

Federalist rhetoric or political tactics? The what, where, who, when and why of Juncker's call for a common European army

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In an interview with the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* on 8 March 2015, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, strongly advocated a common European army to consolidate peace in Europe, react to security threats both within the continent and in its neighbourhood, defend European values *vis-à-vis* aggressive powers, notably Russia, and create economies of scale by consolidating demand for military equipment.

The idea of a joint European military structure is certainly not new. The most distinguished precedent can be traced back to the ill-fated European Defence Community (EDC) in the mid-1950s, but the political vision of an autonomous European 'hard power' has recurrently reemerged throughout the decade-long process of European integration, accompanied by endless discussions on its technical, political, economic and strategic implications. Yet President Juncker's statement has echoed abundantly in European media and beyond, with politicians, practitioners and experts promptly reacting to the general proposals put forth by the EU chief. Juncker's bid for a European army needs to be contextualised via the 'W5' formula: *what, where, who, when and why*.

What is Juncker's statement about? In many respects, the President's comments are a high-level lament on the rather perilous decline of European military capacities. Indeed, European defence has been one of the main victims of a combination of austerity-driven and uncoordinated budgetary cuts, unsustainable financial patterns and persisting fragmentation along national lines. While some high-level political gatherings such as the European Council in December 2013 and the NATO Wales Summit in September 2014 have committed to reverse, or at least mitigate, such worrisome trends, Europeans have struggled to provide a major overhaul of their long-standing 'de-militarisation'. In that light, Juncker's emphasis on defence importantly serves as a top-level reminder that 'security (still) matters'.

Where has the EU Commission President put the geographic focus(es) of a potential European common army? Clearly, Juncker has chosen to refer first to the Ukrainian crisis and its wider repercussions on EU's relations with Russia for evident political reasons. In that context, Juncker's pointing to Moscow's aggressive posture is aimed at further encouraging intra-European cohesion at a time of high uncertainty for the prospects of the Ukrainian conflict and EU's overall stance *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin, notably via its sanction policy. At the same time, the Commission President made clear that any future European army "should not be used immediately", suggesting that any potential military tool would be meant as a component of a much more sophisticated interaction with Russia, thus carefully balancing EU member states' divergent interests and perceptions on this issue. Finally, by referring to Europe's international responsibilities beyond Ukraine, President Juncker's statement interestingly added an overarching question about the future relevance of 'hard power' in a fast-changing, and increasingly multipolar, global environment: one that Europeans will necessarily have to address if they are serious about their future influence on international politics, including in their burning southern neighbourhood.

Who are the actors ultimately affected by Juncker's remarks? Apart from the President's well-known personal belief in a progressively federalist model for Europe, his role as head of the Commission allows him to address European defence from a distinctively integrationist perspective, which derives both from the Berlaymont's role of 'guardian of the treaties', including the Lisbon Treaty's still dormant clauses on the Common Security and Defence Policy

(CSDP), and its increasing but still contested involvement in some defence-related issues - essentially limited to the market and industry domains - in cooperation with other players such as the European Defence Agency (EDA). In such a transforming European policy-making context, EU member states should be considered as the main targets of Juncker's statement, due to their deep-rooted divisions on the ultimate ends of European defence and their general reluctance to loosen their sovereign competences in this policy area. Not surprisingly, Juncker's interview provided another interesting occasion for several European capitals to clarify their intentions or convey political messages on this topic, from the United Kingdom's clear rejection to Germany's positive, albeit conditional, support.

When has this proposal been formulated? Timing is essential in any political game, and Juncker's statement makes no exception. Following the 'CSDP Summit' in December 2013, EU leaders have agreed to re-discuss the state of European defence next June, and the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini has recently launched a review process of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS). Unlike his predecessor, Juncker has decided to devote more of his personal attention to this topic, including by appointing the former European Commissioner Michel Barnier as his Personal Adviser on European Defence and Security. It is therefore likely that, by 'raising the bar' high with such a provocative idea, the Commission President hoped to push for more ground-breaking thinking in an anaemic policy area.

Why does this single episode matter, at the end of the day? Admittedly, Juncker's call for a common European army will remain in the Platonic hyperurantium for several reasons, including the still embryonic stage of European military integration, the pragmatic appeal of sub-regional cooperation formats, and the need to frame a solid division of labour between CSDP and NATO, which remains the cornerstone for the security of most EU member states, notably for territorial defence. All this, however, should not dismiss a significant point which is sometimes overlooked by many observers: discussing European long-term defence integration remains, first and foremost, a useful litmus test for European political solidarity and foreign policy effectiveness. In that respect, one could argue that, even more than the final outcome, it is the process that ultimately matters. President Juncker's statement thus has the merit of helping to keep this process alive.

Overall, and despite some predetermined sensationalist flavour, President Juncker's call should be assessed as a multi-faceted and thought-provoking political message, building on EU's still developing 'defence project' as a much-needed step for Europe's political integration and international relevance. In that respect, the EU chief's statement could hopefully serve as a largely personal, but diplomatically thoughtful, *entrée en matière* for a presumably heated intra-European debate on EU's global role in the next few months.

The reader might object that a key question is still missing: *how* can Europe realistically move forward with European defence integration? Juncker's statement admittedly offers no pre-cooked solution: up to the EU member states to respond!

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