

Academics as Soldiers? Is defence-related research a scandal or a duty?

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coordinated by Bart Pattyn (KU Leuven) and Jean-Michel Chaumont (UCLouvain)

The European Commission recently decided to make a considerable budget available for academic research that could contribute to the defence of the European continent. In an era in which defence is just as much about terrorist organizations as about foreign armies, and in which cyberattacks and even fake news have become more damaging than tanks, most disciplines, from engineering to the humanities, are potentially concerned. Should universities seize this opportunity as a way of funding interesting research that could be useful for both military and civil purposes? Do they even have a duty to respond positively to this request to help defend the European Union and its values, even if the research involved is of no particular scientific interest nor likely to find civil uses? Or should they instead turn down this offer as being incompatible with their ethical ideal of producing knowledge for mankind as a whole, without the secrecy and other constraints imposed by defence concerns?

The weight of these various considerations is likely to vary from case to case. Should the decision about whether to engage in defence-motivated research be left to individual researchers? Or should their institutions rather decide, separately or jointly? And what are the criteria that should guide such decisions?

The debate about these issues was introduced by

- Erno VANDEWEERT (European Commission, Defence Research Unit), Jo COELMONT (Royal Higher Institute for Defence) and Quentin MICHEL (Université de Liège, Unité d'Etudes Européennes), keynote speakers;
- Laetitia SEDOU (European Network Against the Arms Trade) , Joos VANDEWALLE (KU Leuven), Alkeksandra SAMONEK (UCLouvain), “interpellators” from the floor;
- Christophe WASINSKI (Université libre de Bruxelles, Centre de recherche en politiques internationales), Johan DE TAVERNIER (KU Leuven, Faculteit Godgeleerdheid), Federico SANTOPINTO (Groupe de recherche sur la paix et la sécurité), Frédéric MAURO (French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs IRIS), and Bart PATTYN (KU Leuven Institute of Philosophy), members of the panel chaired by Dominique WILLEMS (UGent)

A duty ?

Four main reasons were put forward by the speakers and participants for why defence-related research within a European context might be at least a prima facie duty for academic institutions and research teams in the relevant fields:

- 1) The European economy needs to be boosted through innovation. Given the long history of contribution of defence-linked research to technological innovation,

- 2) Academic research — and the researchers' job prospects — is dependent on access to funds. It would be irresponsible to let this opportunity be monopolized by the private sector — or snapped by rival institutions.
- 3) The defence of Europe against attacks of all natures will be more efficient if it becomes more common and more knowledge-based. Hence the importance of a common research-focused European Defence fund.
- 4) European integration is a peace-driven project that must be further deepened. A common European defence would be a very effective means for this purpose, and EU-coordinated defence-related research an important step in this direction.

A scandal ?

However, for those who regard one or more of these purposes honourable and recognize the prima facie duties they imply, there may be conditions under which academic participation in the European defence fund would nevertheless be inadmissible, possibly even scandalous. Cherishing the value of academic freedom, properly understood, does not imply that it is ethically unobjectionable to accept money to conduct research on any subject, by whatever method, under whatever constraints, and whatever the likely use of its results.

In the course of the Forum, a wide range of conditions for legitimate participation in EU-level defence-related research were mentioned and discussed. Such participation, it was argued, is not permissible

- 1) as long as long as defence includes as a core component the killing of other human beings and/or a dichotomization of the world along an us/them divide (no defence without “enemies”);
- 2) if it goes beyond fundamental research and contributes directly to the development of weapons;
- 3) if it risks contributing to the violation of international conventions;
- 4) if it does not satisfy some additional ethical conditions, such as the exclusion of potential contributions to the development of lethal weapons without meaningful human control (the only substantive ethical condition imposed by the Commission on top of the legal constraints), or to the development of surveillance techniques that could violate human rights or of recognition technologies that could be used to discriminate or stigmatize — conditions which are not, or not yet, enshrined in international law, but could be formalized by ethical commissions set up at the level of universities or of higher education authorities (such as the VLIR — Vlaamse Universitaire Raad — or the ARES — Académie de recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur);
- 5) if it prevents researchers from publishing the results of their research so that they can best contribute to the progress and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of the whole of mankind;
- 6) if it does not require security clearing procedures for both individuals and buildings that would seriously deteriorate the quality of recruitment and of daily life in universities;
- 7) if the European Defence Fund is not accountable to the European Parliament (rather than only to European Council);
- 8) in the absence of a permanent exercise of ethical vigilance on the part of each research unit involved.

No simple criterion will do the trick

Depending on the weight one gives to the various objectives and associated prima facie duties listed above, one will want to interpret these conditions more or less strictly. What is clear is that no simple criterion — such as fundamental versus applied research, or openly publishable versus classified, or usable for defence versus usable for aggression, or securing peace versus preparing war — will ever do the trick. If ethical considerations are to help steer research adequately, there is no way of dispensing with a continuing individual and collective self-scrutiny. All things considered, bearing in mind both the various valuable objectives which academic research could serve and the various misuses to which its results could be put, can the researchers involved be proud of what they are doing thanks to the European Defence Fund if exposed to all in full transparency, or should they be ashamed of having vied for and accepted that money ?