

Chapter 15: The Security Autonomy of Europe and the Hegemonic Shadow of NATO

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Abstract

The Russian-Ukrainian war is not yet over at the time of writing, but it is already certain that it will create many losers – in the political, military, financial, and physical sense. However, there will also be some winners: NATO is one of them. The transatlantic alliance is currently experiencing a tremendous renaissance. This is because the war in Ukraine has refocused the political attention of European societies and Washington alike on the fundamental issues of European security in a way that has probably not been the case since the 1990s. Back then, the United States (U.S.) led NATO's eastward expansion and fought two wars in the Balkans.

Keywords

Ukraine war, NATO, CSDP, Washington, security and defense cooperation EU-USA

1 The USA as a “European Power”

The U.S. under President Joe Biden has unhesitatingly fulfilled its security obligations in and for Europe in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine, forcefully underscoring its role as a “European power”. Since February 2022, the Biden administration has supported Kyiv with massive arms shipments, sworn the West to economic sanctions of unprecedented scope, and expanded its troop presence in Europe.¹ One focus of U.S. troop increases has been NATO's eastern flank. Overall, the U.S. has increased the number of its troops in Europe from about 20,000 to more than 100,000 since

¹ See for details Arabia, Christina L./Bowen, Andrew S.: U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, CRS In Focus, 15 June 2023.

February 24, 2022. In addition, the U.S. Congress has provided financial aid to Ukraine totaling 54 billion dollars through the end of October 2022. It is hard to imagine a time in the last thirty years when transatlantic relations have been more prominent in the minds of American political elites.

With its decisions in the context of the *Zeitenwende*, the German government also took a clear position alongside the Biden administration, which was not necessarily to be expected. While Angela Merkel's government followed the somewhat diffuse paradigm of "becoming more European in order to remain transatlantic" in security policy, Chancellor Olaf Scholz left no doubt that the crisis could only be dealt with in close shoulder-to-shoulder cooperation with Washington. His policy of delivering only those weapons systems to Ukraine that Washington was willing to supply exemplifies this point, even if some observers see it primarily as an excuse not to provide more weapons.² This unrestricted transatlantic "coloring" of German security policy is a direct result of the Russian war against Ukraine and the American reaction to it.

This trend is also matched by public opinion in Germany: Germans and Americans consistently rate bilateral relations as being very positive. From the German perspective, the rating is currently at its best since 2017: 82 percent of Germans see the transatlantic relationship in a "good" or "very good" state. As recently as 2020, only 18 percent shared this assessment. The U.S. also remains the most important partner for Germans (36 percent), ahead of France (32 percent). Particularly in the protection and defense of Europe, for example, within the framework of NATO, 81 percent of respondents see the U.S. as a partner. In 2021, the figure was still 73 percent.³

2 A Snapshot

Yet the Biden administration's commitment to Ukraine and European security is ultimately only a snapshot, which may be welcomed in Europe's capitals, but should not be used as the basis for one's own strategic planning. Russia and the war in Ukraine will remain an important issue for Washington in the coming months and perhaps even years. But even if the Biden administration's support for Ukraine does not diminish in the short

2 Brössler, Daniel/Krüger, Paul-Anton/Szymanski, Mike: "Im Reinen mit sich und Joe Biden", Süddeutsche Zeitung, 17 September 2022.

3 Cf. the data in: Körber Foundation (Ed.): *The Berlin Pulse. Rethinking Security for Germany and Europe*, Berlin 2022.

term, Washington will not be able or willing to maintain the current level of diplomatic engagement, troop deployments, and resourcing for Europe in the long term.

This is because the U.S. political turn toward the Indo-Pacific region continues, and China's rise to power is already turning U.S. attention back to the Pacific. This prioritization was clearly communicated to the Europeans by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May 2022:

"Even as President Putin's war continues, we will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order – and it comes from the People's Republic of China. China is the only country that both intends to reshape the international order and increasingly has the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. Beijing's vision would take us away from the universal values that have made much of the world's progress possible over the past 75 years."⁴

The outbreak of a military conflict in Asia, in which China might attack Taiwan, would change U.S. priorities even further and faster.⁵ Against this backdrop, the current U.S. administration, as well as its successor, will face the dilemma of meeting the political expectations of its allies in Europe and Asia alike while maintaining the troop presence needed to deter Russia and China. Thus, U.S. political overreach and military overextension loom large, with no chance of implementation for a variety of domestic political reasons.⁶ Both Washington and European states must therefore consider how to recalibrate the transatlantic security relationship in light of the geopolitical shifts that have found their outward form with February 24, 2022.

3 American Ambivalence

U.S. policy toward a stronger security role for Europe has not been free of a certain ambivalence: every U.S. president has asked Europeans to spend

4 Blinken, Antony J.: The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China, Speech delivered at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 26 May 2022.

5 See Francis, Ellen: "China plans to seize Taiwan on 'much faster timeline', Blinken says", Washington Post, 18 October 2022.

6 Cf. on these limitations the contributions in: Overhaus, Marco (Ed.): *State of the Union: langfristige Trends in der US-amerikanischen Innen- und Außenpolitik und ihre Konsequenzen für Europa*. In: SWP-Studie 6, June 2021, Berlin.

more money on defense, but the overarching goal of U.S. policy has not been to push Europe toward a more independent political role as well. In 2000, Lord George Robertson, then NATO Secretary General, drew attention to this ambivalence:

“The United States is suffering from a kind of schizophrenia. On the one hand, the Americans say, ‘You Europeans have to carry more of the load’. And then when the Europeans say, ‘OK, we’ll carry more of the load’, the Americans say, ‘Wait a minute, are you telling us to go home?’”⁷

In recent years, when French President Emmanuel Macron led the push for a stronger security role under the rubric of “strategic autonomy”, Washington feared a renewed attempt to decouple Europe from NATO.⁸ As a result, the U.S. ultimately used its influence in Europe to block those efforts that could have led to a more security-independent Europe.⁹

The Biden administration, too, has so far struggled to develop a coherent strategy for balancing its conflicting commitments and harnessing Europe’s newfound focus on security issues for its own geopolitical relief. To be sure, the U.S. has once again proved indispensable in recent months with its hegemonic position in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. But it has not yet used the new momentum to actively address the structural problems that have plagued European defense for decades.¹⁰ Yet the member states of the European Union (EU) seem to be in need of such an external impetus, as they have become (too) comfortable in their security policy immaturity. Especially in the area of military capability development, the EU states remain at odds.

⁷ Quoted in Drozdiak, William: “U.S. Tepid on European Defense Plan. EU Leaders Dismiss Worry About NATO”, Washington Post, 7 March 2000.

⁸ Cf. the contributions in Lippert, Barbara/von Ondarza, Nicolai/Perthes, Volker (Eds.): *Strategische Autonomie Europas. Akteure, Handlungsfelder, Zielkonflikte*. In: SWP-Studie 2, February 2019, Berlin.

⁹ See Bergmann, Max: “Europe on Its Own. Why the United States Should Want a Better-Armed EU”, Foreign Affairs, 22 August 2022.

¹⁰ Cf. Martin, Garret/Sinkonen, Ville: Past as Prologue? The United States and European Strategic Autonomy in the Biden Era. In: European Foreign Affairs Review, Vol. 27, Special Issue 1, 2022, pp. 99–120.

4 New Dynamics

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Russia's war against Ukraine has triggered a new dynamic in the EU's security and defense policy. This can be seen in three points:

4.1 Strategic Compass

On the one hand, the member states adopted the *Strategic Compass*: its development was initiated in the second half of 2020 under the German EU Council Presidency and concluded on March 25, 2022, under the French Council Presidency with the approval of the European Council. With this document, the EU member states wanted to provide themselves with an ambitious and realistic roadmap for the development of capabilities and instruments in order to become more effective in security and defense policy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to another fundamental revision of the Strategic Compass. Russia is now identified in the 64-page document as a central threat to European security. To counter it, complementarity between the EU and NATO must be more firmly anchored, defense spending in Europe must increase, and efforts to counter hybrid threats and cyberattacks must be significantly stepped up. The numerous projects are to be implemented by 2030, with many goals to be achieved as early as 2025. In the area of crisis management, these include the *Rapid Deployment Capacity* of up to 5,000 forces, which is to be built up and regularly practiced together so that the EU can act quickly and decisively when a crisis breaks out – “if possible with partners and if necessary alone”.¹¹ In addition, the EU's military command and control structures are to be strengthened and financial incentives created for member states to provide armed forces for civilian and military missions within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).

In addition to the EU's crisis management, which aims to relieve the U.S. as a security and defense policy actor in the EU's immediate neighborhood, the Strategic Compass attaches particular importance to the “capabilities” issue complex. Among the greatest weaknesses of European defense policy

¹¹ Council of the European Union: Ein Strategischer Kompass für Sicherheit und Verteidigung, 21 March 2022, p. 3.

is undoubtedly a lack of coordinated and increased investment in defense capabilities and innovative military technologies. In the Strategic Compass, the member states now commit themselves to working toward full interoperability of their armed forces, jointly closing critical capability gaps, and creating a resilient, competitive, and innovative European defense industrial and technological base.¹²

4.2 European Peace Facility

Secondly, since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, the EU has been using the *European Peace Facility* (EPF) to support the Ukrainian armed forces. The EPF is an extra-budgetary instrument through which EU member states aim to improve the Union's capacity for conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and strengthening international security. In 2021, the EPF replaced the previous financial instruments in this area, the *Athena Mechanism* and the *African Peace Facility*. At the same time, its scope has been broadened: operational measures with military or defense implications can be financed through the Peace Facility. In order to strengthen third countries, regional or international organizations in terms of security and defense policy, EPF financial resources can be used to strengthen military and defense capacities and/or support military aspects of peace support operations. For the period 2021–2027, the EPF is endowed with a financial capital of 5.692 billion euros.¹³

More than half of this financial envelope has been used by EU member states in 2022 to provide military equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian armed forces. On October 17, 2022, the Council agreed to increase support measures for Ukraine to 3.1 billion euros. Four days after the Russian attacks on Ukraine began, EU member states had already released 500 million euros in support funds. This was followed by further benefits in

12 Cf. on the EU's Strategic Compass i.a. Kaim, Markus/Kempin, Ronja: Kompass oder Windspiel? Eine Analyse des Entwurfs für den "Strategischen Kompass" der EU. In: SWP-Aktuell 2022/A 01, 5 January 2022; Council of the European Union: A Strategic Compass for Security and Defense; Puglierin, Jana: Der Strategische Kompass: Ein Fahrplan für die Europäische Union als sicherheitspolitische Akteurin, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, Arbeitspapier 7/2022.

13 Official Journal of the European Union: Beschluss (GASP) 2021/509 des Rates vom 22. März 2021 zur Einrichtung einer Europäischen Friedensfazilität und zur Aufhebung des Beschlusses (GASP) 2015/528, 24 March 2021, p. L102/14–L102/17.

March, April, May, and July 2022.¹⁴ The lion's share of the EU money goes to heavy military equipment. A smaller amount is available for equipment and supplies such as personal protective equipment, first-aid kits, and fuel.

Increasingly, EPF funds are also enabling the maintenance and repair of previously donated weapons systems.¹⁵

But it is not only for the benefit of Ukraine that the EU is releasing funds for defense purposes to an unprecedented extent. Member states are also being given incentives to procure armaments jointly. In addition to the long-term financing instrument of the *European Defense Fund*, established in the EU budget for 2021–2027 to promote joint research and development of defense capabilities, the EU Commission also proposed in July 2022 to establish a short-term instrument *European Defense Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act* (EDIRPA) for the period 2022–2024. This mechanism, to be endowed with 500 million euros, will allow member states to jointly meet the most urgent defense needs they have faced as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. If at least three member states join forces in the joint procurement of the most needed defense equipment, they can apply for funds from the temporary financing instrument.¹⁶

4.3 EUMAM Ukraine

Finally, as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine, Europeans have strengthened CSDP in general. Denmark, which had stayed away from CSDP since it was enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty,¹⁷ decided to end its

14 Council of the European Union: Timeline – European Peace Facility, 2022.

15 Ibid.

16 European Commission: Defence industry: EU to reinforce the European defence industry through common procurement with a €500 million instrument, Press release, 19 July 2022.

17 Denmark has a so-called "opt-out clause". This was introduced as part of the 1992 Edinburgh Agreement, a text specifically designed to allow Denmark to ratify the 1991 Maastricht Treaty. The Danish population had narrowly rejected it by 50.7 percent. The agreement proposed tailored provisions that clarified Denmark's participation in four areas where EU integration was to be deepened: Citizenship, Justice and Home Affairs, Monetary Union and Defense. In defense, the country withdrew from all decisions. When defense issues were raised, Denmark's representative left the Council of Foreign Ministers. Cf. Grobe, Stefan/Liboreiro, Jorge: "Dänemarks überraschende Kehrtwende in der gemeinsamen Verteidigungspolitik der EU", Euronews, 7 March 2022.

opt-out in early June 2022. In addition, on October 17, 2022, the 27 EU states decided to establish a mission to support the training of Ukrainian military personnel, the *EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine* (EUMAM Ukraine). The goal of this new CSDP mission is ambitious: on its own territory, the EU-27 plan to train some 15,000 members of the Ukrainian military as a first step, complementing the training that the United Kingdom has been providing since June with the help of several European armies, including Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark.¹⁸ 12,000 Ukrainians are to receive basic military training through the EU, and 2,800 are to receive specialized training. EUMAM Ukraine's two headquarters will be in Poland and Germany. Berlin alone aims to train about 8,000 to 9,000 Ukrainian soldiers.

5 Ambivalence of the EU Member States

However, despite all determination, the example of EUMAM Ukraine shows at the same time that the interests of the EU members are far apart even in times of war. Not only are the member states continuing their national training efforts, which have already begun. Rather, a dispute between Germany and Poland over the leadership of EUMAM Ukraine has meant that the mission could begin much later than planned.¹⁹ Armaments cooperation in the EU is also treading water. While nearly all EU member states are increasing their military spending in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine, they rarely meet their investment spending targets along the lines they agreed in the Strategic Compass. Even the money from the European Defense Fund, which member states can apply for if they want to make a joint procurement, is rarely used for large-scale military equipment.

In July 2022, an evaluation of *Permanent Structured Cooperation* (PESCO), which began in the winter of 2017, revealed that member states are not making full use of this framework. Although they politically emphasize the added value of PESCO, progress in implementing the initiative has fallen short of expectations: they are not spending their money together, they are not planning European-wide, and there is no dynamic from the

¹⁸ Council of the European Union: Ukraine: EU sets up a military assistance mission to further support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Press release, 17 October 2022.

¹⁹ Jacqué, Philippe: "L'UE établit officiellement sa mission de formation militaire pour l'Ukraine", Le Monde, 16 October 2022.

few projects that are working. Their defense planning efforts have not brought member states together in a way that allows them to plan for the future together; EU defense initiatives are not sufficiently or systematically considered in national planning and decision making. Of the 60 projects that member states have agreed to under PESCO since 2017, about half will be able to deliver concrete results. Nonetheless, the rest are still in their infancy or are proving dysfunctional. This includes 20 of the 26 projects identified as priorities.²⁰

6 Conclusion: What Next?

The Biden administration, but even more so a possible Republican administration from January 2025, will sooner or later (have to) pursue a strategy to get the states of Europe to take greater control of their own security and to transform Europe from a dependent security recipient to an equal security provider.²¹ Now that the notion of a fully autonomous security policy identity for the EU in distinction to the U.S. has lost its significance, both sides should pursue a dual strategy.

On the one hand, the European members of NATO should use the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to reach agreement on the creation of a European pillar within the NATO alliance. This idea is not new in essence, but it has never really been brought to life. Militarily, the decisions of the Madrid Summit in June 2022 already point the way to a stronger European role, but what the political added value of a European pillar of the alliance is in the changed geopolitical environment must now be strategically developed by Europeans. Guiding this process should be the recognition to further intensify NATO-EU relations by further spelling out the complementary aspect of the two organizations.

Secondly, the EU should continue along the path it has already taken toward a stronger security and defense policy role in close coordination with the U.S. The goal here would be to recalibrate the issue of European defense in response to the Russian invasion, thus ushering in a new era of transatlantic security cooperation. This endeavor could be reflected, for example, in an EU-US armaments partnership. Joint European arms

20 Gros-Verheyde, Nicolas: "Cinq ans après, la PESCO à la peine. Un rapport pointe de grosses lacunes", Bruxelles2.eu, 8 September 2022.

21 See Wittig, Peter: "How to Trump-Proof the Transatlantic Alliance. First, Europe Must Realize That He Might Return", Foreign Affairs, 6 October 2022.

planning and procurement continues to fail because many EU states believe that they can express their deep ties with the U.S. most clearly by buying American defense products. Agreement between Washington and the EU Commission on a common agenda would be a clear signal from the USA to its European partners.

Russia's war against Ukraine has brought the U.S. back to Europe. At the same time, it has shown Washington that it needs united, capable, and well-armed European partners – not least in order to gain the necessary room for maneuver in the Indo-Pacific. For their part, EU member states have significantly increased their defense efforts in response to the war in Europe. Both sides should use these developments to conclude a new transatlantic security agenda behind which there is no turning back. The “window of opportunity” in this regard is still open until January 2025.

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