

Deborah A. McCarthy, *Visiting Senior Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs*

THE MILITARIZATION OF US FOREIGN POLICY

ENGAGEMENT WITH EUROPE INCREASINGLY ABOUT DEFENSE

The US Department of Defense is playing a predominant role in US foreign policy due to expanded mandates, large budgets and the disparagement of diplomacy by the Trump Administration. Defense relations may be the steadier foundation for transatlantic cooperation.

Much has been written on the “militarization” of US foreign policy. Since 9/11, the Department of Defense expanded its non-combat activities into areas normally reserved for traditional diplomacy. In 2005, it was given a mandate to build “indigenous capacity for securing essential services, a viable market economy, rule of law, democratic institutions, and a robust civil society”. While the initial focus was on Iraq and Afghanistan, it allowed the Department to do the same in other regions.

In 2009, the Department’s international mandate broadened to “strengthening governance and the rule of law and fostering economic

stability and development”. Congress added new authorities, most recently allowing the US military to work with *non-military* security forces. The Defense Department now manages a greater portion of security assistance than the Department of State. The Trump Administration continues to favor the use of the US military over US diplomacy to address great-power competition. It has increased the defense budget while slashing that for diplomacy; for 2020, it requested a 4.9% increase for the Defense Department and proposed a 21% cut for the State Department. Today, the Department of Defense plays an important role in US foreign policy.

This expanded role is visible in Europe. Despite tirades by President Donald Trump on the value of NATO, and finger-pointing on member contributions, US military engagement with NATO and in Europe continues, with broad Congressional and public support. Through the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), the US military has increased its forward presence and exercises with allies and partners. Through Operation Atlantic Resolve, the US European Command added US troop rotations across Eastern Europe and prepositioned equipment. The Defense Department also boosted training and assistance for Georgia and Ukraine.

The increased US military presence in Europe was triggered by Russia's invasion of Crimea and aimed at reassuring allies along Europe's eastern frontier. Today, it is part of a broader US and NATO deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia.

The Defense Department has become involved in institution-building in the region, normally the purview of diplomacy. Examples include repairing schools, conducting anti-corruption workshops, and law enforcement training. The gray zone challenges in Europe, especially cyber and disinformation, are being addressed primarily by the Defense Department. Whereas the State Department eliminated the office of the Cyber Coordinator, the Defense Department broadened its networks and now includes civilian authorities in exercises. Whereas the State Department has very little funding to fight Russian disinformation, the Defense Department is expanding initiatives within EUCOM and with NATO.

The consequences of the increased militarization of US foreign policy for transatlantic relations are threefold.

First, US engagement in Europe appears more militarized. The addition of US forces and the increased tempo of exercises has meant that tens of thousands of US troops have

moved across Europe visible to all civilians. A publicity campaign has been waged to highlight this commitment. New security agreements are being signed and celebrated, including the new letter on security cooperation between the US, Finland and Sweden. The increased US pressure on burden sharing, although not always well received, has meant even more defense discussions.

In contrast, US diplomatic engagement has decreased. President Trump's negative rhetoric about Europe, the decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Agreement (JCPOA), and friction on issues such as Nord Stream II have disrupted normal diplomatic discourse. There have been no US-EU Summits since President Trump took office and subgroups on energy and cyber have not met in several years.

Secondly, joint efforts to address threats to democracy in the region will likely be carried out or funded by the Defense Department. The State Department simply does not have the resources: for 2018, its budget for all of Europe and Eurasia was \$1.2 billion. The budget for EDI alone was \$4.5 billion.

Thirdly, beyond Europe, US-European cooperation is more likely to advance in military rather than

in policy channels. On China, for example, where policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic are unable to agree on a comprehensive approach, defense officials are working together to address China's new military muscle in forums such as the US France Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue. In Africa, where US and EU policymakers have vastly different strategies, military cooperation continues to fight terrorism, crime and human trafficking.

The enhanced position of the Defense Department in US foreign policy is likely to continue. The US military has not sought this role. Indeed, US military leaders have repeatedly called for restoring balance between the use of military and diplomatic tools and for funding the State Department. Despite these appeals, the Trump Administration's preference for using the US military will further increase the militarization of US foreign policy.

For Europe, leveraging defense ties can help balance diplomatic disconnects across the transatlantic. While there are challenges in defense policy, defense relations may prove to be the steadier foundation for transatlantic cooperation in the near future.