

The War in Ukraine:

A Catalyst for the EU's Geopolitical Awakening

The invasion of Ukraine is a clear signal to Western democracies: Russia is trying to revise the existing geopolitical world order by projecting military power. In this context, Europe's biggest mistake would be compromising on its core liberal values and legitimising this approach to international politics. This article examines the war currently taking place in Ukraine and how it has affected the position and role of the European Union (EU) in international security. It emphasises the importance of the EU taking a more proactive role in promoting stability and security in the area due to the increasing threat posed by Russia. The text also touches upon the offence–defence theory and its prescriptive utility, as well as the challenges Ukraine is facing in its pursuit of EU membership. While the war in Ukraine will have a significant impact on the geopolitical order, it is time for the EU to work on a revised strategy to take up an entirely different position in the geopolitical landscape.



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Introduction

The establishment of peace among modern democracies is one of the crucial achievements of liberalism (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2008). Liberal states tend to have more peaceful relations with each other because they share common values and interests. This commonality can create a sense of trust and shared identity, which can help to reduce tensions and conflicts between these states. Furthermore, globalisation has significantly reduced the distances between various regions of the world, and advancements in technology have fostered the emergence of an interconnected society.

Nevertheless, even with the presence of widely accepted international regulations, the looming spectre of war remains a constant concern. This reality was starkly evident when Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, serving as a sobering reminder for modern democracies of the persistent threats that exist in today's world. From February 2022, the European Union (EU) and its Member States have stood united in their unwavering support for Ukraine and in condemning Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukrainian territory (EU Council, 2022).

Together with other partners, and for the first time, the EU has supported Ukraine with economic, social, and humanitarian aid (EU Council, 2022) and offered financial assistance for the procurement and transportation of weapons and equipment to a nation under attack. Additionally, the EU has introduced an extraordinary package of sanctions against the Lukashenko government in Belarus and against the Kremlin that is unmatched in its breadth and harshness (EU NeighboursEast, 2023). The sanctions aim to target Russian companies, individuals, financial institutions, and trade flows of goods and services. The EU has also taken swift action by providing both military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Taran, 2022; EU Council, 2022).

The above-mentioned actions in response to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine are tactical ones, but an effective response requires a strategy. Strategy can be defined as a larger, long-term plan that guides a series of actions towards a specific outcome. Changing strategies can be difficult and time-consuming, much like trying to turn an aircraft carrier around. Tactics, meanwhile, are the specific actions or steps taken to achieve a strategy. It is worth mentioning, however, that strategy and tactics are complementary and interdependent. Without a clear strategy, tactical actions can be haphazard and ineffective, while a strategy without well-planned tactics may not result in success. As Sun Tzu

famously recognized, '[s]trategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat' (quoted in FS Blog, n.d.). To guarantee security and stability within the European Union, it is crucial to devise a comprehensive strategy that addresses the current situation in Ukraine.

As the debate continues among EU Member States about the most effective way to achieve these objectives, it is now essential to update the EU's defence strategy with a well-defined stance on Ukraine, ensuring a cohesive and unified response. This can start with acknowledging existing alliances. In the context of security studies, defensive alliances and collective security systems are diplomatic arrangements that can bolster defence and improve security as they foster cooperation and support among member nations (van Evera, 1998).

NATO is a prime example of a successful defensive alliance, and one in which most EU Member States participate (NATO, 2022). Nevertheless, in practice, and despite unanimous support for Ukraine within the Euro-Atlantic bloc, this solidarity encompasses two distinct approaches: 1) the European Union's approach, which is rooted in a legal framework, has led to the implementation of unprecedented sanctions; however, this stance is overshadowed in Ukraine by 2) the approach of NATO and the United States, which are engaged in a form of 'surrogate warfare' on the ground (Krieg & Rickli, 2019).

In the light of the need for a cohesive and unified response to the situation in Ukraine, it is essential to recognise that security is a fundamental responsibility of any state.

In the wake of the Second World War, the EU has successfully ensured security on the European continent. A well-crafted and effective security strategy is vital for achieving and maintaining peace. Through fostering collaboration, pinpointing vulnerabilities, and establishing comprehensive protocols and procedures, a security strategy can assist in preventing and managing

security threats while also contributing to the larger goal of promoting peace and stability across the region.

The following sections will examine the ways in which various events over recent years have shaped the European approach towards a security strategy. Moreover,

they will explore how the war in Ukraine might represent a wake-up call for the EU to advocate for a renewed and comprehensive European security strategy.

A 'Geopolitical Commission' – and its forced slowdown during the COVID-19 pandemic

The European Commission is often referred to as a 'Geopolitical Commission' due to its increasing focus on global issues and its role in shaping the European Union's foreign policy. In December 2019, Ursula von der Leyen announced that her Commission would be a geopolitical one. This decision was made in response to several challenges facing the EU, including the crisis of multilateralism, the growing competition between the US and China, the fallout from Brexit, and the various conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood (Koenging & Redeker, 2020).

While the EU's geopolitical turn may not represent a radical departure from its pre-existing strategic frameworks, it does reflect a more assertive and proactive approach to international affairs.

The EU is taking steps to strengthen its position on the global stage and to promote its interests and values in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. Although it is true that the EU has not made any dramatic changes in the way it approaches international challenges since the invasion of Ukraine, it has underlined economic, political, and military dimensions in becoming a geopolitical actor of global importance (Colibășanu, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a slowdown in the EU's efforts to develop a more ambitious geopolitical strategy. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the EU in terms of both its domestic politics and its external relations. Many EU Member States have struggled with the public health and economic consequences of the pandemic, which has diverted their attention and resources away from foreign policy issues. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of the EU's internal market and the need for greater cooperation and coordination among Member States (Sapir, 2022).

In this context, the EU has had to scale back some of its ambitions for a more assertive geopolitical strategy. The pandemic forced the EU to confront the fact that the system which guarantees its security and prosperity was at stake. The COVID-19 pandemic struck a blow against an international and European order

that was already in a state of crisis. And as the pandemic spread across the world, it reinforced two shocks to Europe's order.

The first shock, in the early days of COVID-19, was experienced both within and outside the EU, when it became clear that none of the great powers were looking to the multilateral system to provide an answer. The second shock to the European system, which the pandemic reinforced, was Europe's relegation to the periphery (Leonard, 2020).

The EU's objective of boosting its strategic autonomy in defence is driven by a desire to ensure its own security and to play a more active role in global affairs. It is difficult for it to claim to be a 'political Union' able to act as a 'global player' and as a 'geopolitical Commission' without being 'autonomous'. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of interdependence, and the vulnerability of Europe. Science, technology, trade, data, and investments are becoming sources and instruments of force in international politics (Borrell, 2020).

Significantly, the crisis has emphasised the value of collaboration and unity among Member States, underscoring the EU's position as a key player in addressing the pandemic on a global scale. Consequently, the pandemic can be identified as potentially ex ante preparation for a more geopolitically engaged EU in the context of the Ukrainian war, as Member States recognise the advantages of joining forces to tackle worldwide challenges.

From Next Generation EU to EU Strategic Compass

To help tackle the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Union introduced the Next Generation EU (European Union, n.d.a), a temporary recovery instrument that was proposed by the European Commission in response to the economic and social impacts of the pandemic. The aim of this initiative is to provide financial assistance to EU Member States to help them recover from the pandemic and invest in long-term resilience and sustainability. The main results of Next Generation EU are significant financial support for EU Member States to help them respond to economic shocks, investment in key areas, and a boost to economic growth and job creation in the EU.

Throughout 2021, the European Union dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to developing the Strategic Compass, which focuses on matters of security and defence. The draft, presented before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, called on the EU to enhance its role as a security and defence actor by improving its performance in civilian and military missions and operations; securing its access to strategic domains; investing in military capabilities and strategic enablers; and partnering with like-minded actors to enhance global security (Fiott & Cullman, 2022).

Undoubtedly, security stands as a paramount concern for Europe, and investing

in security measures is critical for enhancing resilience and attaining strategic sovereignty while ensuring compatibility with that of NATO (European Liberal Forum, 2021). At the same time, discussions about the EU Strategic Compass, the foundation for building the EU security arm, now include the Russian threat to peace and security on the European continent following its invasion of Ukraine (Council of the EU, 2022).

High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell said in 2022 that 'Europe is in danger' and that it faces the very real possibility of strategic shrinkage (Borrell, 2022). Indeed, the EU cannot afford to be a bystander in an increasingly competitive strategic environment, always being principled but seldom relevant. The EU needs to defend its own interests, project its presence in the world, and promote security in its neighbourhood and with its partners. The Strategic Compass aims to cement the foundations for a shared vision for EU security and defence among EU Member States. The document, which was formally approved by the Foreign Affairs Council on 21 March and subsequently endorsed by the European Council, is the EU's attempt to set objectives and a new level of ambition for itself as a security and defence actor (Taran, 2022).

The adoption of the Strategic Compass is a significant step for the EU in enhancing its military dimension and establishing a policy-making framework for security and defence. The Strategic Compass is not meant to be a stand-alone policy document; rather, it is a complementary tool to the existing EU policy-making toolkit. As such, it will be supported by a range of economic, diplomatic, and political measures designed to reinforce the EU's overall security and defence posture (Blocksman, S., Macchiarini Crosson, D., & Paikin, Z., 2022). The EU's economic and political policies must work in tandem with its security and defence policies in order to effectively address the destabilising effect of interference by external forces and hybrid threats (Colibășanu, 2022).



The war opened the eyes of the EU to the imperfections in its legislation and made it start thinking about appropriate changes.

Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union forms the basis of the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (European Union, n.d.b). This is a mutual defence clause that obliges all Member States to render aid to any other Member State that becomes a victim of armed aggression on its territory.

The application of Article 42(7) raises a number of challenges and questions. The fact that the majority of EU Member States are also members of NATO has historically made it difficult to create new structures for collective defence within the EU. This is because NATO has traditionally been seen as the primary forum for European cooperation in the field of defence, with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty providing for mutual defence among NATO member states.

Furthermore, the US has played a key role as a security provider in Europe, and this is not likely to change in the near future. As a result, there has been little appetite among the larger EU Member States for major changes to the existing security architecture, such as the creation of new overlapping structures for collective defence (Dzurinda, 2022).

The EU and NATO recently raised their ambitions by upgrading their strategies for future security: the EU Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept (European Council, 2023). At a time when danger is extremely close, the EU and NATO should promptly reconsider their security strategies and analyse whether the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept are sufficient to ensure security.

The Strategic Compass, updated after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reveals a new-found consensus among EU Member States on the danger posed by Russia, but also a lack of strategic foresight.

The challenge of EU enlargement politics

The European Union's enlargement policy can be considered among the sources of security strategy. One of the main challenges of EU enlargement politics is finding a balance between the EU's political will to expand and the need to maintain its standards for membership. This means that potential new Member States must undergo a rigorous process of evaluation, negotiation, and implementation of necessary reforms in order to meet the EU's criteria. The accession process can span several years, necessitating substantial political, economic, and social transformations within the aspiring nation. In the light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the European Union has a unique opportunity to reassess and streamline its accession procedures, ensuring a more efficient and effective integration process.

The Thessaloniki Summit, held in 2003, opened the door to a European future for the Western Balkans (Alesina, 2022). However, since then the impetus for enlargement has been steadily dissipating. On the one hand, the EU has shown acute signs of enlargement fatigue and a lack of visionary political leadership; on the other hand, the Western Balkan countries have failed to maintain the required pace of reform. Enlargement fatigue among some Member States is in fact one of the biggest challenges facing the EU's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans (Economides, 2020).

Russia's aggression in Ukraine created the momentum for a possible fast-track system for joining the EU. In June 2022, the European Council announced a historic decision: to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (Politico, 2022). While being a candidate country is a necessary step towards membership in the EU, it does not guarantee that the country will ultimately become a member. Each enlargement follows a unique path and cannot be simply equated with previous enlargements.

Ukraine's integration into the EU is of strategic interest for Member States. However, the process of accession will be complex and will require sustained efforts from both Ukraine and the EU to address the many challenges and obstacles that lie ahead. Having a clear strategy for the enlargement of the EU will be a contributing factor to the EU's overall strength and security.

The war in Ukraine and the EU's geopolitical awakening

As mentioned above, the ongoing war in Ukraine has served as a wake-up call for the EU in terms of its geopolitical position and its role in international security. Moreover, it has demonstrated that the EU is not immune to security threats in its immediate neighbourhood and has emphasised the importance of the EU's active involvement in promoting stability and security in the region.

Borrell's statement on his first visit to eastern Ukraine on 5 January 2022 that it is clear that any discussion on European security must include the European Union and Ukraine' (quoted in Brzozowski, 2022) is crucial. The war in Ukraine has increased the EU's awareness of the growing threat of Russia in its neighbourhood. The EU appears to have strengthened its position through accelerated policy-making in response to Russia's aggression. However, the repercussions of the sanctions the EU collectively imposed on Russia may bring new challenges, considering the already existing political outliers in the Union.

If, on the one hand, competition and in some cases conflict are inherent in international relations among great powers, and cooperation is a rare and fleeting occurrence (Barnett & Duvall, 2005), on the other hand, trust and cooperation are crucial for states to effectively balance against a common threat and to be willing to share the costs of balancing.

International relations theories provide broad frameworks and perspectives for understanding the complex issues underlying a conflict. Realists, for instance, would argue that the war in Ukraine was driven by Russia's desire to expand its sphere of influence and assert its power in the region. They would also argue that the EU's response was shaped by its strategic interests rather than a commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty or democracy. Constructivists would rather argue that the war in Ukraine was partly driven by competing narratives and understandings of the region's history and identity and that the response of the EU and the US was shaped by their commitment to liberal values and norms, such as democracy and human rights (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2008). As seen through the lens of liberalism, the war in Ukraine can be explained by a complex combination of factors related to the breakdown of cooperation, the violation of international norms, and underlying economic and political issues (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2008). To address these issues and prevent future conflicts, liberals might advocate for increased efforts to promote diplomacy, negotiation, and cooperation, as well

as greater respect for international law and human rights protections and efforts to address underlying economic and political issues.

Regardless of the perspective from which we analyse the current scenarios, the truth is that if the EU were to play a leading role in resolving the war in Ukraine, it could potentially increase its influence in the broader region, especially if it is seen as a mediator or facilitator of peace. This could help to enhance the EU's reputation as a global actor and potentially open new opportunities for cooperation with other countries. However, it is important to note that the EU's ability to increase its geopolitical might will depend on several factors, including continued unity and coordination among its Member States, the ability to project its influence beyond its borders, and the willingness of other countries to engage with the EU as a global actor.

From geopolitical awakening towards a strategy?

The EU needs to update and revise its security strategy to make it flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. At the same time, it should play a proactive role in promoting stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood and should include Ukraine in the post-war scenario.

Indeed, greater political and economic engagement with Ukraine, as well as more direct security assistance, would contribute to enhancing the country's stability and security and facilitate closer ties with the EU. This could involve various measures, such as providing economic aid and support, promoting trade and investment, sharing expertise on governance and reforms, strengthening energy security, and providing military assistance and training.

In addition to these measures, the EU could also engage more deeply with civil society and promote people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges. This would help build trust and understanding between the EU and Ukraine and foster greater support for closer ties and integration. Ultimately, a more proactive and strategic approach to Ukraine would help to advance the EU's geopolitical interests, promote regional stability and security, and uphold the values and principles of the liberal world order. It is clear that Ukraine's victory in terms of achieving its political, economic, and social objectives does not depend solely on the EU's defence strategy. However, the EU's support can play an important role in helping Ukraine achieve its goals. Ukraine's victory is not only about achieving justice and restoring Ukraine's state borders. It also has implications for the restoration and consolidation of a liberal world order based on international treaties. The victory of Ukraine in defending liberal values will serve as an example to other countries facing similar challenges and is vital for the preservation of world order (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2008).

Ukraine occupies a critical position vis-à-vis the EU's geopolitical influence, its security, and its prosperity. The ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted the need for the EU to take a more active role in promoting stability and security in the

region. It is also important for the EU to update its security strategy and consider the possibility of Ukraine becoming a member of the EU and part of NATO's security architecture. The year 2023 could provide an opportunity for the EU to develop a more strategic posture and take the necessary steps to address these issues.

Recommendations

(1) All strategic security documents should take into account the war in Ukraine and meet the challenges of today.

A robust strategy is not just about leveraging existing strengths; it is about creating new ones. The success of Ukraine is crucial to the growth of Europe. Investing in security means investing in peace, and providing military support to Ukraine is a cost-effective way to restore peace in the region. The EU and Ukraine should work hand in hand to rethink and plan how to embed Ukraine in Europe's security strategy in the future.

(2) The internal European security hydras must change their status.

The current situation represents an opportunity for the EU to comprehensively address all facets of its security concerns. This includes updating relevant legislation and ensuring its effective implementation in order to foster peace and stability in the region. Moreover, the EU Member States should concentrate on the pragmatic application of Article 42 of the Treaty as well as revising and clarifying specific legislation on security matters, while taking into consideration the perspectives of Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

(3) The EU's geopolitical awakening should be an agenda priority.

The European Commission is working to become a more significant geopolitical actor. The events in Ukraine have provided unprecedented momentum for strengthening the EU's geopolitical impact if clear and definitive strategic changes are made regarding Ukraine's role and position. Proper strategic decisions can enhance the EU's position and prevent it from becoming a secondary player in the geopolitical arena.

(4) The EU should start working on preventing a second full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Currently the EU is not only playing the role of partner but also creating a 'security cloud' for Ukraine. Preventing a second full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a challenging task which is likely to lead to a Cold War-like scenario in the coming years. However, it is imperative to formulate a strategic vision to prevent such an invasion, and the EU needs to quickly coordinate with its partners to understand its role in addressing this challenge. ■

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