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Issue Brief

Europe's Re-awakening: The Arduous Task of Re-linking Security Concerns

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S*ummary*

Europe is becoming aware of the complex and seamless nature of security threats, as also the costs entailed in effectively countering these threats. Neither diplomacy, engagement, trade, persuasion have prevented Europe's worst nightmare—the return of war on its soil. The future of Europe's security architecture will depend largely on how well it blends its dependence and deepening with NATO on the one hand and its quest for strategic autonomy on the other.

The internal and external reference points of what was once the European security order have undergone a fundamental shift after the war in Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. To its credit, Europe has been quick to condition itself to the radically changed realities but lot of that re-conditioning continues to be economically painful.¹

Adding to its already upended strategic calculus, the geopolitical bifurcation due to US–China rivalry is forcing the bloc to take sides between the US, a security guarantor and a core ally on the one hand and China, a top-most trading partner on the other. The emerging security-brainstorming in Europe therefore operates in the larger geopolitical matrix of this ongoing global transformation.²

The Era of Polycrisis and Limitations of EU’s aspirational autonomy

While Europe’s latest security misgivings are pegged on the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical bifurcation between the US and China, it also finds itself grappling with diverse political opinions, energy security crises, the challenges of climate change and the need to accelerate green transition. There are compulsive arguments of an indivisible security³ between Europe and Asia that connect⁴ a lack of resistance against Russia to aggravating tensions over Taiwan amid worsening US–China relations.

All of this has triggered staggeringly high defence spending by several actors. At the same time, there has been a rise of the global South fuelling a multipolar world order where a group of countries—what Europe identifies as ‘Consequential Hedgers’—refuse to identify with Europe’s problems.

As a bloc, the EU has been unable to convert its geo-economic heft into geopolitical traction. Part of it stems from the way Europe’s post-World War security was outsourced to the US. The bloc was single-mindedly immersed in the pursuit of the world’s most successful inter-state economic integration experiment—the European Union.⁵

¹ [**“What War Has Done to Europe’s Economy”**](#), *The Economist*, 23 February 2023.

² Velina Tchakarova, [**“Enter the ‘DragonBear’: The Russia-China Partnership and What it Means for Geopolitics”**](#), Issue Brief No. 538, Observer Research Foundation, 29 April 2022.

³ Brad Glosserman, [**“Japan and Europe: A Marriage of Convenience Matures”**](#), The Asian Forum, 22 September 2022.

⁴ Marc Santora and Steven Erlanger, [**“Taiwan and Ukraine: Two Crises, 5,000 Miles Apart, Are Linked in Complex Ways”**](#), *The New York Times*, 3 August 2022.

⁵ Swasti Rao, [**“Macron’s Gaffes in China Open a Door for India — Unwavering French Support at the UNSC”**](#), *The Print*, 21 April 2023.

Russia’s war in Ukraine has once again tugged at the root of this transformational paralysis within the EU. The key difference is that this time around, the bloc has nothing to hide behind. Neither diplomacy, engagement, trade, persuasion have prevented Europe’s worst nightmare—the return of war on its soil. But since it has, so have the deliberations on how should the continent provide for its security, re-embark on the pursuit of strategic autonomy and balance its dependence on NATO. It is evident that the bloc is mulling a viable security architecture that can rise up to the occasion and provide teeth to the EU’s security worldview. The most systematic attempt to this end was manifested at the recently concluded Schuman Defence and Security Forum, a flagship security dialogue held under the aegis of the European External Action Service.⁶ The Schuman Forum is remarkable for attempting to develop EU’s security capabilities in two parallel and complementing major verticals of engagement—one with NATO and the US and another with forging global defence partnerships. Despite the remarkable plans, myriad challenges exist at multiple levels, which unless addressed, are likely to impact the desire of the European Union to emerge as a global security actor and provider.

Ever since the end of the Cold war, securitisation theory has underscored the importance of broad spectrum linking of security issues. This understanding has been further developed by the second-generation Copenhagen school theorists to provide better linkages among emerging threats such as environment and the cyber domain.⁷ It is an irony that despite sitting on the wealth of the intellect of the Copenhagen school, Europe’s discourse on its security and economic concerns kept operating in silos. The current striving for strategic autonomy⁸ as well as the musings at the recently held Schuman Forum are efforts to structurally re-link those security concerns that should have been ideally looked upon along a continuum.

However, even as Europe is becoming aware of the complex and seamless nature of security threats, it is also becoming aware of the costs that a re-adjustment to deal effectively with those threats entails.⁹ If Europe had kept its security concerns linked, its strategies would look different, ties with NATO and the US regardless. At the outset, the March 2023 deliberations on a new security architecture aren’t

⁶ [“Schuman Security and Defence Forum”](#), Youtube, European External Action Service (EEAS), 21 March 2023.

⁷ Holger Stritzel, [“Securitization Theory and the Copenhagen School”](#), in *Security in Translation*, Springer, 2014.

⁸ Clothilde Goujard, [“Charles Michel: Europe Warming Up to Macron’s ‘Strategic Autonomy’ Push Away from US”](#), Politico, 11 April 2023.

⁹ Kenneth Rapoza, [“Russia’s War is Still a Big Problem for Europe”](#), *Forbes*, 28 April 2023.

merely plans to increase the bloc’s defence spending. They address a far broader spectrum by linking the pressing security threats in a flexible and dynamic structure while improving Europe’s freedom of navigation.

Hence, the vantage point of EU’s new security has to be rooted firmly in its ‘strategic autonomy’. It is from there that the twin parallel developments—deepening transatlantic ties and forging global partnerships for a Global Europe, are drawn. It may be noted that achieving strategic autonomy by building equal, pragmatic and flexible security partnerships across the globe was originally conceived in EU’s Strategic Compass.¹⁰ Does that mean that the EU is looking for strategic autonomy away from its hitherto dependence on the US? Would a more security-oriented EU not need the NATO? Analysis indicates that the truth has seldom been far from this binary.

The Two Verticals of European Security Engagement

The future of Europe’s security architecture will depend largely on how well it blends its dependence and deepening with NATO on the one hand and its quest for strategic autonomy on the other. From Europe’s perspective, the two verticals should complement each other. It is indeed counterintuitive to imagine that mutually exclusive pursuits of seeking freedom while deepening dependence would not intersect sooner than later. But for now, Europe has agreed upon reconciling the two to ensure an optimal outcome.

Deepening transatlantic ties

The first vertical of EU security is, unarguably, deepening ties with NATO that the war in Ukraine has cemented. While the panel discussions¹¹ at Schuman highlighted deepening cooperation with organisations like the UN, regional organisations like the African Union and ASEAN and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions for crisis management and stabilisation, the EU’s evolving association with NATO remains the most pronounced.

The January 2023 EU–NATO Joint Declaration¹² ramps up this association with a sharper focus on Climate Change, Space, Artificial Intelligence, emerging and disruptive tech. The declaration promises deeper engagement with a broad spectrum range of security concerns. It condemns the actions on Russia and is

¹⁰ Alice Tidey, [“What is the ‘Strategic Compass’ and What Does it Mean for EU Defence?”](#), *Euronews*, 23 March 2022.

¹¹ [“Schuman Security and Defence Forum”](#), no. 6.

¹² [“Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation”](#), NATO, 10 January 2023.

mindful of the need to address China’s growing assertiveness and policies. The document endorses NATO’s Strategic Concept¹³ and the EU’s strategic Compass¹⁴ and calls for forging a deeper EU–NATO cooperation.

The joint statement recognises the value of a strong and a more capable European Defence that is ‘complementary to’ and ‘interoperable with’ NATO. It also recognises the need to take the transatlantic alliance beyond Europe with a smart combination of political, economic and military instruments that the two alliances have at their disposal. It further develops the idea¹⁵ of the expansion of the transatlantic security theatre into other geopolitical arenas, namely the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶

More and more members of EU and NATO are becoming common to each other. The increase in overlapping membership with Finland already in NATO, Sweden next in line and Denmark incorporated fully into Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)¹⁷, shows that the combined heft of the two is slated to grow.

A particularly noteworthy phenomenon gaining ground through Schuman is that the EU can best act as a security provider by adding ‘value’ between internal and external security while NATO can take up collective defence under article five.¹⁸ It entails aspiring for a perfect division of labour where the EU could work internally, rallying member state support on EU-wide instruments to tackle the broad-spectrum security threats and deepen interoperability and coordination with NATO. This, in turn, would re-inforce NATO’s security umbrella on Europe.¹⁹

Transatlantic ties are also refurbished by the new EU–US defence cooperation of February 2023.²⁰ This arrangement will provide a framework for consultations on several traditional and non-traditional security challenges between European Defence Agency and the US Department of Defense. Making steady progress, the two sides have recently formalised a framework for cooperation through the signing

¹³ [“NATO 2022 Strategic Concept”](#), NATO, 3 March 2023.

¹⁴ [“A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the Next Decade”](#), Council for the European Union, 21 March 2022.

¹⁵ Erik Brattberg and Philippe Le Corre, [“The Case for Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo Pacific”](#), Carnegie, December 2019.

¹⁶ Marianne Schneider-Petsinger, Veerle Nouwens, Alice Billon-Galland, Andrew Cainey and Gareth Price, [“Transatlantic Cooperation on the Indo Pacific”](#), Chatham House, 17 November 2022.

¹⁷ Jon Henly, [“Denmark Votes Overwhelmingly to Join EU’s Common Defence Policy”](#), *The Guardian*, 1 June 2022.

¹⁸ [“Schuman Security and Defence Forum”](#), no. 6.

¹⁹ [“Collective Defence and Article 5”](#), NATO, 14 April 2023.

²⁰ [“EU-US Defence Cooperation: Council Approves Administrative Arrangement Between the European Defence Agency and the Department of Defence”](#), Council of the European Union, 6 February 2023.

of an Administrative Arrangement (AA).²¹ The EDA-DoD AA provides for stronger transatlantic cooperation in defence in specific areas, including in the exchange of information. It is landmark in the sense that while its idea was first floated in 2016, it took all these years and specially Russia’s war in Ukraine to get all the 27 members of the EU on board to agree to a common framework of deepening defence cooperation with the US.

Strategic Autonomy for a Global Europe

The second vertical is the quest for achieving more strategic autonomy. While this has been the mantra in inner discussions within the EU parliament and Commission for a few years, especially after President Emmanuel Macron rose to prominence in the bloc, the war in Ukraine has pushed it to become a ‘performative’ in the true sense.²² Discussed below are some characteristics of the performative aspect of EU’s strategic autonomy:

At the Schuman Forum, the role of European Peace Facility (EPF) was discussed as the first tool for the EU to strengthen its own position as a global security provider by supporting its partners’ security.²³ The EPF is an off-budget instrument²⁴ aimed at enhancing the EU’s ability to prevent conflicts, build peace and strengthen international security. It has evolved into a major enabler for the EU to take on a more global role.

For instance, the EPF’s financial ceiling has been raised twice since the Ukraine war began.²⁵ The EU adopted a decision on 13 March 2023 to raise the financial ceiling of the EPF to €7.979 billion until 2027. What is unprecedented about the EPF is EU’s newfound willingness to provide military support, training and equipment to partner countries.

The military support aspect has been best elucidated in EPF’s support to Ukraine. EU High Representative Josep Borrel has also asserted that the EPF is a truly global instrument and not limited to Ukraine, thereby signalling the adoption of next military help to Niger and Somalia.²⁶ What gives more credibility to EPF is that

²¹ [“EDA- US Administrative Agreement”](#), US Department of Defense, 26 April 2023.

²² Swasti Rao, [“Era of Peace for Europe has Ended. Future Depends on How it Deepens its Ties with NATO”](#), *The Print*, 7 April 2023.

²³ [“Schuman Security and Defence Forum”](#), no. 6.

²⁴ [“Council Decision \(CFSP\) 2021/509”](#), Official Journal of the European Union, 22 March 2021.

²⁵ [“The Council Decsion \(CFSP\) 2021/509”](#), European Parliament, 22 March 2021.

²⁶ [“Schuman Security and Defence Forum”](#), no. 6.

EU is providing military training to 30,000 Ukrainian troops in 2023 and recently formed consensus on sending one million ammunition shells to Kyiv.²⁷

The second tool is to foster better dialogues and consultations with key partners. In line with emerging security domains, such engagement is to be furthered through EU’s new Space Strategy and an updated Maritime Strategy. On 10 March 2023, the bloc adopted the first ever EU space strategy. It is based on four pillars of ensuring shared understanding, enhancing resilience, developing dual use capabilities and fostering global partnerships.²⁸ This strategy would draw on pooling member states space capabilities, space situational awareness and intelligence.

The same formula has been applied to utilising member states’ deployments in the maritime domain under the EU’s Coordinated Maritime Presence.²⁹ The objective of CMP is to enable the bloc gain a more prominent global maritime presence. The way to do so is by deploying member state’s maritime and air assets on a voluntary basis.

Thirdly, since the above-mentioned initiatives are aimed at countering emerging threats, they do get a further push from the new EU hybrid toolbox (EUHT) that was introduced a few months after the war in Ukraine.³⁰ EUHT provides a framework for a coordinated response to hybrid campaigns affecting the EU and its member states. Hybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, and deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces.³¹

It also entails the development of the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox (‘FIMI toolbox’), which will strengthen EU’s ability to detect, analyse and respond to the threat, including by imposing costs on perpetrators. One of the earliest tests for the EUHT will relate to EU’s support for Moldova.³² The ex-Soviet state has claimed to be under a hybrid threat from Russia and looks forward to building collective approach to resilience with the help of EUHT.

²⁷ Andrew Gray and Sabine Siebold, [“EU Seals Plan to Send a Million Artillery Shells to Ukraine”](#), *Reuters*, 20 March 2023.

²⁸ [“EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence to ensure a stronger and more resilient EU”](#), European Defence Agency, 10 March 2023.

²⁹ [“Factsheet: Coordinated Maritime Presence”](#), European Union External Action, 21 March 2022.

³⁰ Ove Troelson, [“European Parliament, NATO supports Hybrid Toolbox”](#), Helsingefors, 4 March 2023.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Alexandra Brzozowski and Aurélie Pugno, [“EU Agrees to Deploy Moldova Mission to Counter Foreign Interference”](#), *Euractive*, 24 April 2023.

Myriad challenges

For a bloc that functions on consensus of its 27 members states, it is an uphill task to co-develop norms around emerging threats both within and globally in a cost and time effective manner. France’s and Germany’s nuanced approach towards Russia has been often cited as a caveat towards sustaining EU’s unity vis-à-vis Ukraine in the long run. The bigger European economies’ proposition to China has already become a complex terrain of balancing de-risking with trade benefits.³³ With Beijing, Brussels is paying the price of ignoring geopolitical risks and focusing on economic engagement. The ‘Voodoo politics’—a belief that a problem left unattended will go away by itself³⁴—can no longer work with EU’s China policy. But the ‘de-risking’ has to operate in the real world to prove its resilience and strength in getting the right blend of containment and engagement.

Conclusion

The era of the peace dividend is over for Europe. As the war in Ukraine continues, the bloc’s evolving China policy is still ambiguous in effect. The continent stands on an inflection point. The policies endorsed at the Schuman Forum will have to operate along the two verticals separately as well in complementarity to save the continent from the risks of de-linked security landscape. For the EU, a viable security solution and a global security posture will have to re-link Europe’s security concerns with equally viable instruments that have support from within and without.

³³ Janne Leino, [“EU’s Bid for Multipolarity: De-risking from China, Without Naming the US”](#), *Euractive*, 3 April 2023.

³⁴ François Godement, [“Containment and Engagement: Drawing the Line with China”](#), Institut Montaigne, 2 May 2023.

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