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ARMAMENT AND TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The Romanian perspective

By

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Comment

ABSTRACT

Romania's transatlanticist and European identities are two sides of the same coin. They define the strategic priorities in Romania's foreign, security and defence policy. This is the reason why Romania feels trapped between a rock and a hard place in times of transatlantic strife. EU-US and EU-NATO cooperation are inherent to Romanian strategic interest, precisely as it feels Russia's offensive military activities breathing down its neck. Though a supporter and active contributor to recent EU defence initiatives from the outset, Romania also places high value upon its partnership with the US - as their track record of bilateral defence cooperation and procurement reveal. Since both European and Euro-Atlantic integration are in its strategic interest, this paper pleads for a more confident Romanian voice on the international stage, one that will allow it to serve as a key transatlantic bridge builder.

Keywords: *Romania, Transatlantic link, European defence, Armament*

Stating that Romania is a transatlanticist country is equal to stating that the Black Sea is wet. Obvious. Stating that the Black Sea is salty is equal to stating that Romania is pro-European. Equally obvious. Just as the two characteristics are inherent to the Black Sea, so are transatlanticism and pro-Europeanism to Romanian strategic thinking.

With a combined transatlantic and European strategic identity, Romania's contributions to both NATO and EU defence efforts have been consistent. Tensions between the two identities could however emerge if transatlantic misunderstandings over the direction and openness of EU defence initiatives continue. How Romania will respond to increasing pressure from the United States for more alignment with American foreign policy also remains to be seen. This comment outlines the pillars of Romanian strategic thinking as revealed in national strategic documents and correlates them with multilateral defence industrial projects and operational engagement abroad. It concludes with an outlook on the bridging role Romania wishes to design for herself in the Euro-Atlantic community.

ROMANIA'S STRATEGIC PILLARS

The Romanian Defence White Book of 2017 follows five objectives: (1) defence capability development; (2) increasing strategic credibility in NATO and the EU; (3) consolidating strategic partnerships, in particular with the US; (4) developing international cooperation; and (5) supporting crisis management bodies. While all Romanian strategic documents emphasise the need to consolidate Romania's credibility as a NATO ally through its operational and conceptual contributions, its strategic partnership with the US is eye-catching and takes priority over other relationships. It is clearly singled out as a strategic objective in the White Book¹. Next in line is Romania's special relationship with France, followed by Germany, then Poland and Turkey. Romania's National Defence Strategy of 2015 is unequivocal about the pillars of Romanian foreign and security policy: the partnership with the US, NATO and EU memberships. This strategic distribution of

¹ Romania and the US signed a strategic partnership agreement in 1997 and a bilateral defence cooperation agreement in 2005 setting the framework for military engagements.

distinguished partners demonstrates the balance between Romania's Atlantic and European identities.

The fact that Romania's Guinness World Records-awarded sitcom revolved around the life of Romanian NATO soldiers, if anything, further confirms its transatlanticist affinity². It is therefore a strong Romanian interest to actively support EU-NATO cooperation in all its dimensions. Both the White Book and the Strategy envision a stronger, more active Romanian role on the international security scene. The two documents are joined by the Military Strategy of 2016 in prioritising the Black Sea's strategic importance for regional and European security. Romania feels the hybrid and conventional threat posed by Russia as breathing in its neck, with illegally annexed Crimea being at a two-hour naval distance from its ports. Embodied in these documents, Romanian strategic thinking is largely compatible with the broad objectives outlined in the EU Global Strategy. As such, Romania subscribes to the notion of increased European strategic autonomy as contributing to a stronger Atlantic alliance, underscoring though the condition of non-duplication.

Industrial dimension

After the fall of communism in Romania the national defence industry largely became grouped around ROMARM and ROMTEHNICA, state companies under the authority of the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Defence respectively. The nucleus of Romanian defence industry is PATROMIL,³ which represents over 200 companies. The government has generally encountered difficulties in fostering competitiveness and technological innovation in a rather rigid, communist-inherited bureaucratic system. Nevertheless, Romania is hosting a growing number of SMEs, particularly on the IT side, which tend to incubate dual-use products. It is them the ministries should target to enable their access, development and innovation potential.

In 2015, President Klaus Iohannis managed to secure a cross-party political agreement for meeting NATO's 2% target. Since 2017, the Romanian government has consistently allocated 2% of its GDP to defence – but has not so far managed to spend it all. In 2018, for example, it spent only 1,89% (Ministry of Defence, 2019). The 2% target continued in

² 'Trasnitii in NATO', loosely translated as 'Oddballs in NATO', was recorded as the longest-running sitcom in the world, it is currently shooting its 33rd season.

³ The Romanian Business Association of the Military Technique Manufacturers

2019 and 2020. In terms of defence procurement, Bucharest has tended to sign government-to-government contracts. The latest procurement spotlight was on the corvettes bidding, finally won by Naval Group, but after waves of contestation with Damen. In 2018, the Romanian MoD spent 33,2% of its defence budget on defence procurement, surpassing the EDA's 20% benchmark.

Romania's support for EU defence initiatives such as the EDF, the PESCO, and the CARD was consistently strong since their launch, with the due emphasis placed on non-duplication and complementarity with NATO. Romania participated in the EDF's precursors, with academic consortia taking part in the Preparatory Action on Defence Research. Most notably, Romania is currently situated among the top 8 applicants for the European Defence Industrial Development Programme⁴.

During the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council in 2019, *Europe as a stronger global actor* was one of the 5 priorities. This included capability development, EU-NATO relations and strengthening the CSDP. The Presidency prides itself with having achieved a tough provisional agreement on the EDF between the co-legislators, with NATO-inclusive language. A PESCO member from its genesis, Romania is participating in 12 projects out of which it coordinates two⁵. While the Romanian Presidency hoped to reach an agreement on third party cooperation in PESCO, it fell short, the matter remaining unresolved to this date.

Romania has a rich cooperation record with American defence industry, having acquired the Patriot missile system in 2017, the F-16 fighter aircraft in 2016 – aiming to add 5 more planes to its dozen – and having expressed an interest in the F-35 fighter jet, instead of the French-German-Spanish FCAS or British-Italian Tempest. It also hosts MQ-9 Reaper drones on its 71st Air Base for intelligence-gathering on the Eastern flank and the Black Sea. Despite sharing many structural defence industrial deficiencies with countries such as Croatia, Albania, or Greece, Romania has so far been excluded from the new US initiative dubbed the European Recapitalization Incentive Program aimed at modernising armed forces slowed down by Soviet-era equipment.

⁴ The 2019 EDIDP award decisions are due in May 2020.

⁵ The CBRN Defence Training Range and the EU Network of Diving Centres

Operational dimension

Romania has been an active contributor to several international operational fronts. In 2018, it deployed a total of 1120 soldiers, the largest contribution being a 700-strong deployment to Afghanistan (Ministry of Defence, 2020). Romania so far contributed to 6 CSDP missions, 7 UN operations and 4 NATO missions - its NATO troop contribution heavily outweighing the others. One of the 20 members of the German-led Framework Nations Concept, Romania pledged to provide a brigade to a future European Corps.

MAINTAINING A EURO-ATLANTIC BALANCE

While holding the Council Presidency might have constituted a reason to abstain from reacting, Romania's lack of reaction to the US 'poison pill' letter regarding the EDF and PESCO could also be indicative of its hedging between support for a strong Europe of defence and a robust transatlantic alliance. Bilateral Romanian-American relations are tightly knit since the 2005 defence cooperation agreement, which enabled the US military to make use of military facilities on Romanian territory, most notably during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. During his latest bilateral meeting with President Trump, President Iohannis voiced Romania's willingness to host an even larger number of American troops (Romanian Presidency, 2019). The two-armed forces engage in frequent military exercises, including Defender2020 and the bilateral Dacian Reaper-20 exercise. Testament to Romania's commitment to the Alliance was also the appointment of Mircea Geoană as NATO Deputy Secretary-General in October 2019, being the first holder of this title from the former-communist Allies.

President Iohannis used the first foreign policy speech of his second mandate in January 2020 to reaffirm that Romania's international priorities were underpinned by the strategic triad of the EU, NATO and the US. Romania's deep commitment to European integration, including on defence, is on par with its belief in the transatlantic alliance as the cornerstone of its security. However, European discourse on strategic autonomy and NATO's *brain death*, paired with American rhetoric on the alleged protectionism of EU defence initiatives are the rock and the hard place in which Romania feels squeezed in. Despite its slightly dominant transatlantic identitary half, Romania is paying close

attention to discourse coming out of the White House and its outputs often give it discomfort. It would nevertheless be reductive to assume that investing in its defence relations with France and Germany are merely an insurance policy in case the gap with Washington increases. Romania is as genuinely transatlantic, as it is European. It thus feels comfortable in playing a balancing and broker role between the EU and NATO. This is a stated politico-strategic goal. Albeit there is room for more action and for more strategy. For others to see its potential as a genuine bridging force, Romania itself has to find its voice and learn to confidently use it – in all the languages that its polyglot citizens master. ■

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ARES GROUP

The Armament Industry European Research Group (Ares Group) was created in 2016 by The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (Iris), who coordinates the Group. The aim of the Ares Group, a high-level network of security and defence specialists across Europe, is to provide a forum to the European armament community, bringing together top defence industrial policy specialists, to encourage fresh strategic thinking in the field, develop innovative policy proposals and conduct studies for public and private actors.

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