

Back Off NATO, There's a New Army in Town

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Many analysts were surprised and confused when European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker recently called for the European Union to create its own army. The idea at first seems rather ridiculous against the backdrop of existing NATO forces, the exorbitant cost of such a project, the fact that reaching consensus on the idea in today's Europe is next to impossible and a host of other obstacles as well.

It is also clear that the United States would do everything in its power to protect its leadership position in Europe and that any European military structure existing alongside NATO would challenge Washington's dominant role.

However, Juncker is no newcomer to big-time politics and is undoubtedly aware of all these considerations. That suggests this was no offhand remark, but a deliberate and well-considered step. So the question is: Why does he make this proposal at all, and why right now?

The simplest and most primitive interpretation is that it is intended as an attack

on Moscow — especially considering that Juncker did cite "Russia's participation" in the Ukrainian conflict in an unsuccessful bid to add weight to his argument. But that maneuver prompted Russian State Duma Deputy Franz Klintsevich to "fall into the trap" of solemnly condemning Juncker for his "provocative idea."

As deputy chairman of the Duma defense committee, Klintsevich should understand that politicians often say things for purely political purposes. What's more, he must certainly realize that by the time such an army could come into existence — if it ever does at all — the Ukrainian conflict will have been long forgotten and EU-Russian relations will have progressed beyond the current impasse.

In other words, the current situation could not have motivated the proposal. Juncker cited the "Russia factor" in the same way a cook might use carrot stars as a holiday salad garnish: he probably figured that little touch would make it easier for the Americans to swallow his "EU army salad."

Another standard explanation is that the European commissioner was simply repeating an idea that many European politicians had previously expressed — namely, that the EU should have whatever structures are required to function independently, including the natural need for its own army.

Lastly, Juncker might have used such "Aesopian language" to give vent to the accumulated frustration Europeans feel over excessive and intrusive U.S. pressure. Indeed, this irritation has repeatedly made headlines in European media and crops up in the statements of influential EU politicians.

Consider, for example, the way German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier rebuffed NATO Supreme Allied Commander U.S. General Philip Mark Breedlove concerning the Ukrainian conflict. "The statements [on Ukraine] from our source do not fully coincide with the statements made by NATO and the U.S.," Steinmeier said. Although his words were politically correct, the subtext was clear: "Mr. Breedlove, you are a liar."

German newspaper Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten (DWN) reported that this was the first instance in which Germany had openly disagreed with NATO — and by extension, with the United States, because Breedlove was expressing an official, not a personal position.

According to DWN, "There is increasing resistance in the EU toward the U.S. strategy aimed against Russia." In this light, Juncker's claim that the creation of an EU army would "help us to develop a common foreign and security policy" can be seen, not as an attempt to intimidate Russia, but as a call for an independent EU foreign policy. Of course, this is not a full-blown mutiny, but it does indicate some grumbling in the ranks.

It is definitely worth noting how quickly Germany expressed support for Juncker's proposal. After all, Germany is the lone heavyweight in today's European Union. Britain forfeited that role by following in Washington's wake since World War II and France, as compared to Germany, is only a middleweight. As for the other European states, none can even fight in the same ring with these three.

In my opinion, Berlin's position on this issue is the most interesting because Germany's

support for Juncker's proposal might be a sort of "declaration of intent." A European army is an idea with potential.

Today, its proponents are only trying to get a feel for where other EU states stand on the subject. But tomorrow, or more likely the day after tomorrow, it might just become possible. Why wouldn't Germany support the idea of a future EU army, knowing that it would serve as its undisputed leader?

Germany has already resolved its unity problem and put on political and economic weight — and will doubtless add more in the years ahead. Why not think about developing its military, something that will only strengthen its position?

And who can say if it would be good or bad for Russia, the U.S., Germany or even for the EU itself if Europe had its own army by the mid to late 21st century? And what if former French President Francois Mitterrand was right when he said, recalling the two World Wars, that German reunification was a dangerous venture?

A few decades from now, after President Vladimir Putin, U.S. President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Juncker and all the rest are gone, who will dominate in Europe and the world?

As always, history offers no promises with regard to the future.

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