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The New European Defence and Security Agenda

Abstract:

The Ukraine war has raised blunt questions to Europeans about how they should guarantee their security and defence. No EU or NATO state has been attacked, yet Ukraine – a partner country of both institutions which furthermore borders four EU/NATO countries – has been invaded by Russia, and this de facto challenges European stability as well as the European security and defence regime. This brief aims to unpack how the Ukraine war has impacted the European defence debates and, in particular, the role of the European Union. It sheds light on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU's defence and security identity, and the relationship with NATO, and ends with future challenges.



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A revisited CSDP

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was launched in the late 1990s in the context of the Yugoslav conflicts as an instrument to enable the EU to do crisis management in ways similar to what NATO was doing at the time in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and then Kosovo. As of 2003, the EU started to run its own CSDP operations and missions, mainly in the Western Balkans and Africa. Thus, it asserted itself as one component of the European security architecture.

The EU would not run coercive military operations as NATO or some of its member states have. Still, it deployed a dozen stabilisation operations together with more than 25 civilian missions. These activities have played a key role in shaping the EU's security identity, yet, their level of success was questioned from the beginning, and the political support that those operations benefitted from EU member states has always been shaky. Furthermore, the creation and conduct of CSDP operations were not accompanied by a parallel effort to develop European military capabilities. In contrast, the European defence market has remained fragmented, with little that European states would do to facilitate joint capability development and procurement.¹

This being said, a series of initiatives were taken in the context of the implementation of the 2016 EU's Global Strategy on Security and Defence, among which the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in December 2017² and the European Defence Fund (EDF) in 2019/20.³ Through these efforts, the EU aimed to address the structural weaknesses of the European Defence Industrial Base at a time when CSDP operations were less in demand. As of April 2023, PESCO has led to the creation of 60 projects in 7 domains, while the EDF has funded 61 defence industrial projects for a total amount of EUR1,2 billion in 2022.⁴ Through these initiatives, the EU defence agenda has shifted away from operations and towards more military capability development. In March 2022, the Strategic Compass captured this evolution. The document drafted before the outbreak of the war but adopted a few weeks after 24 February 2022, provides a

¹ See European Defence Agency, '2022 Coordinated Annual Review on Defence Report', November 2022, <https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/eda-publications/2022-card-report.pdf>

² Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participating Member States, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32017D2315>.

³ See 'European Defence Agency', [https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/european-defence-fund-\(edf\)](https://eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/EU-defence-initiatives/european-defence-fund-(edf)); see also Sophia Besch, 'EU Defense and the War in Ukraine', Carnegie, 21 December 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/21/eu-defense-and-war-in-ukraine-pub-88680>.

⁴ See European Commission (2022), 'Results of the EDF 2021 Calls for Proposals: EU invests €1.2 billion in 61 defence industrial cooperation projects', News article, 20 July, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/results-edf-2021-calls-proposals-eu-invests-eu12-billion-61-defence-industrial-cooperation-projects-2022-07-20_en.

'shared assessment of the strategic environment in which the EU is operating and of the threats and challenges the Union faces'; it furthermore proposes a series of initiatives to 'improve the EU's ability to act decisively in crises and to defend its security and its citizens'. Four areas of action are listed: act, invest, partner and secure.⁵ The Compass proposes inter alia the creation of a Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops for crisis management operations.

What the Ukraine war says about the EU's Security and defence identity

The way the EU has responded to the Ukraine war as of 24 February 2022 has confirmed its existence as a purposeful security actor.⁶ Through the adoption of ten packages of sanctions against Russia, the hosting of more than 4 million Ukrainian refugees and associated humanitarian aid, the financing of the delivery of weapons to Ukraine by its member states (see Box below on the European Peace Facility), and the response to the energy crisis, the EU has played its share of the Western response to the war in Europe. The relative easiness by which decisions were taken throughout the first year also attested to a sense of political cohesion among EU states and their reunion in sharing outrage over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁷

At the EU level, political unity culminated when the EU offered Ukraine (together with Moldova) candidate status at the June 2022 European Summit. Overall EU member states have proved to be willing to support Ukraine politically and through the delivery of weapons while refraining from taking measures that could lead to direct confrontation with Russia. While doing this, though, some differences have been visible across the board as to how far European states shall go in their support of Ukraine, with France and Germany sometimes being perceived as less eager to deliver high-end lethal weapons than countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, more directly exposed to the Russian threat.⁸

This was particularly the case in the early 2023 debate over the sending of battle tanks, when Germany and France resisted a decision to send Leopard 2 (for Germany) and Leclerc tanks (for France), before Germany eventually accepted,

⁵ Strategic Compass, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en

⁶ See Thierry Tardy (Ed.), 'War in Europe. Preliminary Lessons', NDC Research Paper No. 23, May 2022, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=0>.

⁷ Interestingly, while constructive abstention (article 31 TEU) had been used only once in the past (in the context of the creation of EULEX Kosovo in 2008), it was invoked by four countries in the context of the war in Ukraine: by Austria, Ireland and Malta on the EPF (28 February 2022), and by Hungary on the creation of EUMAM (17 October 2022).

⁸ 'Franco-German struggle over war in Ukraine raises EU foreign policy questions', Le Monde, 20 May 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/05/20/the-franco-german-tandem-s-struggle-over-war-in-ukraine-raises-questions-for-eu-foreign-policy_5984115_4.html

while France only conceded to send light-wheeled tanks.⁹

On the CSDP front, the EU established in October 2022¹⁰ a military mission (EU Military Assistance Mission, EUMAM), mandated to train 15,000 (then raised to 30,000) Ukrainian troops. The operation is deployed in Poland and Germany, with various EU states contributing to the training.

Finally, while the pre-24 February 2022 debate was dominated by the weak levels of defence spending by European states and how this could negatively impact the transatlantic bond, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has constituted a wake-up call for quite a few of them. Most European states revisited their threat assessment exercises and made decisions to beef up their defence posture, whether in budgetary terms or in the field of capabilities.¹¹ From Germany's *Zeitenwende* to Finland and Sweden's application to NATO,¹² and Denmark giving up on its EU defence opt-out, the European defence landscape has been significantly shaped by Russia's move over Ukraine and what it means in terms of the plausibility of war on the European continent. The states sharing a border with Russia have been particularly concerned with these changes, although they are also the ones for whom the invasion of Ukraine was the least surprising.

Several lessons can be drawn from these various initiatives.

The EU has delivered. One is that the EU and its member states indeed delivered in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, thus demonstrating a sense of agency and relevance at a strategic moment of the EU's existence. EU institutions have had a geopolitical approach to the crisis, combining short-term and long-term elements and various components of an enlarged security agenda (combining sanctions, energy, CSDP, delivery of weapons, etc.). The EUMAM attests to an EU geopolitical dimension insofar as, through this mission, the EU trains a force fighting against Russia. Although EU member states are eager not to engage in a direct military confrontation with Russia, training the Ukrainian forces is arguably not politically neutral.¹³

What the EU and its member states have done also attest to the reality of the Common Security and Defence Policy, in contrast with what was done (or not done) in response to the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, the Iraq War in 2003, the Arab Springs or the Libyan crisis in 2011.

⁹ 'Germany agrees to send its Leopard battle tanks to Ukraine after weeks of pressure', NPR, 25 January 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/25/1150759498/germany-leopard-2-tanks-ukraine>

¹⁰ 'European Council (2022), 'Political and Security Committee Decision (CFSP) 2022/2097, 27 October 2022 on the appointment of the Special Training Commander for the European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022D2097&from=EN>

¹¹ See Jason Davidson, 'No 'free-riding' here: European defense spending defies US critics', The Atlantic Council, 13 March 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/no-free-riding-here-european-defense-spending-defies-us-critics/>

¹² On 4 April 2023, Finland joined NATO as 31st member, while Sweden's membership is still conditioned on Türkiye's parliament ratification of Sweden's accession protocol.

¹³ Niklas Novaky, 'With the new Ukraine Mission, EU Military Training Becomes More Geopolitical', Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 21 October 2022, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/blog/with-the-new-ukraine-mission-eu-military-training-becomes-more-geopolitical/>

The EU is confined to a security role. In this context, another lesson of the EU's efforts post-24 February 2022 is that these efforts are more akin to a security posture than a genuine defence posture. The EU's response has been about funding, sanctioning, coordinating and training more than it has been about contributing directly to the defence of its Eastern flank members. For example, the EU as such has not contributed to the NATO-led enhanced Forward Presence deployed on the territory of the eight Eastern Flank countries, nor has there been any debate on possible security guarantees provided by the EU to Ukraine or Finland and Sweden as they were applying to NATO membership (in reference to article 42.7 TEU). One could argue that a proper defence role in Europe is not what the CSDP is fundamentally about (as this remains a state's and NATO prerogative). Yet, the defence component of CSDP has evolved over time to implicitly include an internal dimension (as illustrated by some PESCO projects such as military mobility or many of the military capability development initiatives).

The scope of the changes. Third, while European states have primarily revisited their defence posture in light of Russia's attack on Ukraine, uncertainties also exist on at least two levels: one is about the mid-term reality of the defence efforts pledged by current governments; the other pertains to which institution – the EU or NATO – is more likely to benefit from the changes. At the first level, hesitations in Germany on implementing the 2% pledge (of GDP spent on defence) and using the EUR 100 bn military modernisation fund have shown how long-term threat perceptions and domestic politics can affect decisions taken immediately after the outbreak of the war.¹⁴ As for the institutional debate, although the war has allowed for a further EU-NATO rapprochement together with a clarification of their respective roles (see below), it has not erased the deep inter-institutional contest that may even be renewed at a time when states want to beef up their defence postures, and may be tempted to prioritise NATO over the EU in the defence realm.

¹⁴ '5 things to know about Germany's historic military investment fund', Politico, 30 May 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-things-to-know-about-germanys-historic-military-investment-fund/>

The European Peace Facility (EPF) and Ukraine

The EPF is an off-budget fund created in March 2021.¹⁵ It aims at 'enhancing the Union's ability to prevent conflicts, build peace and strengthen international security, by enabling the financing of operational actions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy that have military or defence implications'.

The EPF was initially allocated €5.692 billion in current prices (€5 billion in 2018 prices) for the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Plan.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the fund has been used to finance the delivery of weapons to Ukraine; seven successive tranches of EPF have been used to reimburse states that have delivered weapons to Ukraine, for a total amount of EUR 3,6bn as of April 2023.¹⁶

Austria, Ireland, and Malta invoked Article 31 TEU on Constructive abstention on the Council's vote on the EPF (28 February 2022) because they had an issue with using the fund to finance the delivery of lethal weapons.

The implementation of the EPF has also led to some debates, particularly regarding the amounts claimed and how some states may have used the mechanism to upgrade their arsenal at the expense of the leading financial contributors.¹⁷

In March 2023, EU states also agreed to fund a three-track initiative to facilitate and strengthen the European capacity to provide ammunition to Ukraine. The first track is about the disbursement of EUR 1 bn taken from the EPF to support the delivery of one million artillery shells to Ukraine. The second step implies another EUR 1 bn used to jointly procure artillery shells (155mm ammunition) to be produced by EU companies as well as in Norway. These two initiatives may pave the way for other types of EU-supported collective procurement efforts (and, in practice, could also challenge the viability of the so-called EDIRPA project).¹⁸ In a third step, EU states, together with the Commission, the European Defence Agency (EDA) and the European External Action Service (EEAS), are looking into ways to strengthen the European defence industrial base so that it can better and more quickly manufacture ammunition and possibly also weapons, in part to respond to Ukrainian needs.¹⁹

¹⁵ Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/509 of 22 March 2021 establishing a European Peace Facility, and repealing Decision (CFSP) 2015/528; European Peace Facility, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>

¹⁶ Council of the EU, 'Ukraine: Council agrees on further military support under the European Peace Facility', Press Release, 2 February 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/02/ukraine-council-agrees-on-further-military-support-under-the-european-peace-facility/>

¹⁷ See 'EU allies query Estonia's bumper refund from weapons to Ukraine', Politico, 28 March 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-estonia-bumper-arms-reimbursement-ukraine-european-peace-facility/>

¹⁸ See 'La fin de l'EDIRPA est-elle programmée?', B2, 24 March 2023.

¹⁹ See General Secretariat of the Council, 'Delivery and joint procurement of ammunition for Ukraine', doc. 7632/23, 20 March 2023.

Strategic autonomy – collateral damage of the Ukraine war?

The 2016 Global Strategy of the European Union framed the concept of 'strategic autonomy'; its preface stated that the Strategy 'nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union', which is considered necessary to 'promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values'.

In the subsequent years, the notion of strategic autonomy has been mainly referring to the defence and security realm and implicitly defined in reference to NATO and to the role of the United States in the defence of Europe. A strategically autonomous EU would imply a capacity to decide, plan and run a number of high-end military activities without having to rely on NATO or the US.²⁰ The notion was progressively enlarged to include a European defence industrial base and broader components pertaining to energy, supply chains, and critical economic sectors.

In the context of the Trump Presidency and doubts expressed about the US commitment to European defence, among other things in reference to European states' defence spending, several European leaders hinted at the necessity for Europeans to get their act together in the domain of security and defence.²¹ This said, the concept of European strategic autonomy also created tensions with the United States as it was perceived as exclusive of the transatlantic partnership and, therefore, detrimental to NATO. Quite a few European states have been ill-at-ease with the notion of autonomy insofar as it could imply a lesser role for NATO or the United States as the primary defence guarantors of Europe or a will to decouple Europe from North America. Such tensions found an illustration on the occasion of the French President's visit to China (5-8 April 2023), when a renewed plea for European strategic autonomy seemed to give little consideration to the degree of US commitment to Europe in the context of the Ukraine war.²²

Given the centrality of the US and NATO in response to the Ukraine crisis as of February 2022, one conclusion of this sequence of events was that the debate about European strategic autonomy was no longer relevant. Not only have the US proved to be fully committed to the defence of Europe, but the extreme European dependency on the Americans revealed – or rather confirmed – by the war in Ukraine also provided an indication that Europe's ambition of autonomy was simply out of reach.²³ Furthermore, for the European countries most exposed to the Russian threat, the link to the US and NATO is seen as irreplaceable and not undermined by any narrative about hypothetical European autonomy.

²⁰ Daniel Fiott, 'Strategic autonomy: towards 'European sovereignty' in defence?', Issue Brief 12, EUISS, 2018, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2012___Strategic%20Autonomy.pdf

²¹ Merkel / Macron.

²² 'Europe must resist pressure to become 'America's followers,' says Macron', Politico, 9 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-china-america-pressure-interview/>.

²³ See Jason W. Davidson, 'European Strategic Autonomy Is Dead', The National Interest, 28 June 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/european-strategic-autonomy-dead-203222>

Those are fair arguments that cannot be easily dismissed in any debate about European defence. Yet at least three sets of elements need to be factored in here.

First, it matters to define strategic autonomy both in time and space. Timewise, European autonomy is a long-term objective, not wishful thinking for today. The idea is to recognise that Europeans depend on others and that this dependence must be remedied because it creates vulnerabilities. The narrative is about the EU aiming to improve its capacity to decide and act. As for space, the notion of autonomy can be understood as a broad concept encompassing economic, energy, political, and security/defence dimensions. Some would refer to the broad idea of European sovereignty,²⁴ one component of which pertains to defence. The March 2022 Versailles Declaration defined European sovereignty (which European states are trying to build) as encompassing three dimensions: defence capabilities, energy, and economy.²⁵ In the defence domain, autonomy is then understood as bringing together:

- a capacity to decide (intelligence and decision-making capacity);
- an ability to plan and run operations (planning and command and control structure);
- a defence industrial and technological base.

A fair degree of political will and a shared strategic culture would also be necessary for European sovereignty in the defence domain to see the light.

Second, if the Ukraine war has confirmed the US commitment to European defence, it has also blatantly shown the level of dependency of Europeans towards the Americans. One may be content with such reliance and argue that it simply reflects an asymmetry in political and military power between America and Europe and that Europeans benefit from the US military superiority. Alternatively, one can contend that such dependency is problematic and, therefore, plea for more European capacity/autonomy.

Third, the solidity of the current defence architecture is highly dependent on the US commitment, assuming that such commitment is there to stay. Another approach is to ask about the sustainability of the US commitment and the possible consequences for Europe of a situation that would lead to a partial or total withdrawal of the US from Europe. Two types of scenarios may lead to such a withdrawal: one is the return in Washington, for example, following the 2024 presidential elections, of an administration that would not favour the type of commitment to European security that is currently being observed with the Biden administration. The second scenario is one in which the US would pivot to Asia (including with troops) due to a significant geopolitical evolution in that region. As the 2022 US National Security Strategy states, 'The Indo-Pacific fuels

²⁴ See Daniel Fiott (Ed.), 'European Sovereignty. Strategy and interdependence', Chaillot Paper 169, EUISS, July 2021, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/european-sovereignty>

²⁵ See 'Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government', Versailles Declaration, Versailles, 11 March 2022, para.7, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>

much of the world's economic growth and will be the epicentre of 21st-century geopolitics. As an Indo-Pacific power, the United States has a vital interest in realising a region that is open, interconnected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.'²⁶

These two scenarios are not implausible and would both question the ability of Europeans to cope by themselves with their own security and defence challenges, thus probably raising anew the debate about their own autonomy and what it would take to move towards it.

The EU-NATO partnership

The partnership between the EU and NATO has been complex since the early days of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Yet, it has, by and large, benefitted from a number of initiatives taken over the last years, notably in the context of the 2016 and 2018 EU-NATO Joint Declarations.²⁷ The 2022 Strategic Compass refers abundantly to NATO (quoted 30 times); it acknowledges 'how essential NATO is for the collective defence of its members' and insists on the EU's complementarity with the Atlantic Alliance. Likewise, NATO's new Strategic Concept characterises the EU (quoted 11 times in the NATO document) as a 'unique and essential partner for NATO' (para.43) and 'recognises the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes positively to transatlantic and global security and is complementary to, and interoperable with NATO' (para.43).

In practice, the EU-NATO cooperation has been tangibly developed over the last seven years, be it through political dialogue, staff-to-staff coordination, or through operational projects such as military mobility;²⁸ and the two institutions have shown a reasonable level of alignment in the aftermath of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. A third EU-NATO Joint Declaration was issued in January 2023 (although after having been delayed several times),²⁹ reasserting the strength of the partnership and pledging renewed cooperation to address the 'growing geostrategic competition, resilience issues, protection of critical infrastructures, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, the security implications of climate change, as well as foreign information manipulation and interference'. Most importantly, the war in Ukraine has clarified the division of tasks between a NATO that 'deters and defends' and an EU that 'sanctions and funds'. As said earlier, the defence agenda of the Atlantic Alliance has been reinforced, while the political and security agenda of the Union has found a new reality in response to Russia's aggression on Ukraine.

²⁶ White House National Security Strategy, October 2022, p.37; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

²⁷ See European Council (2023), 'EU-NATO Cooperation', <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-security/eu-nato-cooperation/>

²⁸ See 'EU-NATO cooperation: seventh progress report', 20 June 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/20/eu-nato-cooperation-seventh-progress-report/>

²⁹ Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, 10 January 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/10/eu-nato-joint-declaration-10-january-2023/>

The EU-NATO partnership continues to suffer from a few discrepancies linked to national policies as much as inherent inter-institutional competitive dynamics. At the first level, several NATO allies that are not members of the EU – namely the United States, the United Kingdom and Türkiye – do not necessarily see the EU-NATO relationship as a priority or have issues with EU states (in particular between Türkiye and Cyprus) that directly affect the EU-NATO partnership. The ambivalence that characterises France’s policy vis-à-vis NATO, for example, in the context of the European strategic autonomy debate, also negatively impacted the cooperation between the two organisations. At the institutional level, the ambition of the EU in the defence domain and that of NATO in areas that are tangential to the EU’s comparative advantages, such as resilience, critical infrastructure protection or cyber security, have also led to frictions between the two institutions. These two sets of difficulties have resulted in a sub-optimal partnership that falls short of what the current strategic landscape would require.

Challenges ahead

The European Union is often portrayed as making progress in times of crisis, and the Ukraine war may offer an example of this. It is fair to say that through its various initiatives as of 24 February 2022, the EU has demonstrated a sense of agency and renewed relevance. Some of the measures taken (like using the EPF for lethal weapons and even for joint procurement; or those pertaining to sanctions and energy security) took time to contemplate prior to the war in Ukraine.

In the coming months, though, the EU will continue to confront many challenges, particularly in Ukraine. At least three such challenges will be particularly acute. First, the EU will have to keep displaying the highest level of political cohesion vis-à-vis Russia; this will carry a political dimension (political unity of the member states) that will impact the EU’s ability to:

- maintain or even reinforce further sanctions against Russia;
- keep up with the delivery of weapons and financial assistance;
- offer a united front in any possible negotiation with Russia.

Second, the EU must revisit the European sovereignty debate to factor in the transatlantic bond (articulated around EU-US relations) and the EU-NATO partnership. Complementarity must be the driving theme here, with efforts to clear up the ambiguities generated by the strategic autonomy debate and its exclusive connotation. Finally, it is the vision and role of the EU in the post-Ukraine situation that will have to be built, with issues such as the EU’s vision of the future European security regime and how it will relate to NATO in this regime, the degree of the political and economic integration of Ukraine into the EU before a full accession; and the type of security guarantees the EU will be able to offer Ukraine short of Ukraine’s membership in NATO. At these three levels, what the EU and its member states can offer will directly impact European security; never in the past were the stakes and expectations this high. ■

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