

The European Union's Security and Defence Policy Beyond COVID-19

Written by Shreya Sinha

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SHREYA SINHA, JUN 24 2020

As Europe went from being the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic to a situation where most European countries are confident that they are past the worst of the crisis, the focus of the European leaders is now towards the resurgence of the society back to normalcy. Beyond the epidemiological challenge of the virus – the economic, political, geopolitical as well as security challenges faced by the Union are also plenty. Though the European Union's Global Strategy of 2016 (PDF) highlighted the detection, prevention and response to global pandemics as a priority, the massive consequences and implications on the security policy of the EU are unprecedented. In a continent that is always undergoing shifts, the outbreak of COVID-19 is likely to cause an impact much similar to that of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the 9/11 terror attacks on the United States of America in 2001.

The most direct and immediate impact is economic in nature which is taking place concurrently to the pandemic. Most European companies including the EU defence firms are witnessing a historic drop in their stock market prices. This is subsequently leading to a rise in their debt ratios and eventually causing a functional threat to their survival. Further, as the public authorities are channelling their resources towards fighting an unprecedented challenge, the funding towards the defence sector and its initiatives is bound to be diminished.

As Europe enters a massive economic recession, defence spending will also take a blow in terms of priority. Europe's recovery from the outbreak will require unparalleled levels of financial stimulus and thus, the allotted funding to previous defence initiatives, which do not seem to play a key role in the overall recovery of Europe, is likely to decrease. Spending on the defence sector, which had finally reached its pre-2008 financial crisis level in 2019, is now likely to see a reverse trend. The lack of funds will also have a directly proportional relationship with the in-house Research and Development sector of the European defence firms. As long as the COVID-19 crisis persists, its impact will continue to be seen as the slowdown of innovation in the European defence sector, further diminishing the European competitiveness in the same.

As the spending on defence sector slumps, the development of several initiatives on the EU defence cooperation such as European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF) will lose their velocity. The number of Member States already questioning the political credibility and the value of financing these initiatives will rise, fragmenting the otherwise flourishing integration project of the supranational Union. With COVID-19 wreaking havoc on the already unequal economies of the Northern and Southern European states, unity and solidarity are already under stress as Member States embolden nationalist narratives, rather than European solutions. Political will is a crucial factor for a transnational actor like the EU in order to develop an effective framework for European security and to establish itself as a credible security partner alongside NATO. The EU defence project will only make sense if the Member States support each other in principle in times of crisis.

The EU's position as a security actor is under question as a result of the pandemic. Owing to the high cost of dealing with the socio-economic damage caused by the outbreak, the EU's operational readiness of crisis-management activities will be narrowed down. The Union's willingness to contribute troops to civilian and military activities on Libyan, Syrian and Ukrainian territories is likely to decrease. This inward-looking perspective of the European security policy further creates a risk that crisis in such regions may worsen at the peak of a pandemic. This will not

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only add to the human suffering in the neighborhood, but also create a nexus of vulnerability and crisis for Europe. If not handled effectively, non-state actors may begin to take advantage of this period of vulnerability of the Union. Negative externalities could spill over to the EU, such as accelerating the migrant issue and leading to political polarization within the Member States.

While COVID-19 continues to transform political and economic realities in Europe, it becomes imperative for the EU to advocate a holistic recovery package that focusses not only on the reconstruction of economies but also on the diversified security needs of the alliance. The EU has to cope with the pandemic as well as the economic recession without sacrificing the European defence sector initiatives and competitiveness, which could play a functional role in not only maintaining security and stability but also in pushing towards an EU-wide plan of economic and industrial re-launch. At the same time, it is important to note that the need for advancing solidarity on the defence policy front has never been as compelling. With the EU facing the heat on both sides of the pacific in the face of US-China rivalry and transatlantic relations also under stress, the exigency for a more coherent, geopolitical, self-reliant Europe is emergent.

The European Union External Action Taskforce's factsheet on 'COVID-19: Lessons and Implications for EU Security and Defence' (May 2020) highlights the need of the Union to confront all possible security consequences of the pandemic, in order to be truly prepared and resilient for the future. The document brings out the five key essential initial lessons learned in order to overcome the crisis: partnerships, solidarity, responsiveness, capabilities and preparedness. It is advisable for the EU to not abandon its pre-coronavirus agenda on security and defence policy, which is required to be truly responsive to imminent threats facing the continent. Thus, the EU must incorporate European defence cooperation to be a part of its post-pandemic recovery, in order to achieve the goal of strategic autonomy, and enhance its role a security actor in the international realm.

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