

Enough Theory, European Strategic Autonomy Needs Practice in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

Libya, Iraq, and the Strait of Hormuz provide three test cases where greater assertiveness and transatlantic cooperation could go hand in hand, but only if European countries receive genuine U.S. support to step up their operational efforts and diplomatic engagement.

Traditionally, European countries have pursued different, if not diverging, priorities in the Middle East and North Africa. Combined with uneven military capabilities and a lack of political will to engage in risky operations, especially outside a UN mandate, this divergence has largely kept them from asserting a strong, unified position in the region. Yet given the deterioration of transatlantic relations under President Trump and the **growing American fatigue (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/523131-the-us-needs-europe-to-end-the-forever-wars-in-the-middle-east>)** toward unending crises, Europeans must now step up their collective efforts in a region whose instability is directly affecting their security interests.

First Collective Steps

Over the past few years, the rise and **resilience of the Islamic State (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/terrorism-france-new-and-old-trends-jihadism>)**, the **use of chemical weapons (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/faint-red-line-how-west-should-respond-syria-chemical-weapons-report>)** by the Syrian regime, the growing **risk of nuclear proliferation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/latest-iran-nuclear-inspection-report-reveals-multiple-concerns>)** from Iran, and **ongoing maritime incidents (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/submarine-movements-irans-doorstep-military-and-legal-implications>)** in the Persian Gulf have pushed France, Germany, and other countries to make renewed geopolitical contributions in the region. Such endeavors have been linked with the need to build a more autonomous Europe that is able to take charge of its security interests.

In Iraq and Syria, Europeans contributed to the U.S.-led military response against the Islamic State. This campaign included states that have traditionally been cautious about foreign military engagement, such as Germany. The European Union has also been instrumental in providing humanitarian and stabilization assistance, which has totaled more than 1 billion euros in Iraq alone since 2014.

In Libya, Europeans launched Operation Irini last year with the primary goal of impartially implementing the UN arms embargo. Drawing on maritime, aerial, and satellite assets mainly provided by Italy, France, Greece, and Germany, this operation benefits from a robust mandate, allowing it to inspect vessels that may be carrying prohibited materiel. It has already achieved concrete results, uncovering Turkish and Emirati breaches of the embargo. These actions were bolstered by new European sanctions issued last September targeting companies that supply factions in east and west Libya.

On Iran, European countries have maintained unity since 2017 to preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) amid a looming proliferation crisis exacerbated by the U.S. maximum pressure policy. In keeping with their balanced approach, and in reaction to rising tensions with Iran in the Gulf, France and other countries launched their own naval surveillance operation in January 2020. This mission, named “European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz” (EMASOH), is distinct from the U.S.-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).

“Two Sides of the Same Coin”

The above initiatives remain modest and could stall, however. Soon after Joe Biden’s election, divisions resurfaced among Europeans regarding the notion of “strategic autonomy” and what it might mean for the transatlantic relationship. German defense minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer called this notion an “illusion,” explaining that Europeans would never be able to “replace America’s crucial role as a security provider.” Yet French president Emmanuel Macron “profoundly disagreed” with such views, arguing that the United States would only respect Europeans if they were “sovereign with respect to [their] defense.”

As many experts have noted, the actual strategic differences between these countries are narrower than what conceptual debates suggest. In a November 16 joint op-ed for the *Washington Post*, the French and German foreign ministers underlined that promoting a stronger Europe and building a more balanced transatlantic partnership are “two sides of the same coin.” Indeed, the Middle East presents several immediate security challenges on which Europeans need to both strengthen their efforts and reset their coordination with Washington (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/presidential-elections-united-states-political-and-economic-consequences-europe>).

The tendency in Europe is to wait for the United States to clarify a given policy before taking action. Today is no exception, as many governments have high expectations for President-elect Biden. This passive position is dangerous, though—it leaves space for Iran, Russia, Turkey, and other actors to assert themselves in regional theaters such as Syria, at a time when the new U.S. administration is not yet fully operational and is grappling with substantial challenges at home.

The ball is therefore in Europe’s court to organize itself and prepare proposals for dealing cohesively with the Biden administration. On the diplomatic front, the EU needs to develop a more flexible and reactive foreign policy. Changing the current EU requirement for unanimous votes on sensitive foreign policy matters is not realistic in the foreseeable future. Yet individual European states could still launch a smaller coalition that is willing and able to lead the continent’s response to the next crisis. Much like the Libya group formed by the EU, France, Germany, and Italy, such a vanguard could be an effective venue for coordination with Washington.

On the military level, officials need to clarify what would constitute a realistic and effective balance between European and U.S. assets. As demonstrated in Libya, the Sahel, and the Levant, American enablers are crucial for

European operations, especially in the areas of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, aerial refueling, and airlift support. This type of U.S. support will still be necessary for the near future. Nevertheless, Europeans should still scale up their military investments, enhance their operational readiness (e.g., through intensified information sharing and contingency planning), and explore ways of better pooling their resources (as NATO did quite effectively with its shared AWACS fleet when fighting the Islamic State). These activities should be prioritized despite the ongoing economic fallout of COVID-19.

Three Test Cases

To test this rebalanced transatlantic cooperation, Europe should take steps to revamp its partnership with Washington in three key hotspots over the next few months:

Iraq. The first priority is to take greater responsibility in the fight against remnants of the Islamic State. Denmark's decision to assume leadership over the NATO training mission in Iraq and send 285 military personnel is an encouraging signal in that regard, particularly since the mission is now expected to incorporate some of the training activities previously coordinated by the Global Coalition Against Daesh/ISIS. Because of their relative neutrality, European forces can help maintain international support to Iraq while containing the risk of escalation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pushing-back-iraqi-militias-weighing-us-options>) between Iran-backed militias and U.S. troops. Even so, this increased European engagement will require some military backing from the United States in order to be sustainable and credible (e.g., force protection, airlift, intelligence, base access).

Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Europeans should propose stronger coordination among existing maritime security initiatives, starting with the United States but also reaching out to Japan, India, and Australia. Regardless of how extensively the Biden administration chooses to reorient U.S. policy toward Iran (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-bidens-iran-policy-can-have-chance-succeed>), Europe will presumably have more political room and incentive to push for an inclusive regional dialogue on maritime security—particularly when Russia and other actors have not hesitated to launch competing initiatives. Divorced from the nuclear issue, maritime security could be an effective venue in which to rebuild confidence between Europe and Washington, and between Middle Eastern governments.

Libya. European officials should strengthen their support for the arms embargo by allocating more assets to Operation Irini, which needs a couple additional vessels to fully implement its mandate. In return, Washington could be more openly supportive of these efforts and facilitate coordination between European air assets and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), especially with regard to informing the UN about embargo violations committed by land or air.

More broadly, the United States is contemplating a wider military withdrawal from the Middle East in order to focus on competition with China. Holding a serious transatlantic discussion about this strategic shift is therefore urgent, with the goal of formulating a smarter and more balanced model of military cooperation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/short-term-diplomatic-agenda-syrian-puzzle>) in the region. For some Europeans, promoting a more proactive defense and security role for the continent is still considered detrimental to the transatlantic partnership. Accordingly, Washington would be wise to explicitly encourage a stronger and more militarily credible European approach to the Middle East.

Pierre Morcos is a visiting fellow with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Previously, he was named deputy head of the Strategic Affairs and Cybersecurity Division in the French foreign service, focusing on NATO and European defense issues. The views expressed in this article are strictly personal. ❖

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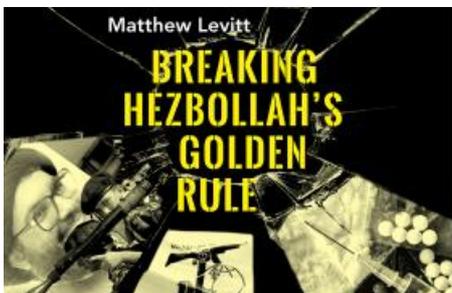
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