

Europe finally pulls the trigger on a military force

After two years of Trump treating European allies like adversaries, France and Germany have finally committed to creating an EU-wide army. The move promises to shore up existing alliances, writes German economist Hans-Werner Sinn.



We know who our friends are. Source: DPA

Donald Trump is making an intolerable show of himself in Europe. Not only has he cast doubt on America's commitment to mutual defense under NATO; the US president has also unilaterally withdrawn from the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany and the European Union.

Since then, the Trump administration has unilaterally imposed an embargo on goods deliveries to Iran from any third country, including the other signatories of the agreement. Foreign firms that continue to conduct business in Iran now face the threat of sanctions, and banks that process transactions risk losing access to the US financial system.

Meanwhile, the US has been threatening similar action with respect to the new Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline that will run from Russia to Germany. Congress is considering legislation that allows the Trump administration to impose sanctions on European firms taking part in the project, even though these companies are contractually obliged to see the work through. And, according to Gerhard Schröder, a former German chancellor who now chairs the pipeline project, the US ambassador to Germany has been acting more like an "occupation officer" than like a diplomat.

All told, the Trump administration's disruptive behavior has left the French and German governments furious. But, beyond fueling anger, Trump's attacks on other countries' sovereignty are adding momentum to a new push for European political unification.

Vassals? Not us

It is no secret that Europe is in the midst of an internal economic crisis — a result of the euro saddling southern euro-zone countries with high inflation prior to the 2008 financial crash, which severely reduced their competitiveness within the euro system. These problems have led to the emergence of Euroskeptic nationalist parties and movements across the continent. More recently, the European project has been weakened further by the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the EU.

Against this backdrop, Trump's actions are actually something of a godsend, because they have forced Europeans to accept that they must stand together in defense of their sovereignty and prosperity. A union of almost 450 million people (after Brexit) cannot allow a country two-thirds its size to treat it like a group of vassal states.

Accordingly, both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared this month that they support the need to create a joint European army. The best way to understand this effort, said German Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen, is as an answer to Trump's demand that Europeans spend more on defense.

Of course, von der Leyen knows that the formation of an independent European force isn't really what the US president had in mind. But the German establishment credibly maintains that a European army is meant to supplement and strengthen NATO. The trans-Atlantic alliance will be no less necessary than it was before, nor will European citizens regard their American counterparts with any less sympathy and fellow feeling. The deep historical ties between the US and Europe remain unchanged; everybody knows there will be an America after Trump.

Political union to the fore

Better yet, Europe is once again pursuing political unification with vigor and a sense of collective purpose, and that is how it should be. The European project has long suffered from giving economic integration pride of place while pushing political unification to the backburner. Indeed, France, Italy, the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), and Germany had agreed

to form a European army as early as 1952 under the Framework of the European Defense Community. But the French National Assembly never ratified that treaty, so it never entered into force.

Then came the Maastricht Treaty, which offered a second chance for a political union. Yet France stood in the way once again. The French supported membership of the euro, because they wanted the Mediterranean countries, including themselves, to be able to borrow at the same low rates as Germany on the capital markets. But they successfully resisted the creation of a political union, which is predicated on a central state with a joint army and monopoly on the use of military force.

If France is now serious about merging national armies into a joint defense force under a central EU command — rather than just an intervention force for its former African colonies — Macron could well secure his place in the history books. There is much work to be done. But if it happens, he will have Trump to thank.

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