'European' army is not a surprise. Some sort of 'European Legion' along the lines of the French Foreign Legion might be politically attractive. Budgetary contributions would be something else. The accusation by Trump, that Europe does not spend enough on defence is not a new call, from US politicians; Obama said much the same thing, as have others.

Any European military alliance would need to have an Article 5 equivalent, which binds allies to support each other. The current 'solidarity' clause, in the Lisbon Treaty, is a masterful piece of obfuscation. As it is, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty does not imply any automaticity, in terms of how the NATO Alliance responds to aggression.

Certainly the attraction of a European Army would be simplified arms procurement; which would be dominated by French, German and Italian companies. British and US companies risk being locked out by EU procurement rules, unless some provision can be agreed upon. The attraction of 'European' procurement would also serve to lower defence budgets, rather than maintaining investment in manpower or additional capability. No politician can resist the lure of reducing expenditure.

The UK would find itself in a semi-detached relationship with this new entity. The Political Declaration, published with the withdrawal agreement earlier this week speaks of strong co-operation in the defence and security arena. This will be very necessary from a security stand point, and useful on the defence front. It would demonstrate that the UK is a good neighbour and partner.

As for the US; Trump can only serve two terms – 8 years. But who will come after? Might he have shifted the needle to the point where the US feels that Europe really can look after itself? Besides, the US is more concerned about the rise of China. In this world diplomatic relations will be underpinned by utilitarian considerations. Coalitions of the willing may replace the ready-made alliances which have characterised the post-World War Two era. In this world, countries with good intelligence, good technology, soft power and extensive commercial interests will fare better than those that are muscle bound and rigid.

Clausewitz's dictum that 'war is a continuation of politics by other means' repays study. A continuation of politics....; a 21st century war might not be fought by regular armies, but in cyberspace, or through trade embargoes or withholding gas or credit, to force compliance. War may be 'the king's last argument', so the trick will be to get the diplomacy right; provide assistance to fragile states, but above all be ready to use lethal force if necessary. The military can do disaster relief, but it is not an NGO.

The sad lesson of the Versailles peace treaty was that it didn't solve the ability of mankind to find ways of starting another, more destructive war. A 'European' army may solve a short-term problem, but may be unable to solve problems as yet unseen.

Nick Watts is a defence commentator and Deputy Director General of the U K Defence Forum