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# French initiatives regarding the creation of the European Union Armed forces as an autonomous power unit

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## Abstract

The article is dedicated to the initiatives of the President of France E. Macron and the Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel to promote in the EU projects related to the ideas of the “European Armed Forces”.

The EU crises in the second decade of the 21st century, paradoxically intensified the trend towards autonomy of foreign policy and security, since they gave rise to attempts by the main “engine” of this association – France and Germany even before coming to power E. Macron to create a more advanced integration model based on the “euro area”. At the same time, the question arose about the “joint defense” of this group of countries, which, on the one hand, was conditioned by new external threats – Islamic terrorism, military conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, on the other – was considered as a factor of their cohesion and in the face of internal challenges.

Macron E., who is a staunch supporter of the transformation of the EU into an independent “world center of power”, not only continued this course, but gave it a very significant impetus. An increasingly “unilateral” US policy under Donald Trump, including in the security sphere, played an important role in this. The article shows certain shifts initiated by the French President in strengthening the integration process in the “euro zone”, as well as some progress of the EU in the “joint defense”. At the same time, it points to the difficulties that he meets on this path, primarily related to the existence of NATO. The weakening of the positions of E. Macron and A. Merkel in their own countries add uncertainty to the issue of the prospects for this defense.

**Key words:** European integration; “European defense”; “European army”; initiatives of Emmanuel Macron; prospects.

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## Introduction

The statement of the French President E. Macron about the creation of the “European Armed Forces” to protect the EU from China, Russia and even the United States, which he made on radio “Europe 1” on November 6, 2018 (Macron, 2018), on the eve of the celebration in Paris of the centenary of the end of the First World

War, made a lot of noise. The announcement was controversial in a number of EU countries, especially in Eastern Europe, and caused controversial comments in France itself. Outside the EU, US President D. Trump reacted most sharply to the statement, who described him as describing it as very offensive.

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## Material and methods

The core of a “European Armed Forces” could have been a Franco-German brigade, formed in 1989 and reorganized in 1992 into the Euro-corps, to which joined units from Belgium, Luxembourg and Spain. This perspective for a long time has been analyzed and discussed by scientific communities representatives. In our time, this

topic is mainly addressed by scientists from Russia and the United States, such as Andryushin S.V. (2015), Shamakhov V.A., Kirilenko V.P., Kovalev A.A. (2018), Pindyak P. (2018). Ukrainian researchers practically did not consider it. These questions require deep study.

## Results and discussion

Brexit in Britain has shaken the very foundations of the union. With the growth of “Eurosceptic” sentiments and the rise of the so-called populist forces in majority of the member states, all this has called into question the old model of European integration.

France, Germany, Spain and Italy at the EU summit in Versailles in March 2017 represented the initiative of “different-speed Europe”, which implied the formation within the union on the basis of the “euro zone” (19 member states out of 28) a kind of advanced euro integration “coalition”. The rest of the member states had to catch up to it as far as possible. Among the main tasks of the “coalition” President F. Hollande named the strengthening of the “euro zone”, the strengthening of the economic and financial union of the EU, tax and social harmonization, as well as “joint defense”. Thus, the latter was included among the factors of cohesion of these countries within the EU. It should be noted that public opinion in the EU, in principle, supported the idea of moving towards to such defense. In November 2016, for example, in France, 80% of the respondents were in favor of it, in Germany – 85, in Spain – 83, in Italy – 65, and in general for the union – 75% (Macron E., 2012).

Among the external factors that explained the emergence of a “defense component” in the Versailles initiative were the terrorist ISIS problem, the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, and the increased effectiveness of the Russian armed forces demonstrated by them. Paris, in addition, could not forget how in 2011, during the joint intervention with Great Britain in Libya, he had to ask Washington not only for logistical support, but also for the supply of modern ammunition. The lack of its own resources increasingly affected the implementation by France of anti-terrorist military operations in its former colonies in Africa, in particular in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad (Dumoulin A., 2017).

The EU, from its side, adopted in June 2016 a new Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy, which focused on strengthening its

capabilities, to protect its own population from new threats, in particular terrorism, “hybrid wars” and cyberattacks on the one hand and on the settlement of international conflicts on the other hand. In connection with the conflict in Ukraine, which was described as a threat to the “European order”, the document paid special attention to Russia. In particular, the confrontation with it was described as “the most important strategic challenge” for unification. Although the Global Strategy recognized the “interdependence” of both parties and the need for selective cooperation “where possible,” it condemned the annexation of Crimea by Russia, its destabilization of the East of Ukraine and proclaimed the determination to ensure Ukraine the right to freely choice relations with the EU (L'échec de).

It is worth to remind that the rivalry between the EU and the Russian Federation in Ukraine that served as a catalyst for the crisis in 2014, which led to the Revolution of Dignity, and other known consequences, including an acute confrontation between Russia and the West. But in the Global Strategy was fixed so-called “normative” approach to these events, where restoration of the situation until 2014 was paramount, which actually blocked the settlement of this crisis. The document also sensed a desire to take advantage of the confrontation in order to advance a common security policy.

But a particularly great impetus to this trend was given by D. Trump’s coming to power in the United States with his slogan “America First” and the demand for the European NATO allies to increase military spending to at least 2% of GNP, in accordance with the decisions made earlier in the Alliance, which, however, they were not implemented (in 2017 in France this indicator was 1.79%, in Germany – 1.24, in Italy – 1.12, in Spain – 0.92%) (Dumoulin A., 2010). For the majority of Western European elites, the new president's frank orientation towards the narrowly understood national interests of America, his “one-sidedness” in his approaches to solving major international problems was as a

real shock.

In France, all these processes have aggravated the confrontation between adherents of “statehood” in the spirit of Gaullism and Euro-Atlanticists. Most candidates in the April-May 2017 presidential elections advocated weakening the country’s dependence on the EU, NATO and the United States. Together they collected almost half of the votes in the first round. Election of E. Macron in the second round, in principle, meant the victory of those who were oriented towards the Euro-Atlantic. However, the youngest head of state in the history of the Fifth Republic (39 years old), who had almost no experience in international politics, changed the traditional Euro-Atlantic vector (aligning with the United States) and put the strengthening of European integration in the first place. Moreover, the new president, who during the election campaign showed a tendency to “synthesize” conflicting attitudes, tried to transfer the attitude to “statehood” from the national level to the EU level. In his view, only the transformation of the latter into a world “center of power” can allow France to compete with the world’s leading countries. Guided by this idea, in September 2017 E. Macron outlined in a speech at the Sorbonne University a detailed program for strengthening Euro-integration in the “euro zone”, which actually opened up the prospect of the EU turning into a federal state (Pflimlin E., 2017).

For E. Macron, adherence to national identity at the level of EU member states contradicts the trend towards globalization of the modern world, which, in his opinion, is objective and will continue despite any crises. At the same time, he defends “European sovereignty” within the EU, which can and should ensure its countries’ full participation in globalization and the new technological revolution associated with the development of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Among the conditions that need to be met in order to achieve this sovereignty, he named, first of all, the transformation of the EU into a real economic and industrial power, which requires strengthening of the economic and financial union, promoting a single tax policy and harmonizing social protection systems, as well

as creating a single the digital technology market and the single energy market. In the “euro area”, which is intended to become the main platform for these processes, a single budget and a finance minister should appear, de facto prime minister; and the European Monetary Fund.

At the same time, in the context of the “gradual but inevitable US withdrawal” from the role of the main sponsor of the EU’s security, the President stressed the vital need for the union to build a single foreign and defense policy. “Our defense goal”, he said, “should be to build autonomous capabilities in addition to NATO”. E. Macron highlighted the importance in this regard of the EU decisions on the promotion of two French initiatives, supported by Germany: on the activation of PESCO (in June 2017); on the creation of the European Defense Fund (in July of the same year). At the same time, he made new proposals: on the formation by 2021 of the Common Intervention Forces and the development of a Common Strategy for them, as well as on the creation of a European Intelligence Academy. It should be noted that earlier, in August 2017, in a speech at the annual meeting of the head of state with the French ambassadors E. Macron frankly stated that the weakening of the EU’s dependence on the United States in terms of ensuring its security is one of the conditions for turning it into an independent player in the international arena (La perception, 2017).

As shown above, movement in this direction was marked even under F. Hollande. However, the Versailles initiative of Germany, France, Italy and Spain in March 2017 was not followed by any significant practical steps. On the contrary, the determination and pressure of E. Macron bore some results. In November 2017, 23 of 28 EU states signed an agreement to join PESCO – Permanent Structured Defense Cooperation, which opened up the prospect of filling this still empty shell with at least some real content. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point to such an important point as the commitment made by the participating countries to increase their military spending, as well as their declared willingness to provide specific projects of cooperation in the field of arms. The agreement

has been described by many European politicians and media as a “breakthrough”. Some mass media even started talking about the beginning of the movement towards the creation of a “European Armed Forces”, or unified armed forces of the EU, in order to free themselves from military dependence on the United States (Conseil de, 2016).

In June 2018, E. Macron achieved the signing of a letter of intent on the issue of the “European intervention initiative” by nine EU states (except France: Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Luxembourg, Spain, Estonia and Portugal). In accordance with it, it is planned to establish a small structure in Paris that will deal with issues of strategic forecasting and planning, support of operations and learning from experience in the framework of EU military missions, in particular in Africa (OTAN, 2017). According to the president’s plan, this should be the first step towards the formation of the proposed General Intervention Forces. In the same month, at a meeting in Meseberg (Germany), E. Macron and A. Merkel made a joint declaration, which spoke of the need to abandon the principle of unanimity when voting on security issues in the European Council. It also promoted the idea of creating a European Security Council (modeled on the UN Security Council).

Since all these agreements and initiatives are inextricably linked to the efforts E. Macron, aimed at deepening European integration, it is important to note that in February 2018 the European Commission approved his initiative to transform the existing European Stability Mechanism into the European Monetary Fund in 2019. In June 2018, German Chancellor A. Merkel, after long hesitation, supported the idea of creating a common budget for the “euro zone” by 2021. An agreement was also reached on the development of an appropriate “road map” by both countries. In France, these events were also perceived as a “breakthrough” and a personal diplomatic success for the president (Discours du Président).

In this context, E. Macron’s conviction that the EU will be able to move towards an autonomous defense potential has clearly

strengthened. The need for the latter, according to a number of his statements, grew as the more and more rigid “one-sidedness” of the US policy under D. Trump. In April 2018, during his official visit to the United States, E. Macron learned a lesson of this “one-sidedness”. He tried to convince Donald Trump not to withdraw the United States from the 2015 “nuclear deal” with Iran and the 2016 Paris climate agreement, but failed completely (Chernega V.N., 2018).

Donald Trump's disdain for the economic interests of his allies, coupled with the newly voiced demand to increase their military spending at the G8 meeting in Canada in June 2018, only added fuel to the fire. The intention of the US President to withdraw from the treaty with Russia on intermediate and short-range missiles (INF), his uncertain position on the possibility of extending START-3 in 2020 further increased fears that Washington will be guided exclusively by its own priorities in security matters. In addition, many European experts, including those in France, began to believe that “Trumpism” is not a transient phenomenon (as the Euro-Atlantic elites in the EU hope for), but will continue in one form or another even after his leaving White House.

Macron’s E. talks with the leaders of Russia and China in 2017–2018, apparently, convinced him that the factor of military power remains extremely important in international politics. The unresolved crisis in Ukraine, unsuccessful attempts of French diplomacy to “return” to Syria after F. Hollande led her to a dead end with his irreconcilable position towards the Assad regime, attempt to play “on equal terms” with Russia and the United States, also showed that in conditions of a military conflict you cannot rely only on the art of negotiation.

Macron’s E. statement about the “European army” cited at the beginning of this article was thus his reaction to all these factors. However, it should be emphasized that, at best, we can only talk about a very distant future, for the EU is still at the very initial stage of forming its “defense identity”. It is no coincidence that the leader of the center-right opposition in France, L. Vauquier, called the idea of such an army a “fantasy” of the president. The practical results

of the above initiatives so far boil down to the creation of EU mechanisms for cooperation and unification in the field of armaments, which, of course, is important, but still very far from even “autonomous defense”, not to mention the “army”. The main obstacle on this path is NATO, which, according to Art. 28A of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, is the “foundation and supreme authority” of the EU in the field of defense. The 2016 EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy recognizes that the Alliance “remains the most important authority for most member states” (Collomp F., 2017). Accordingly, the EU will deepen relations with it, “striving for complementarity and synergy”, but “preserving autonomy in decision-making”.

This diplomatic formulation hides the most important problem of the supporters of “European defense” and “European army”: how to promote these projects in the EU, when NATO, with which it is associated *de jure* and *de facto*, already has everything it needs for such a defense and, moreover, some of its member states are guided in security issues by the Alliance and the United States? Another problem, as noted by the famous French expert, former head of the French Foreign Ministry's strategic forecasting unit N. Gnezoto, is that the governments of the EU countries that support the idea of defense autonomy will sooner or later need to admit, at least for themselves, that geopolitical and geoeconomic interests are more important to them than “common Western values”.

Macron's E. statements, as expected, caused a negative reaction in most of the Eastern European EU member states, which are most consistently oriented in the field of foreign policy and security towards NATO and the United States. Some Polish media accused the French president not only of violating “Atlantic solidarity” in the face of “aggressive Russia,” but also of seeking to oust the United States from the region in order to take their place. Even before this speech by E. Macron, a number of Czech mass media suggested that the only result of moving towards a “European army” could be the rupture of transatlantic ties and the collapse of NATO. In a shorter perspective, “the creation

of a European army will mean duplication of the functions of the Alliance, which means a decrease in the effectiveness of the already low defense spending” (Sommet de, 2018).

In Great Britain, who is a loyal ally of the United States, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, General M. Carlton-Smith, who was “famous” for his statement that Russia poses a greater danger to his country than ISIS, spoke out in this regard especially unequivocally. According to him, E. Macron's initiative leads to a decrease of the military effectiveness of NATO, “which is the center of European security and has shown itself to be an incredibly successful alliance”.

NATO General Secretary J. Stoltenberg also expressed concerns about possible substitution or duplication of functions. As might be expected, from his point of view, the EU's defense efforts should “complement” the activities of the Alliance. He also expressed the hope that the EU will not close its markets to weapons from non-EU countries. French experts were quick to point out that in 2017 the EU member states purchased weapons from the United States for 35 billion euros, while the American arms market is actually closed to European manufacturers.

It should also be noted the contradictory attitude towards this issue of public opinion in the EU member states. As shown below, the majority of Europeans in 2016 approved of the greater independence of the EU in the foreign policy and defense spheres. At the same time, however, in 2017 only 10% of respondents considered it a priority. The first three places were given: immigration – 39%, terrorism – 38%, economic situation – 17%.

Mainly this contradiction was explained by the fact that even in those states where the ideas of “European defense” or “European army” received the greatest support (France, Germany), more than half of the population still relied on NATO for protection from external threats. In the Netherlands, Poland and the Baltic countries, the proportion of such people was even higher – 79% (L'armée européenne, 2018).

Hence the fact that E. Macron and A. Merkel have repeatedly stressed the “usefulness” of

NATO. In this context, it is not surprising that the French president had to urgently “soften” the effect of the statements about the “European Armed Forces”, which he made on November 6, 2018. The statement of the Elysee Palace administration on November 9 spoke about the “confusion” that had occurred due to the fault of the media and emphasized, that E. Macron “never said that he wants to create an army against the United States”.

The objective weakening of the Franco-German “motor” of European integration, which E. Macron has always counted on, is not in favor of the “European army” either. A. Merkel’s

positions in Germany look more and more precarious, she has already announced that she will no longer be re-elected. The influence of the French president in his own country has also significantly decreased, especially after the “tough” protests against his policy of the so-called “yellow vests” in November-December 2018 their obligations to the EU in the area of budget deficit (no more than 3%). As a result, the main “integrator” had to convince his colleagues at the next meeting of the European Council that this is only a “temporary deviation” from this fundamental EU rule.

## Conclusions

Thus, despite some progress noted above, the prospects for EU independence in the defense sphere remain blurred. For Russia, this is rather bad news, since “European defense” or

“European Armed Forces” would be less evil for it than NATO with the absolute dominance of the United States.

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