

EU Security Policy in the Era of Trump: A Radical Account

Written by Michael Merlingen

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This article foregrounds the relationship between the institutional orders of neoliberal capitalism, class, state and world politics to argue that the meaning of the Trump challenge to the European Union's (EU) security policy and the EU's ability to respond to this challenge, are shaped by a double crisis of the EU's own making. EU states and the EU itself face an internal legitimacy crisis linked to the rise of populism and an international crisis of EU imperialism. The main claim of the essay is that the Trump administration, unexpected and unwelcome by EU leaders, makes their chosen strategy of using a re-launch of the EU security and defence policy to help contain the double crisis that confronts them a high-risk endeavour that is likely to further undermine the EU.

The Class Political Context of Contemporary EU Security Policy

Marxist or historical materialist theories of the capitalist state and its internationalisation and transgovernmentalisation have in recent years been reworked and re-energised. One important inspiration of these new departures has been Nicos Poulantzas, who was a leading Marxist theorist of politics from the 1960s to the 1970s. Neo-Poulantzian state theory, which intersects with various branches of transnational historical materialism such as Gramscian International Relations (IR) and the Amsterdam School of critical International Political Economy (IPE), is useful for identifying and analysing important features of the state of politics in the Atlantic order in the Trump era.

Like other Marxist social theories, a neo-Poulantzian approach regards class differentiation and class struggle as key structuring principles of capitalist societies. Class agents are constituted by their structural positioning and their practices. Structural location refers to agents' positions in relations of production, notably their ownership of and/or control over productive resources, and their structural capacity to allocate productive resources to certain ends, shape the labour process and dispose of the produced commodities. Besides creating hierarchies of power in the work place, actors' positions in relations of production typically have an impact on income and wealth levels, among other things. Class agents also engage in practices of overt and implicit, everyday forms of class struggle in and through which they reproduce or transform their material positioning in relations of production and the existing institutional order of the relations of production. They take what Poulantzas (1974) called "offensive" and "defensive" steps, say, employees defend the standard 8-hour working day against an employers' offensive to compel them to flexibilise their offer of labour power to enable businesses to make more profitable use of productive resources in response to market conditions. Neo-Poulantzian approaches differ from many state-centric and anthropomorphising IR theories insofar as they do not regard the capitalist state as an autonomous or sovereign actor, which is divorced from the everyday power struggles at the level of civil society and political economy.

The state is fully entangled in these struggles, and the force field constituted by these struggles structures the institutions or apparatuses that make up the state: the ministries; the political and bureaucratic networks that traverse them such as task forces and commissions; the parliament with its political parties and committees; and so on. Also, this force field of societal power relations shapes the rationalities, strategies and instruments by means of which states govern. Hence, Poulantzas speaks of the capitalist state as the "material [institutional] condensation of a class relationship of forces" (Poulantzas, 2000: 130). Yet power relations, apart from completely congealed forms of

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domination, never fully determine actors, and capitalist state apparatuses do typically retain the capacity to respond to the moves of other actors, to strategise and, up to a point, to modify the rules governing the force fields. International and supranational institutions such as the EU are grasped as “second-order condensations” of class forces as their apparatuses and rationalities are refracted through the member states and their differential locations in the transnational political economy and the interstate system (Brand, et al., 2011).

In this perspective, the EU and its member states primarily serve capitalist interests and values because their institutional separation from the capitalist economy makes political decision-makers dependent on a well-functioning economy (think business climate) for their tax resources and popular legitimacy. At the same time, political decision-makers’ relative separation from the economy and the individual capitalists and executives who run it, typically enables them to escape state capture by any particular capitalist group. This leeway is the condition of possibility, though no guarantee, for political decision-makers to mobilise the whole capitalist class, which is constitutively divided into different fractions (such a interest-bearing capital versus profit-producing manufacturing capital), around a common growth strategy, support it by appropriate institutions and regulations and formulate an ideological narrative that generates popular consent (active or at least passive) for the selected accumulation strategy even if it largely favours the material interests of the capitalists and their allies among the better-off classes over those of the popular classes. Above and beyond the national differences of EU capitalisms, the EU has since the late 1990s institutionally condensed the dominance of globalist, world-market-oriented capital fractions and pursued a neoliberal accumulation strategy based on rolling back the welfare state, flexibilising labour markets, institutionalising wage restraints and so on (Van Apeldoorn, 2002; Jessop, 2016).

The onset of the global financial crisis in 2007 and its persistent European ramifications in the form of the sovereign debt crisis have thrown this accumulation strategy and the balance of class forces on which it has relied into crisis. Supervised and disciplined by the EU, member states have been forced to undergo the variegated experience of “the rise of a permanent politics of austerity” to cope with the implications of the economic crisis (Jessop, 2016: 414). All EU states, including the economic powerhouse Germany, have implemented a two-nation strategy which channels material rewards to the better off and imposes belt-tightening on the lower middle- and working classes. Overall, these policies have aggravated the economic inequalities and economic insecurities that have accumulated for some time in Atlantic capitalism. The upshot is that popular consent for the EU’s neoliberal growth model has been undermined. This has fuelled the rise of populist parties (right-wing and left-wing) which are critical of the EU and call for greater powers for states to control their economic and political destiny. The growing political contestation of the status quo has entailed a triple crisis of the EU and its member states (cf. Jessop, 2017). The authority crisis of political elites fuelled by ineffective policies, endemic infighting and tactical manoeuvring among the political class and its corruption, expresses itself in widespread distrust of mainstream politicians. Many citizens turn to charismatic leaders such as Beppe Grillo in Italy or Marine Le Pen in France. Closely linked, the representational crisis of party systems in many EU states (and in the EU parliament) is fuelled by the interchangeability of the dominant political parties. The emergence of what Poulantzas called the “parties of power” or the “single-party network” composed of mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties has led to dwindling support for its constituent parties, a steep decline in election participation rates and the formation and growth of EU-critical and EU-hostile populist parties (Poulantzas, 2000: 220; 236). While some of these parties focus on traditional petty-bourgeois themes such as strong opposition to immigration and multi-culturalism and strong support for tough law-and-order measures, many far-right parties across the EU have added statist social-democratic themes to their agenda, themes which have long ago been abandoned by nominally social-democratic parties. These parties thus militate for limiting domestic and global economic liberalisation and for stronger social safeguards for the middle- and working-classes. Not surprisingly, in many countries these parties are the new home of the “proletariat”. The third crisis affecting the EU and many of its member states is a crisis of hegemony. The established strategy of making citizens consent to, or at least passively accept, the existing economic and political order has lost its persuasiveness. The previously hegemonic chain of equivalences has become badly fractured. Many people no longer identify the free market with globalisation; globalisation with free choice; free choice with individual freedom and equality; and the latter with the de-statisation of politics. The old Thatcherite mantra so dear to neoliberal globalists in the EU – there is no alternative (TINA) – is increasingly contested, even as pro-EU elites engage in a politics of fear to discredit talk of alternative policies.

These three interlinked crises amount to a deep legitimacy crisis of EU states and EU institutions. To solve this crisis,

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mainstream political leaders across the EU are using customary strategies: denunciation of populism, increased surveillance and repressive measures against radical critics of the neoliberal accumulation regime. For instance, the state of emergency in France, which was instituted in November 2015 to cope with the terrorist threat, was subsequently used extensively by authorities to target political critics of government policies. As an Amnesty International researcher observed in May 2017, “Under the cover of the state of emergency, rights to protest have been stripped away with hundreds of activists, environmentalists, and labour rights campaigners unjustifiably banned from participating in protests” (AI 2017). In addition to mobilising the repressive state apparatus, mainstream political leaders across the EU have also looked for new discursive-hegemonic responses to re-build broad popular consent for their rule and their mantra that there is no alternative to the further neoliberalisation or marketisation of all social relations. It is to this issue that the essay turns next.

The Quest for a Discursive-Hegemonic Fix for the Legitimacy Crisis of the EU and its Member States: EU Security Policy

Since the early 2010s, EU leaders have stepped up their efforts to re-frame and re-energise EU security and defence policy. As EU security policy is an intergovernmental format, talk about strengthening EU security policy amounts to talk about putting in place EU-level institutions, mechanisms and incentives to enable member states to work together in building up national, but complementary military capabilities and to enable them to deploy them in joint operations. This section argues that when assessed against the backdrop of the legitimacy crisis of EU states and the EU itself, narratives to strengthen EU security policy acquire a particular class-specific meaning. They are an element of a discursive-hegemonic fix for this political crisis, which creatively uses the language of security in an effort to stabilise the political domination of pro-EU leaders across the EU and to safeguard the neoliberal, globalist accumulation strategies they pursue.

At the end of 2013 the European Council (2013), the highest policy-making body of the EU comprising the heads of state and government of the member states, invited the EU foreign minister – the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – to produce a new strategic assessment of the global security environment with a view to re-launch EU security policy. The European Council explained its request by claiming that Europe’s strategic and geopolitical environment was seriously deteriorating, making old threats to EU citizen more potent and producing new ones. It singled out “cyber defence” as well as “illegal migration, organised crime and terrorism”. The reference to cyber security had a clear anti-Russian thrust, the other issues were linked to the blowback effects of the Arab Spring and failed Western military intervention from Libya to Afghanistan.[1]The European Council also identified the ‘obvious’ solution for the dangers facing EU citizen: an upgrade of EU security policy because the Union is indispensable when it comes “to enhance the security of European citizens”.

Following up on the request by the European Council, the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, who was appointed at the end of 2014, conducted, in 2015-2016, a wide-ranging consultation and reflection on the strategic challenges facing the EU and on possible responses. This work was carried out against a considerable intensification of the securitisations of the increasing refugee and irregular migration flows from and via the MENA region into the EU, flows which have been linked by both pro-EU and EU critical political forces to the threat of terrorism. In addition, and unlike many EU critical parties, pro-EU elites have also massively ratcheted up their securitisation of Russia after its 2014 annexation of Ukraine and its subsequent military support for rebels in eastern Ukraine, which occurred after a staunch pro-EU and pro-NATO government replaced the previous Ukrainian government in a coup d’état (Van der Pijl, 2017).

Against this international backdrop, the strategic reflection carried out by Mogherini in close consultation with member states and EU institutions resulted in a series of strategic narratives. To begin with, a strategic assessment of the international security environment was carried out and presented to the European Council in the summer of 2015. Based on this assessment, Mogherini and her team elaborated a new EU global security strategy, which was adopted by the EU in the summer of 2016. A few months later, the EU agreed to Mogherini’s Implementation Plan on Security and Defence (2016). The European Commission too made an important contribution to this strategic talk by tabling a European Defence Action Plan (2016), which outlined strategies and measures to strengthen EU military capabilities and the EU military-industrial complex in order to tackle the existential threats faced by EU citizens and

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EU states. Finally, the EU and NATO agreed on practical follow-up measures to implement their earlier pledge of reinforced mutual cooperation (EU-NATO Statement, 2016). The key common denominator of these strategic narratives is their insistence that “Our Union is under threat” (EU Global Strategy 2016). At the same time, EU leaders stress how much the EU has already achieved. As Commission President Juncker (2017) put it, “Our Union has come very far in making Europe safer and more peaceful.” EU strategic narratives are thus caught in the typical endless loop of securitizations, in which threat representations lead to the elaboration of counter-measures, which entail the ‘discovery’ of new threats, which require further responses, and so on.

A Marxist perspective on political power highlights that the proliferating EU security narratives are not only moves in a securitisation game, but also moves to counter the deepening political contestation of the EU and its member states. The European Council’s launch of a strategic rethink of EU security policy set in motion a process of strategic reflection seemingly focused on protecting EU citizens, while also contributing to a broader hegemonic strategy aimed at protecting pro-EU elites from disenfranchised citizens. The objective function of this discursive process, of which the securitisation narrative is only one constitutive element, is to make citizens reconnect to those who govern them and to make them consent (actively or passively) to what their pro-EU leaders define as being in their best or general interest. An important condition facilitating this ideological function of EU security talk is that European public opinion has for years and by large margins supported a common EU defence and security policy. For instance, Eurobarometer public opinion surveys show that both in 2008 and 2016, 75% of the respondents were supportive of such a policy (Eurobarometer 78 & 86). In the intervening years, public support stayed remarkably stable, with only minor variations.

In short, over the last few years, as the legitimacy crisis affecting the EU and many EU states has deepened and the neoliberal growth model has alienated ever more EU citizens, national and supranational policymakers across the EU have multiplied their discursive interventions in the field of international security, elaborating ever more nuanced narratives whose common denominator is the argument that the EU is indispensable for the protection of its citizen against a multitude of traditional and non-traditional security threats. One of the functions of these cascading narratives is to increase the salience of a particular security imaginary that ties citizen to the EU and its rulers. In this view, the discursive reinvigoration of EU security policy can be grasped as part of a broader legitimization strategy of policy-makers across the EU aimed at re-establishing hegemony over the popular classes.

A Brief Excursion: Marxist Geopolitics & EU Imperialism

From a Marxist geopolitics perspective, the securitisation of refugees, irregular migrants, terrorism and Russia has as one of its conditions of possibility failed or contested imperialist EU policies.

Contemporary Marxist geopolitics foregrounds the concepts of imperialism and the uneven geographical development of the capitalist world system (Wilhelm, 2010). Recent debates centre on the question whether the “transhistorical fact of geopolitical multiplicity” is necessarily associated with a distinct territorial logic of security competition, which in the modern interstate system takes the specific capitalist form of conflicts between imperialist powers (Callinicos and Rosenberg, 2008: 80). Those like Alex Callinicos who think so constitute a “realist IR” strand within Marxist IR; those who disagree such as William Robinson, constitute a “liberal IR” strand. Yet there are also syncretic Marxist approaches, which (dialectically) combine both perspectives. One such approach has been formulated by the leading representative of the Amsterdam School of IPE: Kees van der Pijl. His approach is useful in making sense of the geopolitical conditions of possibility of contemporary EU securitisations.

A common strand running through (most) Marxist approaches to the IR is their focus on processes of structural differentiation, which sets them apart from realist, liberal and constructivist IR. Besides a focus on class differentiation, historical materialism foregrounds processes of uneven geographic development that constantly produce, reproduce and transform spatial differentiations such as the hierarchical clustering in space of economic activities, income, wealth and political power. These ceaseless processes in the modern world system are driven by “molecular processes of capital accumulation”, that is, by the everyday decisions of market actors, instantiate shifting structures, within and between national economies, of core/periphery, advanced/backward, high-tech/rust-belt, rich/poor (Harvey, 2003: 93). Utilising different spatial scales of politics (scale-jumping), states seek to influence

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these processes of uneven development by looking for institutional, spatio-temporal and discursive fixes for the economic, political and social tensions and contradictions that these processes entail (Harvey, 2003; Jessop and Sum, 2017).

The post-cold war expansion of the EU into central, eastern and south-eastern Europe has offered such fixes for an EU that in the 1980s and 1990s was struggling to keep up with international economic competition. Both through EU enlargement (accession to the EU) and the EU neighbourhood policy (close relations with the EU), the Union dismantled trade impediments and extended its regulatory framework to the East, in the process engaging in what David Harvey (2003) evocatively calls “accumulation by dispossession” – with state-owned and indigenous private property in the East being acquired by mainly EU capital. Also, the expansion empowered the liberalisation of the politico-economic order across Western Europe as low wages, limited welfare regimes and flexible labour markets in the East put competitive pressure on established class compromises in the West. EU expansion has been accompanied by a powerful elite and academic discourse of normative power in Europe, which has stressed the value-dimension of expansion and which initially resonated well with EU citizens while it directed attention away from the socio-economic entailments of the process. In the late 2000s and beyond, as the EU pressed ahead with expanding its economic and political influence and order models further East, notably into Ukraine, it moved ever closer to the Russian borders. Moreover, this was done in increasingly close cooperation with NATO, after the initial misperception, by the USA, certain EU states and Russia, of the meaning and implications of the creation of a common security and defence policy at the start of the 2000s. Their mistaken belief was that with the new policy, the EU would turn itself into a US peer competitor, which would challenge American military and diplomatic-strategic leadership in Europe and beyond. The entangled processes of EU expansion moving closer to the borders of Russia and the increasingly synergetic relationship between the EU and NATO resulted in Russia taking economic, diplomatic and military counter-measures. It intervened militarily in Georgia and in Ukraine to prevent their deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, and it initiated the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union as counterpole to the EU. Domestically, the Russian leadership intensified its movement towards managed, illiberal democracy, and it began to replicate Western policies aimed at building alliances with political actors in the West and at shaping international media narratives.

The resulting action-reaction cycle has created what some observers have called a new cold war. It constitutes an ‘evental’ eruption that fits the long-term historical pattern structuring capitalist international relations, which Van der Pijl (1998) characterises as a persistent heartland-contender division. Van der Pijl shows historically that in this geopolitical structure Lockean, liberal capitalist societies seek to penetrate and remake (economically, politically culturally) Hobbesian, illiberal societies governed by authoritarian states, while the ruling elites of the latter seek to resist their political and economic dispossession. In the 20th century, key contender states of the Anglo-sphere at the heart of the Lockean heartland were imperial and Nazi Germany, imperial Japan and Soviet Russia. The former were integrated into the Lockean heartland by the USA after 1945. The EU tried to do the same with Russia after 1989. But while economically and militarily considerably weaker than the EU states in combination, Russia remains a contender, which challenges its subordinate place in the Western dominated European order and this order’s foundational rules (as it demonstrated by its annexation of Crimea).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, EU policies, too, are partly an expression of efforts to displace national or regional socio-economic tensions and problems within the EU elsewhere. And just like in the case of the eastern expansion of the EU, these fixes interacted in a vicious circle with the global heartland-contender structure of capitalist interstate relations to produce serious unintended consequences for the EU. The EU’s push for economic liberalisation of the MENA economies, and its insistence on opening up protected markets for Europe, notably via its revised, neoliberal development policy, interacted with, among other things, domestic structures of authoritarianism in the MENA region, its clientilistic or ethnic politics and highly uneven economic development, including structural unemployment and pronounced economic inequality, to undermine the legitimacy of ruling elites and to destabilise established class and ethnic compromises. At the same time, through their participation in military interventions in the region, EU states undermined the Union’s policy of supporting stable, even if authoritarian states in the MENA region in exchange for their commitment to prevent EU-bound refugees and migrants from passing through their territories. The failed or contested military interventions by the USA and select EU states, which aimed at dispossessing the ruling elites in contender states in Afghanistan and the MENA countries Iraq, Libya and Syria contributed to a

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massive dislocation of people from these territories. At the same time, these interventions unintentionally weakened or did away with heavily policed border control regimes, notably in Libya, which separate(d) the MENA region from Europe. This resulted in an unprecedented influx of refugees and irregular migrants into the EU, though economically weaker states in the region such as Jordan and Turkey have been hosting many more.

In short, the imperialist policies that the EU and EU states have been pursuing in the East and the South have created blowback effects that in turn function as conditions of possibility for the securitisation of refugees, migrants, terrorism and Russia. While some of these securitisations have been constructed by opponents of the EU and free market globalisation, EU leaders themselves have emplotted these “threats” in their own securitisation narratives to rebuild public acceptance of the EU and pro-EU leaders in the member states.

Europe’s Trump Headache: Trump’s Impact on the EU Legitimacy Crisis

The victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections has been unexpected and unwelcome by EU leaders. The new administration has considerably aggravated the crisis conjuncture within which the EU finds itself. Beginning with what turned out to be only a hypothetical complication, Europeans feared that the Trump administration would act on its campaign pledges and reset relations with Russia by adopting a business-like approach towards Russia that sought to act on shared interests to generate joint benefits, while downplaying issues that separate the two sides. For the EU, there were two risks associated with such a development. If the EU persisted in its confrontational policies towards Russia, acting as lone ranger, its relations with the country would remain in the freezer, and the Union and the member states would have to bear the brunt of Russia’s counter-measures, which so far include Russia’s pronounced unwillingness to give in to EU pressure over Ukraine; the intensification of its military activities on its borders with NATO states and NATO-friendly states; its intervention in Syria, which has aggravated the refugee challenge for the EU; its counter-sanctions against the EU; and its expansion of political communication to, and ties with political forces in, EU states. In this first scenario, EU states would probably have been compelled to beef up their joint military capabilities to stand up to Russia on their own. Counter-intuitively, such a course of action would have been bad for the EU because it would have undermined its capacity to use securitisation as a semantic fix for its legitimacy crisis. (The logic of this argument will be laid out in the Conclusion). The other risk associated with a Trump reset of relations with Russia was that the EU would feel the political need to fall in line with its American ally. This would have meant an unwelcome political volte-face and an associated loss of face that would have raised serious doubts about the EU’s credibility as an international diplomatic and security actor. In this scenario, too, the discursive-hegemonic strategy of using EU security policy as a means to rebuild the identification of EU citizens with Brussels and pro-EU national policy-makers would have been in shambles. Fortunately for the EU, the Trump administration has not been able to move on its campaign pledges. On the contrary, US-Russia relations have gone from bad to worse as confrontation has moved from the realm of discourse to military policies, say, in the cases of Ukraine and Syria.

Turning from the hypothetical to the actual impact of the Trump administration on the EU, its legitimacy crisis and its efforts to fix it, the first point to make is that Trump signifies the accession to power of the sort of populist politicians whom traditional political, economic and cultural elites are battling in every EU states. Trump is their nightmare comes true because his presidency is a loud signal that it is possible to go beyond the policies advocated by the parties of power. Second, the challenge for pro-EU elites is what to tell their own citizens when the Trump administration succeeds in persuading or compelling companies to invest in US manufacturing jobs and in bringing back home offshored jobs and if, more broadly, it succeeds in regulating the transnational movement of goods and people into the USA in the pursuit of an America-first policy. Any success on these issues impugns the TINA mantra so popular among mainstream EU elites, and strengthens populist counter-hegemonic narratives in the EU according to which an alternative to the globalist, neoliberal accumulation strategy pursued by the Union and its member states is feasible. Third, the Trump administration has put public pressure on America’s European allies in NATO to do significantly more for their common defence, highlighting forcefully what behind closed doors Americans have been telling their allies for a long time: you need to stop acting as free riders in European and international security affairs. EU leaders have tried to use this demand to their advantage to bolster their strategy of talking up EU security to regain hegemony over those parts of the electorate that have become sceptical of the EU and its globalist credo. But this is likely to backfire!

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EU leaders such as Commission president Juncker and German chancellor Merkel have been trying to make the Trump critique of the EU and NATO work in their favour. They have used transatlantic disagreements over military spending, free trade, environmental protection and so on, and have plugged into the widespread public distrust of Trump across the EU, to strengthen Euro-patriotism. After G-7 and NATO encounters with Trump in one and the same week, Merkel said: “We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands... We have to know that we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans” (Guardian, 2017). Juncker (2017), again explicitly referring to the Trump administration, stated that “The protection of Europe can no longer be outsourced.” And he added that it is precisely because Europeans must do more to protect their citizens that they have to strengthen the EU because “Even our biggest military powers — and I could count them on one, maximum two fingers – cannot combat all the challenges and threats alone”. The European Council at its meeting in June 2017 has reinforced this message. It agreed on a number of steps, including closer military cooperation among a coalition of the willing and able under the aegis of what the EU Treaty calls permanent structured cooperation, which allows a coalition of states to use EU institutions to coordinate their cooperation; common funding of the deployment of EU battlegroups; and the swift operationalisation of the European Defence Fund to finance joint military capability development projects and joint military research.

Conclusion: The Threat to the EU from EU Security Policy

Juncker and Merkel’s strategy of using securitisation narratives to rally citizens around the EU flag, a strategy which finds broad support among EU governments including the new French president Macron, is a high-risk game that is likely to backfire. So far, EU leaders have been able to talk up the security vocation of the EU in the knowledge that the USA would not compel them to step up to the plate. Hence, a pattern exists in EU security and defence policy, which the EU studies literature describes as capability-expectations gap (Hill, 1993). The EU has periodically vaunted its security prowess, thus creating expectations (among pro-EU forces inside and outside the EU) of forceful and effective foreign policy actions, expectations which it has so far never (fully) met. This has been the pattern from the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s to the wars in Libya and Ukraine in the 2010s. In each case, the EU, or key EU states, wanted to lead the response of the West, and in each case they fell far short of expectations. Previous US administrations criticized this discrepancy between intentions and actions, but they never insisted loudly and harshly that EU states plug this gap, instead helping them out by stepping up their own engagements in the conflicts or defending the lack of resolve of their allies. Early declarations and actions by the Trump administration indicate that it is serious about making EU states pay more for US hegemonic leadership, both in Europe and globally. This external political pressure on EU leaders, coupled with the logic of their own deep securitisations of Russia, refugees, irregular migration and terrorism, may compel them for the first time to act on their rhetoric and do upgrade their joint military capabilities quickly and in a big way. If this happens, it is likely that instead of making the EU more legitimate, they will further undermine it.

To understand this argument, it is important to point out that the “ideological” function of EU security policy, by which citizens are encouraged to transfer their positive assessment of a particular and largely marginal EU policy to the EU as a whole, depends on the fact that this policy remains marginal to what the EU does. In the EU studies literature, it has long been highlighted that a key element of EU security policy is that it is about EU identity building, and that it is this focus on itself that explains in parts the internal, largely procedural orientation of EU security policy, which issues reams of declarations, makes plans and pledges, carries out coordination exercises and tinkers with institutional design and procedures without ever really building any new military capabilities or mustering the will to use what it actually has, notably its battle groups (Anderson, 2008; Bickerton, 2012). To put it bluntly, one key reason why EU security policy is so popular among EU citizens is that the EU has so far never engaged in war fighting in which lives are lost in combat. Another key reason is that EU security policy has so far not cost much. Once EU leaders actually start investing in capabilities and infrastructure, and then use them for military interventions, as the strategy pushed by Merkel, Juncker and Macron implies, they will have to find the necessary funds at a time when an increasing number of lower-income people turn towards anti-establishment parties to protest policies that hurt them in favour of the better off. In the neoliberal competition the member states, under the guidance of the European Commission, have been busy building, new security and military funding will likely come from diverting public funds currently assigned to social programmes and employment promotion. Eurobarometer polls bear out the risk to EU legitimacy of pushing ahead with the creation of an EU security union. In 2011, only 14% of respondents said that “they would like

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the EU budget to be spent ... on defence and security". In 2015, the figure was 19%. The corresponding figures for a preference for EU spending on "social affairs and employment" were 42% (2011) and 44% (2015) (Eurobarometer 83). As the EU scholar Richard Youngs (2017) puts it, referring to the European Defence Fund, its creation is "disconnected from any political strategy for addressing populism or the underlying pathologies plaguing the European project, both of which pose real threats to the bloc's survival and long-term security", and both of which are linked to "the harm done by a decade of austerity".

In short, the legitimacy of EU states, EU institutions and pro-EU policies and attitudes have for some time been hit by growing popular alienation. The growth of populist parties across the EU and declining participation rates in national elections are powerful signs of this crisis. The Trump administration is a reminder to EU governments and elites of the risks of their weakened discursive hegemony over large parts of the population. One of the responses of EU states and pro-EU elites to this challenge has been to talk up EU security policy. As long as they stick to their established pattern of talking the talk, but not walking the walk, this strategy may have (modest) success in containing Euro-scepticism. However, should EU leaders feel compelled, by the force of circumstances created by the Trump administration and the logic of their own securitisations, to move towards the creation of an EU security union, they are likely to end up further undermining the legitimacy of the EU as public funds are diverted to security issues and body bags are brought home from foreign military theatres.

Note

[1]Ever since a massive 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia, which was attributed to Russia, the EU and NATO have identified politically motivated cyber-attacks as a major threat, and taken counter-measures.

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