
European strategic autonomy and defence after Ukraine

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Theme

How will the war in Ukraine reshape the EU's defence policy?

Summary

This analysis examines the potential implications of the war in Ukraine for the EU's security and defence policy, particularly the need to shift from a paradigm of crisis management operations abroad to an approach based on territorial defence and dissuasion. Given the primacy of NATO in these areas, this analysis highlights the potential of certain EU tools in the fields of capability development, technology and arms procurement in order to strengthen its contribution to dissuasion and territorial defence. While such a contribution would generally be indirect, it would nonetheless be strategically and politically significant

Analysis

The war in Ukraine has exposed the growing political relevance –and even centrality– of issues related to security and defence in Spain and Europe.

Over the last three decades, since the end of the Cold War, security and defence have occupied a somewhat marginal position in the minds of the (Western) European and Spanish political classes, as well as in public debate more broadly. However, the outbreak of a high-intensity war on European soil, which has now dragged on for more than eight months, has seen a sharp rise in interest in security and defence matters, both at the political level and in terms of information. The rise in military spending across the continent is testament to the change that is taking place.¹

At the same time, the growing political and social interest in security and defence has been accompanied by a change of tack on these issues. Over the last three decades, debates on security and defence in Spain and Europe have centred on crisis management operations abroad. Such operations have generally been associated with peacekeeping, stabilisation and the fight against terrorism in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa and the Balkans.² The armed forces have been primarily seen as a tool for

¹ See, for example, Max Bergmann, Colin Wall & Sean Monaghan (2022), *Transforming European Defense*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, 18/VIII/2022.

² Luis Simón (2012), 'CSDP, strategy and crisis management: out of area or out of business', *The International Spectator*, vol. 47, nr 3, p. 100-115.

projecting stability beyond national, European or NATO territories, and primarily in terms of low- to medium-intensity combat.

The return of high-intensity war to European soil and the spectre of a confrontation with a major power (moreover, with a nuclear dimension) means security and defence are once again being primarily thought of in terms of dissuasion and territorial defence.³ We have seen growing interest in matters of security and defence, and have started to see them in different terms. All this raises the questions of how the war in Ukraine has affected European defence policy and, more specifically, how it has affected the EU's ambition to strengthen its autonomy in security and defence.

Events in Ukraine have acted as a political wake-up call to NATO and have highlighted the central role played by the US in European security, both in terms of its political and diplomatic leadership and its operational support to the Ukrainian forces.⁴ However, even if the war in Ukraine has captured the bulk of Washington's strategic and diplomatic attention in recent months, the White House seems unlikely to backtrack on its pivot to China and the Indo-Pacific theatre. The National Security Strategy approved by the Biden Administration on 12 October 2022 is clear on this point, making a specific distinction between China as a 'systemic', 'global' challenge and Russia as an 'immediate' albeit more localised threat.⁵

In this respect, the new strategy clearly prioritises the Indo-Pacific region. It states that we have now entered a 'new period of American foreign policy that will demand more of the United States in the Indo-Pacific than has been asked of us since the Second World War', adding that 'no region will be of more significance to the world and to everyday Americans than the Indo-Pacific.'⁶ The rivalry with China may be 'global' in nature but the document makes it clear that its epicentre is the Indo-Pacific theatre.⁷ In this light, the war in Ukraine has clearly not changed the order of US strategic priorities or its decision to focus on dissuasion against China in the Indo-Pacific.

The order of US strategic priorities matters here because the US focus on Asia over the medium to long term is one of the most frequently cited arguments among European experts and politicians to explain why Europe must strengthen its autonomy in security and defence.⁸ The growing US focus on China and Asia is forcing Europe to assume more responsibility for the security and defence of the continent. This shift also comes

³ Sean Monaghan (2022), 'Resetting NATO's defense and deterrence: the sword and the shield redux', *CSIS Brief*, 28/VI/2022.

⁴ Luis Simón (2022), 'The Madrid Strategic Concept and the future of NATO', *NATO Review*, 2/VI/2022; and Félix Arteaga & Luis Simón (2022), 'El concepto estratégico de Madrid: una (auto)evaluación de los resultados', ARI, Real Instituto Elcano, 7/VII/2022, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/el-concepto-estrategico-de-madrid-una-autoevaluacion-de-los-resultados/>.

⁵ The White House (2022), 'National Security Strategy', 12/X/2022, p. 23-27.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 38.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁸ See, for example, Sven Biscop (2013), 'Peace without money, war without the Americans: challenges for European strategy', *International Affairs*, vol. 89, nr 5, p. 1125-1142; and Sven Biscop (2022), 'The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?', *Egmont Policy Brief*, nr 285, September.

against the backdrop of a significant deterioration in European security, further underscoring the need to boost European autonomy on security and defence.

From a Europe of defence to the defence of Europe?

Technically, the EU has had a common security and defence policy for 23 years. However, despite including the word defence, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), formerly the European Security and Defence Policy, does not necessarily live up to the promise of its name. Since 1999, European leaders have been clear that the objective of the CSDP was to equip Europe with the capabilities and mechanisms needed to conduct crisis management operations abroad.⁹ In other words, its remit was essentially peacekeeping and stabilisation operations. It was based on the underlying assumption that territorial defence and dissuasion against state threats was primarily a job for NATO.¹⁰ As a result, the EU's defence policy is first and foremost a security policy, prioritising low- and medium-intensity capabilities and operations, as shown by experiences in the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan. This explains why the CSDP is subordinate to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Indeed, the CSDP is more of a foreign policy tool than a defence policy.

The EU's emphasis on crisis management operations abroad is understandable. On the one hand, territorial defence and dissuasion are satisfactorily covered by NATO, with its integrated and consolidated command structure and the strategic and political backing provided by clear US leadership. On the other, since the end of the 1990s, when the CSDP was launched, the geopolitical and techno-military hegemony of the US and the West has made defence and dissuasion seem almost superfluous. No rival has dared to directly challenge the US or its allies. In this context, NATO has also become involved in operations abroad, for example its protracted operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

In fact, over the last two decades, we have seen NATO and the EU coexist in crisis management operations.¹¹ NATO has generally handled tasks that might involve combat (high and medium-high intensity), while the EU has focused on stabilisation (even touching on policing), finding its added value in the link between the military (low-intensity) sphere and 'civil' roles (policing, legal or administrative advice, and development policy). This division of labour has featured prominently in both the Balkans and Afghanistan. However, the EU –France in particular– has continued to aspire towards a fully-fledged military component.

⁹ See, for example, Jolyon Howorth (2007), *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

¹⁰ Article 47.2 of the Treaty of the EU mentions mutual defence but there are no mechanisms and structures to support this commitment. The acknowledgement of the primacy of NATO in this area also makes the commitment purely rhetorical (at least for the time being). For more on this debate, see Elie Perot (2022), 'NATO, the EU and the return of collective defence', *CSDS Policy Brief*, nr 12/2022.

¹¹ See Stephanie Hoffmann (2011), 'Why institutional overlap matters: CSDP in the European security architecture', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 49, nr 1, p. 101-120, <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/library/publications-institute/why-institutional-overlap-matters-csdp-european-security>.

This has been the prevailing logic of the last two decades, from the launch of the CSDP in 1999 through to recent years. However, the geostrategic context has now changed radically. Issues related to territorial defence and dissuasion against major powers are once again coming to the fore in debates on security policy.¹² This change can be explained by two factors in particular. The first is the cracks that appear to be forming in US geopolitical hegemony, alongside the bolder stances of countries like China and Russia in terms of challenging the interests of the US and its allies. Russia's 'two-stage' aggression in Ukraine (2014 and 2022) is a clear example. The second is that the US and the West as a whole appear to be growing weary of interventionism, as exemplified by the disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.¹³ The recent US National Security Strategy is also clear on this point: the withdrawal from Afghanistan marks the end of 'an era of major military operations to remake other societies'.

In short, the resurgence of interstate rivalry and the West's fatigue with interventionism point towards growing interest in and a new approach to defence. A renewed emphasis on territorial defence and dissuasion seems set to displace the traditional focus on crisis management operations abroad. While this clearly highlights the value of NATO, what does it mean for an EU defence policy designed around crisis management abroad?

There is a growing need for the EU to play a bigger role in the security of its southern neighbourhood (the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Sahel and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East).¹⁴ The nature of the challenges to its south, which are more transnational and less strictly military in nature, highlights the value the EU can add in areas such as the civil-military nexus or the security–development nexus, both essential for stabilisation, counterterrorism and capability development in partner countries. Moreover, the contraction of US 'bandwidth' in Europe –which will most likely be focused on dissuasion against Russia in eastern Europe– and NATO's prioritisation of dissuasion against Russia will increase the political and strategic space for the EU in its southern neighbourhood.

In terms of dissuasion and collective defence, all the evidence suggests that even if European allies do strengthen their activities, these additional efforts will primarily be channelled through NATO, which, as we have noted, has a solid and well-established military command and control structure and culture of dissuasion.

Given the 'normative', 'pacifist' and 'multilateralist' culture that has characterised the EU's development and its foreign policy, it remains to be seen how prepared it is to face a world dominated by interstate rivalry, not to mention the dissuasion of major powers. This brings us up against one of the limits of the EU's common security and defence policy, primarily oriented towards low- to medium-intensity crisis management operations abroad and transnational challenges, instead of defence (or dissuasion) in its own right.

¹² Perot (2022), *op. cit.*

¹³ Luis Simón (2021), '¿Fin de ciclo? La caída de Afganistán en perspectiva estratégica', Real Instituto Elcano, 29/IX/2021, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/fin-de-ciclo-la-caida-de-afganistan-en-perspectiva-estrategica/>.

¹⁴ Luis Simón (2022), 'El retorno de la OTAN y el futuro de la defensa europea', *Política Exterior*, nr 209, 30/VIII/2022.

This situation was summed up recently by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell when he remarked that the EU can no longer continue to be a herbivore in a world of carnivores.

Conclusions

Even if we accept the primacy of NATO in territorial defence and dissuasion, an in-depth reflection is nonetheless required on the potential contribution of the EU in these areas and on how its defence instruments can strengthen the dissuasion and territorial defence strategy of the Atlantic Alliance. The primacy of NATO means the EU's contribution to dissuasion and territorial defence will be largely indirect, albeit strategically and politically significant. Should the EU fail to rise to the challenge, and should it choose instead to retain crisis management at the heart of its defence policy, it runs the risk of being consigned to strategic and even political irrelevance. This is particularly true in a world in which strengthening dissuasion in the face of interstate threats has become the centre of gravity of European security and the top priority among many Member States, particularly those in Eastern and Central Europe.

The use of the European Peace Facility (a fund conceived to strengthen the capabilities of partner countries) and the launch of a task force for the joint procurement of materials to replace donations to Ukraine reflect the EU's desire to adapt in order to play a role in crises. But beyond these examples, the EU's substantial common budget and its established industrial policy also give it an edge in areas such as capability development and technological innovation, both of which are critical to dissuasion.

Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund –designed to promote capability development and technological and industrial innovation– stand out for their potential to add value in the area of dissuasion and territorial defence. For the time being, even if these incentives do not specifically discriminate against territorial defence and dissuasion, their underlying approach remains one of crisis management operations abroad. Clearly prioritising territorial defence and dissuasion against major powers to make them the cornerstone of Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund would be an excellent way to help European states develop the critical technologies and capabilities required for credible and sustainable dissuasion (eg, heavy manoeuvre forces, artillery, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship missiles, offensive cyber capability, advanced air and land combat systems, and missile and air defence systems).

The European Commission's response to the security and defence requirements expressed by the Member States at a meeting in Versailles in March 2022 includes incentives for joint arms procurement and paves the way for joint programming going forward. It is a major first step towards the required reorientation of EU defence policy away from crisis management towards dissuasion and territorial defence. As the EU's response to the war in Ukraine, it identifies a number of specific territorial defence capabilities, including air and missile defence.¹⁵ However, the initiative must be

¹⁵ European Commission (2022), 'EU steps up action to strengthen EU defence capabilities, industrial and technological base: towards an EU framework for joint defence procurement', 18/V/2022.

complemented by a broader reflection on the EU's contribution to dissuasion and defence at the strategic-conceptual (strategic compass), capability development (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and technological (European Defence Fund) levels.

This reorientation towards traditional defence and dissuasion against major powers will significantly boost the added value of the EU on what many Member States regard as the top security issue. However, doing so will require much deeper and permanent institutional linkage between the EU and NATO, allowing the alignment of the EU's priorities on industry, capability development and arms procurement with the operational needs of NATO (as set out in the Defence Planning Process), which will also require more integration between the EU and NATO at the politico-strategic and strategic-military levels.