
It's time for Europe to think and act as a superpower

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Theme

This analysis¹ discusses the implications of the Ukraine war for Europe's role as a security and defence actor.

Summary

This analysis sets out the reasons why **Russia's** invasion of **Ukraine** has increased the need for a stronger European foreign defence policy. It is argued that this should come about as soon as possible. This is not just because of a possible Trump re-election but also because of the autocrats within **NATO and the EU**. Even if Biden is re-elected, there is a need to develop a European pillar under NATO. This paper thus sets out an agenda for the EU not 'to become a superstate' but to become an aspiring 'superpower', as EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen put it. It discusses some of the actions and reforms that must be taken after the European elections in June 2024, and shows what an integrated EU foreign and defence policy should look like.

Analysis

When a French President adopts the cloak of Britain's finest wartime Prime Minister, he is worth listening to. On French TV, in mid-March, President Macron quoted Winston Churchill. *'Il faut avoir le nerf de la paix'*, he said to his interviewers. 'If you seek peace, prepare for war', it loosely translates to. The French President seems to have chosen to confront Russia. This is a stark difference from the beginning of 2022, when President Macron seemed to opt for a third way to deal with the Russian President, on the eve of his decision to launch an all-out war in Ukraine. Western leaders then tried to make sense of what Putin was all about, and the French President saw a role for France in changing the Russian leaders' mind. The same Macron, who claimed to have spent hundreds of hours with Putin and, even after the Russian invasion, argued that Russia should not be 'humiliated', changed his tune. Two years into the most savage war on the European continent since WW2, we see a French leader sadder and wiser, but also more determined not to let Russia win. 'If Russia wins, Europe's credibility will be reduced to zero. We have to be prepared to use all means to ensure that Russia does not win', added the French leader addressing his TV audience.

President Macron already primed this message when, after the Ukraine summit of European leaders at the end of February, he uttered that no option should be taken off

¹ Based on the NATO-Elcano Royal Institute presentation 'NATO's 75th Anniversary, from Madrid to Washington', Madrid, 8/V/2024.

the table, including 'French boots on the ground'. That message was new. However, instead of being received in Moscow, it quickly got rebutted in various capitals around Europe, mostly in Berlin. Where Macron addressed the Russian leader in his own language, it was blatantly clear that the Europeans' *lingua franca* is not that of power and confrontation. Talk is cheap, and the strong words of the French leader are not matched by French military or civilian support for Ukraine. *Point d'argent, point de Suisse (Keine Geld (Kreuzer), keine Schweizer)* as the French know all too well. France has given €3.8 billion in support of Ukraine, Germany has already provided €18 billion and even the Netherlands, with €6 billion, outranks France by a mile. Perhaps the other European leaders were quick to jump the gun on the French President's claim not to rule out troop deployment in Ukraine because the French leaders' rhetoric was in stark contrast to his financial commitment. More likely, the fear of escalation towards Russia was the main reason for the series of press releases sent from the various European capitals, stating that there was no intention to have European soldiers fighting on behalf of Ukraine. Russian President Putin must have mused the plethora of European responses and, after some consideration, rebuked by threatening to respond with nuclear power if a NATO member should enter the war with soldiers.

This French *Alleingang* (going solo) shows two things: the need for a coordinated European response, whatever that might be. Unity in messaging means clarity of purpose. Something that the EU has been lacking chronically in most policy areas although the position towards the Russian invasion was remarkably coherent. The other thing that is lacking is the European will to think, speak and act as a superpower. Nothing new, but never so existential, now that the Russian military threat to the continent is growing with Ukraine slowly bleeding to a standstill and being forced into negotiations on increasingly unfavourable terms.

This analysis seeks to fill some of the gaps to ensure that there is a sustained coherence in what European leaders say and do. It argues for a European cockpit piloting the continental plane. However, the plane itself should be assembled both within and outside the EU. The ambition to become 'strategically autonomous' is not a serious one if the EU cannot even match its words and actions. Even its first promise to deliver to Ukraine a million grenades by the end of March this year has already been broken and has had to be pushed to a new goal for the end of this year. The EU now follows NATO purchasing guidelines to deliver much-needed Patriot missiles to the front. In fact, two years into the Ukrainian war the record of non-EU but NATO member states, such as the UK (Storm Shadow long-range missiles), Norway (NASAM advanced surface-to-air missiles) and Turkey (Bayraktar drones) has been more impressive than that of most of the EU's member states. However, because even the US Congress has been dragging its feet on the latest support package for Ukraine in an election year that could bring Donald Trump back into the White House, the need for European members of NATO to defend Ukraine has become ever more pressing. The package did eventually come through, pushed by the House Speaker, although it took a very long time and did not go easily.

In one of its issues of February-March 2024, *The Economist* asked the question 'Is Europe ready?' and summed up the answer: 'Russia is becoming more dangerous, America is less reliable, and Europe remains unprepared'. With Russia morphing its gas- and oil-driven economy into a full-scale war economy, now spending 7,1% of its GDP on

defence, according to Denmark's Defence Minister, Troels Lund Poulsen, it could attack a NATO country within three to five years. This might have been the latest and starkest warning from a Western politician about Moscow's appetite for confrontation beyond the war in Ukraine, but he is not alone. Joined by colleagues from Sweden, Romania, Germany and the UK, the Danish Minister sounded an alarm about Russia's increased defence spending and the possibility of a direct confrontation with NATO that would test the alliance's collective defence pledge (Article 5). Together with the potential comeback of Donald Trump, who has already undermined the cornerstone of the NATO defence alliance in his first term, this spells a gloomy picture for Europe's security architecture, which has been carefully woven since WW2. It all spells that the time to change is now.

1. The Russian threat extends beyond Ukraine

On 4 March the Vice-President of the Russian National Security Council, Dimitri Medvedev, spoke in Sochi and called the existence of Ukraine a 'concept that should be terminated forever' and restated that Ukraine is 'without a doubt part of Russia'. Medvedev is not just acting as Putin's puppet, he also leads the Russian military industrial complex. According to Boris Kagarlitsky (a Russian sociologist and union-man, now sentenced to five years imprisonment in a Russian labour camp), Western analysts make a mistake in interpreting Russia's behaviour solely through a geopolitical lens. 'The war is not just rooted in geopolitics' but also finds its origin in the need of the Russian military industrial complex and some oligarchs to 'get more funding through military invasion'. This might have been an extra reason to go to war, but it comes on top of the unbelievable ignorance on the side of most Western analysts for the clear warnings that the Russian leadership itself should restore the Russian-speaking community (Russky Mir) beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Since President Putin addressed the Munich Security Conference in 2007, he consistently laid bare his ideas of Europe carved into spheres of influence, with NATO staying behind the Oder-Neisse border and the Russian motherland consisting of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and potentially parts of the Baltic and Georgia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, the downing of MH17 –a passenger flight over Eastern Ukraine by a Russian-provided BUK-missile– or a 7-page essay by Vladimir Putin in the early summer of 2021 in which he wrote that Ukraine was 'no country' but belonged to 'the Russian motherland', nothing has served to wake Europe up. During the run-up to the war, Russian blood supplies were refreshed, notwithstanding the dire need for blood plasma in Russian hospitals that had already experienced more than a million COVID-deaths. Although US-intelligence services heeded the warning over this observation in NATO headquarters at a time when Russia was pulling together over 120,000 troops at the Ukrainian border, Europeans still dreamed of restraining Putin. Most Europeans, that is. Obviously, not the Poles or Baltics, who had seen Russian military boots on their streets not that long ago.

One year into the war, the first attempt at peace negotiations in Turkey failed because of the horrendous massacre committed by Russian soldiers in Bucha. It showed the ruthlessness of the Russian leadership at the time that the war was certainly not running in their favour. Two years into the war, the murder of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader, incarcerated in a penal colony on 16 February, underlines, once again, the ruthlessness and violence of Russia's leadership. After Putin secured his 5th term in office, his victory speech included the word 'war' for the Ukraine invasion that had

previously been dubbed a 'special military operation'. It is no surprise that this is the lead-up to an increasing number of soldiers being sent to Ukrainian trenches, just falling short of full mobilisation.

The question that should now be at the forefront of the thought of European leaders is: can Ukraine lose the war? Is Putin's appetite for territorial conflicts satisfied?

Former French Minister De Villepin once called this situation '*nous sommes dans la logique de guerre*'. This logic of war, however, easily leads to the logic of escalation. That is what seems to unite Europeans more than thwarting a wider conflict with the Russians. The refusal of German *Bundeskanzler* Scholz to deliver the Taurus missiles with the range to hit Russian soil deprives Ukrainians, who are struggling in their trenches, of the capacity to keep the Russian invader at arms' length. On the contrary, it also signals to Moscow that support for Ukraine is not steady and that European unity is slowly breaking up. The solution to this now seems to be found in the German delivery to the UK, after which the Brexiteer NATO-ally can deliver its Storm-Shadow missiles to Kiev. Reluctant countries backing up their more committed counterparts are a very ugly and European solution, but do not have to be bad *per se*. As long as the European fear of escalation is greater than its trust in its own deterrence, it keeps giving Moscow the chance to cry foul and pretend that it is at war with NATO. That Russian narrative then seeps into the domain of Western public opinion, and Putin has his fifth column of European voters who are either war-fatigued or simply opposed to taunting the Russian bear. The European elections in June will most probably already see a majority of Eurosceptical parties, which have a fault line between anti-Russian (the party of the Italian Prime Minister Meloni, the populist True Finns and the Polish PIS) and Russian-friendly populist and right-wing parties (such as the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's, Italy's populist right-wing Salvini's and Germany's AfD and die Linke). In this landscape, European leaders need to manoeuvre and make the case for their electorate that Russia is still a prime security threat.

That case could –or, rather, should– be handled better. First and foremost, the Russian invasion of Ukraine disrupted energy security in Europe, making it necessary to not only decouple itself from Russian gas (and mostly oil) but also to compensate ordinary citizens from the state budget because they would no longer be able to afford to pay their bills. Secondly, it is important to curb rampant inflation and keep purchasing power more or less stable. The expenditure that EU member states have allowed themselves to make so that their own citizens keep paying their bills outclasses the expenditure of supporting Ukraine by almost tenfold. However, apart from the German Energy and Economy Minister, Robert Habeck, no European politician is making this point: 'we do whatever we can to support Ukraine in its fight, but we will make you pay your bills!'

More importantly, Europe's leaders must make the case for freedom more eloquently. If Ukraine can be attacked at will, then the core liberal principles of sovereignty (no violation of borders and the right to choose one's own government) go out the window. The Helsinki-accords, a cornerstone of European civilisation and the attitude of governments towards their people would be void. The security architecture built under the US nuclear umbrella and represented by the Council of Europe and the OSCE would be rendered useless. European member states would become vulnerable to autocratic or direct

Russian influence, as would some of the other countries bordering Russia. An 18th century Europe of spheres of influence would return with 20th century nuclear weapons and 21st century means of online destabilisation. Every country in the EU would be affected, all European-oriented governments would be challenged, and every European society would see more polarisation and violence as a result. Putin would not only grab land to restore his imperial pipedream, but also take the opportunity to challenge the Western order that he has come to dislike so much.

There are a few Russian military options on the table. Undoubtedly, the weakest geographical area for NATO is the Suwałki-corridor, where Russia could cut off the Baltic states from Poland. This 100km wide stretch of land, with the Baltics' most southern state, Lithuania, on one side and Poland on the other, separates Russia from Belarus. On the Russian side lies Kaliningrad (Immanuel Kant's Königsberg), where Russia harbours its naval fleet and has access to hypersonic missiles that are ready to be loaded with nuclear warheads. If Russia decides to cut off and isolate the Baltics, there are only two roads and one railroad that connect them to Poland, making it NATO's Achilles heel. This is where Putin might test the solidarity of the alliance and he would not even have to invade.

Russian failures in Ukraine over the past two years have exposed some of the limitations of the country's armed forces. The Russian army has suffered extremely heavy losses, and the total number of soldiers killed in Ukraine is now estimated to be over half a million, most of them Russian. However, this extraordinary number, which would have set any general rethinking, have not deterred Putin. He simply uses soldiers as cannon fodder. After his staged re-election, the Russian leader now calls his invasion of Ukraine outright war. Should Ukraine fall, he would undoubtedly be prepared to occupy the country with further hundreds of thousands of troops. A resurgent and emboldened Russia would 'become an empire' again, as the US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski already noted in the 1990s. But despite Russia invading Georgia in 2008, annexing Crimea and supplying the war in the Donbass in 2014, the US looked away from Ukraine and Europe was lulled into negotiations (Minsk I and II) that only provided a springboard for war in 2022. The Biden Administration was quick to understand that there was simply no other way than to be forced back into the European theatre that it so much wanted to leave to the Europeans themselves in order to focus on the geopolitical rivalry with China.

Ukraine is now facing its most challenging time since the beginning of the war. It is running out of ammunition and all manner of supplies and is forced to impose rationing. Russia's invasion is now expected to step up and, especially if it is able to carve out a piece of Ukraine, it will remain a source of continuous threats. Should Kiev fall, Russia would be straight on NATO's border. Although the alliance has been enlarged and extended with Sweden and Finland, it would be discredited should it fail to defend Ukrainian independence, as so many of its main member states had vowed when Ukraine became a sovereign state and gave up its (Russian) nuclear arsenal. Therefore, the continued existence of an independent Ukraine can no longer be taken for granted.

2. What must Europe do?

First and foremost, it must be made absolutely clear that Europe will do 'whatever it takes' to continue supporting Ukraine. Mario Draghi's famous quote supporting and securing the euro is equally valid about ensuring the freedom and security of Europe against those in its neighbourhood that wish it ill. Considering that the Russian economy is worth US\$1,900 billion and is smaller in size than Italy's, this should be possible. Even the price Europe must pay to rebuild Ukraine is estimated at US\$484 billion and could already be covered using the frozen assets of Russia's national bank. Worldwide, there are around €300 billion in Russian assets, of which two-thirds are in Europe, mostly at the clearinghouse Euroclear in Belgium. The interest on this capital alone could be treated as a windfall profit and deliver somewhere between €3-€5 billion yearly, enough to start a European fund for centrally purchasing ammunition the way the European Commission did during the COVID-crisis with the vaccines. The US and the UK would even go so far as to use the frozen capital itself, which could easily leverage €1,000 billion on the international capital markets.

Obviously, there are some downsides to taking Russian money that has not yet been legally confiscated on the basis of a court order. It could also damage trust in Euroclear and in the euro and dollar, or spur countries such as Qatar or China to withdraw their capital from the EU. However, if G7 acts together, it could also be the beginning of a geopolitical rise of the euro, similarly to the way the US dollar has always been used. Finally, the EU could also issue defence bonds. However, it would be far better to have EU member states commit spending 2% of their GDP on defence, which would provide another €80 billion for that purpose.

The key to a credible European defence policy is precisely that: increased defence spending. This year, European NATO members will spend approximately €350 billion on defence. So, combined, the European NATO members have a greater expenditure than Russia. However, they spend only 20% of the EU national defence budgets on weapons, according to *The Economist*. On the eve of the war in 2022 and eight years after the annexation of Crimea, NATO's European members spent no more than they had in 1990 in real terms. However, social spending during the same period doubled.

In a remarkable speech, immediately after the Russian invasion, Germany's *Bundeskanzler*, Olaf Scholz, spoke about *Zeitenwende* (historical turning point) and announced an enormous increase in defence spending. Germany is now set to have the biggest defence expenditure in the EU, although subject to the typical problem of European bureaucracy. In 2010 the German *Bundeswehr* had around 8,500 employees dedicated to procurement and now it has around 11,000, but the country buys fewer weapons systems than during the Cold War. In addition to heavy-handed decision-making processes, European NATO allies suffer from very fragmented and nationally-oriented defence industries, an incompatibility of weapons systems and numerous duplications, while simultaneously having a very low output. Weapons production cannot keep up with US or even UK defence companies.

Knowing this all too well, the former Minister of Defence and now European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen supported the idea of creating a European Commissioner on Defence. However, this could be a serious mistake, since a new

Commissioner would also lead to greater bureaucracy and no new competencies (the Treaty of Lisbon mostly speaks of exemptions for the defence industry from competition rules because of national interests). It would at best lead to a duplication of what NATO already has successfully in place, command and control, and deployments of military assets and soldiers in real wars. Far better would be the idea of Guntram Wolff (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswertige Politik*) who has pleaded for a European Commissioner for Arms (*Rüstung*). By default, being a civilian organisation, the EU will never command armies in a battlefield. However, it will be able to coordinate and facilitate the purchase and transfer of weapons using economies of scale and financial instruments. Wolff argues correctly that if a global financial crisis leads to a banking union and a worldwide pandemic can make EU member states combine their purchasing power to buy vaccines, why not weapons in the face of imminent Russian threats? The Europeanisation of weapons tenders and procurement, however, should also be accompanied by a 'NATO-fixation' of the existing EU Defence Fund. If the US, British, Norwegian and even Turkish defence industries could jointly tender with European industry for the EU Defence Fund via the mechanism of co-financing, many more weapons systems could be developed at a much faster pace. It would include important industries from non-EU countries but NATO countries would secure the harmonisation of weapons systems according to NATO standards. For France and Germany, opening up this EU Defence Fund might hurt, as it would break their monopoly, but the co-financing mechanism would secure European involvement in any of the agreed funding for defence projects.

This raises the problem of Europe always being at risk of overcomplicating its decision making and falling into the trap of institutional bickering. Some even become dogmatic over what has now become known as 'open strategic autonomy'. Apart from the obvious contradiction in terms between 'open' and 'autonomy', the term is erroneous and both unwise and undesirable. To understand this, it should be noted that those who argue in favour of strategic autonomy mostly mean autonomy from the US. However, if one thing has become utterly clear since the invasion of Ukraine (2022), the defence of Afghanistan against the Taliban (2021) and every security threat to Europe back to the European attempt to go at it alone in Libya (2011), it is that Europe cannot do without the US and certainly not without NATO. The latter is the existing and tested security alliance that has kept Europe free and safe since WW2 and is its only chance to harbour a free and prosperous Ukraine in the future.

Therefore, it would be better to relive the old 'two pillar idea' that US President John F. Kennedy proposed in 1962 in Paris (where NATO held a meeting at the time). This would mean that European NATO countries form a league of their own under NATO-command and control, but with a specific focus on the European continent and security threats in our own backyard. The deployment of assets in this theatre should first and foremost come from European NATO countries, whether it is a patrolling mission in the Baltics, the deployment of Patriots in Bulgaria, or providing troops to ease tensions in Kosovo. This European pillar of NATO could also support the US 6th fleet currently stationed in the Spanish port of Rota. Likeminded and naval-oriented nations such as the UK, Spain, France and even the Dutch could patrol the waters of the Mediterranean to the Barents Sea. They would be de facto acting as a militarised coastguard and could assist Frontex in its fight against smuggling, from illegal oil to illegal immigrants. For instance, it would free tangible naval assets for the US to be deployed in the South China Sea. If such a

naval operation of European NATO members were also to include heavier military vessels, including submarines, it could acquire the type of long-distance firepower that is currently only provided by the US. By taking over the tasks of the US 6th fleet in the waters off Europe and acquiring a long-range firing capacity in the US, it would even be able to keep President Trump happy and within NATO, since he would be able to boast that he had made the Europeans take care of their own backyard while opening up two Raytheon factories for the long-range firing capacity that the European industry has failed to provide.

This could lead to a renaissance of a highly developed and innovative industry in Europe, as long as security and defence are not limited to EU countries alone, but include non-EU but NATO member states such as the UK, Norway and Turkey. This principle should also be applied to the EU's foreign policy decision-making. As it did during the Libyan crises, when the EU tried to act alone militarily, decision-making in foreign policy crises and events should be more effective and smoother in light of the Russian threat but also of the ever more complicated geopolitics of the European neighbourhood. Some of the instability, destabilisation and conflict at the EU's outer borders is now also becoming manifest themselves in the Union's inner cities. For instance, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict erupted again in the Gaza Strip after the horrific massacre of Jews on 7 October. The EU has always been a *quantité négligeable* as regards the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, bitterly divided on how to deal with the practical eruption of conflict but totally united on its desirable outcome and two-state solution. The lack of *Handlungsfähigkeit* (ability to act) in this conflict on the EU's doorstep, however, is increasingly painful for European governments under pressure from demonstrations in the streets of their respective capital cities.

To deal with this conflict, or any other in the European neighbourhood, such as the civil war in Syria or the failed state in Libya, or a provocative Belarus threatening to push migrants over the Polish border, the EU is simply incapable of apt decision-making or thinking as a superpower. However, what the example of Hungary (notoriously the outlier in decisions on sanctioning Russia or providing arms) shows is that sometimes its 'ok to stand out'. Too much emphasis has been placed on the right of veto of member states in matters of foreign affairs. In the larger EU, the principle of qualified majority voting (QMV) must be introduced so that a majority (55% of the EU's member states representing 60% of its population) can respond to ongoing international threats and crises. 'Events, dear boy, events', the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was supposed to have answered when he was asked what the greatest challenge for a statesman was. The same goes for the *Werdegang* (development process) the EU now has to undergo to think and act as a superpower, in the interest of securing freedom and prosperity in Europe. For instance, on decisions to enforce sanctions against rogue countries, terrorist organisations and/or war criminals, Europe could start by slowly adapting the unanimity rule. To impose sanctions, unanimity is left in place, but to extend sanctions a qualified majority would be enough, while to lift them a reversed qualified majority voted (as with sanctions on the euro) would need to be brought to the European Council.

This brings us to the last proposal for the EU to become a superpower in foreign and security matters, which is urgently needed. The idea is to reform the European Council

itself. Earlier, I used the analogy of European foreign and security policy as an aeroplane, steadfastly steering its course through clouded geopolitical skies over the world, and Europe in particular. The first reform that should take place is to give the European President the right to invite non-EU but NATO members to the table of the European Council if a crisis erupts that can potentially bring these countries and/or NATO into play. The Council would then have to be prepared by permanent representatives of both EU member states as well as NATO Ambassadors, with it subsequently asking the NATO-Council to deploy troops or other military assets. In this way a European pillar under NATO would become a reality and would not mix military and civilian authority. Similarly to a pilot and co-pilot, the EU and NATO would pilot the plane. The EU would still be sovereign in its decision-making, though not autonomous. However, who wants auto-pilots in international crises and events?

Conclusions

This analysis ends where it started. With French President Macron not ruling out a French military deployment on Ukrainian soil to also defend the integrity of Europe's liberal democracies and principles of sovereignty, borders and freedom of choice. If the EU had a cockpit on foreign and security matters, the French President's public stand could have been coordinated and prepared. It would have been the statement of a superpower coming to age and not the cacophony of the entire crew of the plane being aired. Therefore, the next time Macron comes up with something, Sikorski (Poland), Scholz and Baerbock (Germany), Landsbergis (Lithuania), Kallas (Estonia) and aspiring NATO-SG Rutte (Netherlands) might all say 'no boots on the ground'. But strategic ambiguity can only be an asset if it is the purpose of the communication. To leave Putin guessing is wise, but to leave him to pick and choose the response of a European leader to then launch his own threats, plays right into the hands of an autocrat. Moreover, a strong hand from Europe is needed. It is really now or never!