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Following Afghanistan Defeat: Can EU Win Own 'Independence' from the US?



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Suddenly, the idea put forth by French President, Emmanuel Macron, late last year does not seem so far-fetched or untenable after all. Following the US-NATO hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan, European countries are now forced to consider the once unthinkable: a gradual dismantling from US dominance.

When, on September 29, 2020, Macron uttered these words: “We, some countries more than others, gave up on our strategic independence by depending too much on American weapons systems”, the context of this statement had little to do with Afghanistan. Instead,

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Europe was angry at the bullying tactics used by former US President Donald Trump and sought alternatives to US leadership. The latter has treated NATO – actually, all of Europe – with such disdain, that it has forced America’s closest allies to rethink their foreign policy outlook and global military strategy altogether.

Even the advent of US President Joe Biden and his assurances to Europe that “America is back” did little to reassure European countries, which fear, justifiably, that US political instability may exist long after Biden’s term in office expires.

The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan – without NATO members even being consulted or considered as the US signed and enacted a withdrawal agreement with the Taliban starting in July 2020 – has convinced Europe that, despite the defeat of Trump, Washington has essentially remained the same: a self-centered ‘ally’.

Now that the US and NATO have officially left Afghanistan, a political debate in Europe is raging on many political platforms. The strongest indicators that Europe is ready to proceed with an independent foreign policy agenda and European-centered military strategy became evident in the EU Defense Ministers’ meeting in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

In a position that is increasingly representing a wider EU stance, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell Fontelles, articulated the Bloc’s prevailing sentiment: “The experience from Afghanistan has shown that our inability to respond comes at a price. The EU must therefore strengthen its strategic autonomy by creating the first entry force capable of ensuring stability in the EU’s neighborhood.”

Despite assurances that this ‘first entry force’ will not represent an alternative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but rather ‘complement’ its role, chances are this new army will serve as a stepping stone for Europe’s coveted independence from the US foreign policy agenda.

Just marvel at these statements by top European, including British, officials and analysts to appreciate the crisis underway in NATO. Remember that 51 NATO members and partner countries had rushed to aid the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, following the invocation of the common-defense clause, Article 5.

“Nobody asked us whether it was a good idea to leave that country in such ... a way,” Johann Wadephul, a deputy caucus leader for German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats, said, with reference to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the absence of any coordination with Washington’s NATO allies.

Former British Prime Minister, Theresa May, questioned everything, including Europe's blind allegiance to the US: "Was our intelligence really so poor? Was our understanding of the Afghan government so weak? Was our knowledge on the ground so inadequate? Or did we just think we had to follow the United States and on a wing and a prayer it would be all right on the night?"

Katharina Emschermann, the deputy director of the reputable Berlin-based Center for International Security at the Hertie School, seemed to speak for many European analysts when she said: "Part of the discord that we're seeing now is probably also rooted in the sense of unease about how things are going to go on in the future."

This 'unease' refers to Europe's traditional foreign policy, which has been hostage to post-WWII Trans-Atlantic European American partnership. However, Europe itself is changing, together with the world around it. Moreover, the Chinese economy has grown tremendously in recent years. As of last year, it was Beijing, not Washington, that served the critical role of being the EU's largest trade partner.

Not only has Chinese economic – thus, political and military – clout grown exponentially, Europe's share of the global economy has shrunk significantly, and not only because of the Brexit ordeal. According to NBC news, citing the British accounting firm PwC, "in 1960, the countries that would form the E.U. made up a third of the global economy. By 2050, the bloc is projected to account for just 9 percent".

The growing realization among European countries that they must engineer an eventual break-up from the US is rooted in legitimate fears that the EU's interest is hardly a top American priority. Hence, many European countries continue to resist Washington's ultimatums regarding China.

It was also Macron, while elaborating on the concept of the European army, who rejected the US China agenda. "We cannot accept to live in a bipolar world made up of the US and China," he said.

Macron's once 'controversial' view is now mainstream thinking in Europe, especially as many EU policy-makers feel disowned, if not betrayed, by the US in Afghanistan. If this trajectory of mistrust continues, the first step towards the establishment of a European army could, in the near future, become an actuality.

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