



CSDS POLICY BRIEF • 8/2022

European Strategic Responsibility Must Focus on Russia

By Henrik Larsen | 3 May 2022

Key Issues

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine presents a new political reality in which the European countries are ready to enhance their role in the defence of their own continent. However, they should focus on "strategic responsibility" rather than "strategic autonomy", which remains militarily and politically unrealistic.
- The Europeans should conceive their efforts in three steps: (1) Military Mobility: the EU needs to finally allocate the budgets to improve the infrastructure for the swift reinforcement of troops, equipment, and supplies to NATO's eastern territory to deter Russian troop buildups; (2) Resilience: containing Russia's political warfare against the West requires a division of labour, with NATO remaining a fighting force and the EU focusing on the coordination of civilian assets; and (3) Enhanced European Deterrence: the Europeans will continue to rely on critical US military support functions but must muster the bulk of the ground and tactical air forces in the future defence and deterrence of Russia.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is jump-starting the debate about the extent to which European countries and the EU should play an independent role in the defence of their continent. The debate about European strategic autonomy until now focused predominantly on the softer trade and technology aspects in the growing competition with China, without however spilling over to a transformation of the EU's military role or closer defence cooperation.

The European countries face a reality that goes beyond the now-obvious need to position existing forces eastward for NATO's conventional deterrence of Russia. They will need to carry the bigger burden of this deterrence themselves, given the rise of China that increasingly draws US military resources toward Asia. The United States is currently geared to

defeat only one single great-power adversary in one theatre, while at best deterring another great power in another theatre at the same time. If the United States were to be bogged down in a war against China, it would therefore fall to the Europeans to defend themselves in a war against Russia.

The European countries – and the EU for certain tasks – have an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate their military readiness and added value to transatlantic security in the competition with Russia and China. European strategic autonomy essentially describes the EU's ability to act autonomously in areas of strategic importance with the use of its own resources. The European countries should think about their enhanced contribution without chasing "strategic autonomy" as an empty catchword because the United States remains indispensable for

most governments, as well as for the performance of European troops on the battlefield. Unrealistic for military and political reasons, strategic autonomy should rather be explored as a question of increased European “strategic responsibility”.

This policy brief argues that the Europeans should conceive their efforts in three steps: (1) military mobility, (2) resilience, and (3) enhanced deterrence against Russia.

A New Political Reality

France for almost two decades provided constant pressure for the development of autonomous EU military assets, without however managing to forge a common threat perception among the EU member states that could direct such an effort. The EU conducted several crisis-management missions in the Western Balkans and Africa but never managed to deploy its own battlegroups intended for this purpose. Most other countries opposed the idea of a permanent EU military headquarters.

France, in turn, attempted to advance the idea of European strategic autonomy after the election of US President Donald Trump in 2016, who refused to recommit to NATO’s collective defence obligation. However, Paris’s efforts achieved little other than institutional additions to the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation, as well as a moderate financial allocation for collaborative research and industrial projects on defence through the European Defence Fund.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has changed Europe’s political reality as there is now a clear external hostile power to rally against. President Vladimir Putin’s justification for recognising the Donbas breakaway republics on 21 February – basically [calling into question](#) the land drawings during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union – gives reason to fear an attack against Estonia and Latvia, which have significant Russian minorities, as well as toward Kaliningrad through the narrow Suwalki gap between Lithuania and Poland. The prevention of war on EU/NATO territory now hinges on absolute clarity about the West’s resolve and ability to repel a Russian attack.

The outrage over and the scale of Russia’s aggression

highlights the necessity of an enhanced European and EU effort in the conventional deterrence of Russia, even among the traditionally most Russia-leaning members. Paris continues to seek “strategic dialogue” with Moscow, as testified by President Macron’s relentless but inconclusive phone calls with President Putin. Nevertheless, Paris agrees to the need to reinforce the eastern border. Clarity on the fact that European strategy now focuses on the Russian threat, and not some undefined risk, is crucial to overcome suspicions among the eastern allies such as Poland and the Baltic States about (not only) French ambitions to undermine NATO as Europe’s primary security provider.

The challenge for the European countries is to figure out how they can translate their new common will to counter Russia into increased military preparedness, using both national, NATO, and EU instruments. In practical terms, they must proceed in three steps in order of increasing difficulty.

Step #1: Military Mobility

The Europeans must start with the easiest step, namely allocating the relatively modest EU budgets for the implementation of the “Military Schengen” to optimise the infrastructure for swift movements of troops and equipment eastward during a crisis. The lack of rail corridors connecting the three Baltic States to Poland and the rest of continental Europe is especially worrying for NATO’s ability to reinforce and supply its exposed eastern members, should Russia choose to build up forces in its western military district facing NATO territory, similar to what it did in the course of two months prior to its invasion of Ukraine.

NATO itself lacks the instruments to improve military mobility but in 2018 [identified](#) areas in need of improvement, including easing diplomatic and legal procedures across the military and civilian sectors, and developing and strengthening supply routes able to handle military transportation. The EU has the regulatory powers to simplify custom and border permissions for the transportation of dangerous goods and military equipment, including for NATO allies which are not EU members. The Union also has the funds to [construct and maintain infrastructure](#) required for rail cargo to move heavy military loads by completing missing sections of transit corridors and developing dual-use infrastructure projects.

Military mobility is uncontroversial but political prioritisation remains an obstacle for its implementation. In 2020, at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commission's proposal for funding for military mobility dropped from €6.5 to €1.5 billion in the final budgetary allocation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the end of the Covid-19 pandemic provides a new push for the allocation of the necessary resources for

is in NATO's interest to monitor the preparedness of its allies to withstand external pressure, influence levers, and infiltration, but the EU in most cases is better placed to coordinate such action, whether legislative action, law enforcement, or the pooling of crisis capabilities.

NATO should instead operate with a resilience concept that ties closely to the protection of military

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military mobility as the most obvious area of EU-NATO defence cooperation without further delays.

Step #2: Resilience

The second and more challenging step is to ensure that NATO remains a fighting force that does not unnecessarily venture into civilian areas. There must be an appropriate division of labour with the EU on non-Article 5 security matters relating to Russia's political warfare to divide and weaken the transatlantic alliance. The two organisations need to protect their allies/members from Russian attempts to drive wedges between them through coercion, disruption, or influence campaigns, but they have different mandates and comparative advantages.

NATO in the competition with illiberal Russia and China seems to be going down a slippery slope by focusing on resilience tasks that are peripheral to a defence alliance. NATO rightly focused on civil support to the military to be maintained under the most demanding circumstances, but also included essential services to the populations such as food and energy supplies that seem more well-placed under EU competency. There are now further [calls](#) for the alliance to engage in the domain of "democratic resilience" to resist interference from hostile external actors in the functioning of their democratic institutions and processes. Joseph Biden (at least before his election as president) recommended that NATO expand its role into the fight against weaponised corruption, illicit party financing, the outsourcing of influence campaigns, and cyber theft. It

infrastructure and defence. NATO seems to be the right forum for increased cooperation among Western intelligence services on counterterrorism (given Russian sabotage and assassination operations), counterintelligence (given the increase in Russian espionage), and obviously on cyber defence. Moreover, it falls to NATO to train and structure parts of its forces in Poland and the Baltic States for grey-zone eventualities, such as disinformation campaigns and subversion preceding the application of large-scale kinetic force. Preventing Russia's political preparation for military aggression may require NATO to embed parts of its forces with the host country authorities, but not necessarily the EU other than in the joint effort to debunk disinformation.

Step #3: Enhanced European Deterrence

The third and most comprehensive step is for European states to take the main responsibility for the defence and deterrence of Russia. With the current forces in the Baltic States, NATO is in significant personnel and equipment understrength based on the traditional 1:3 ratio for successful defence without yielding significant territory against the Russian forces concentrated in its western military district. Going forward, NATO must leave no doubt about its ability to repel an attack on its eastern territory due to the much higher cost of having to liberate territory after a Russian *fait accompli* and due to the doubt about its resolve to do so, should Russia follow up with a threat to use nuclear weapons.

NATO most likely needs to station troops in permanent

bases in Poland and the Baltic States and lighter forces in countries like Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania without a land border with Russia. It must also increase the number of ready-to-deploy response forces to be rushed to the conflict zone. In NATO's adaptation to deterrence by denial, it falls to the Europeans to provide the bulk of the ground and tactical air forces, reinforcing and replacing existing US forces, and enabled by the expected increase in European defence spending. However, the Europeans will continue to rely on the United States for a reliable command structure, strategic airlift, and not least, the nuclear umbrella. The performance of European troops would also greatly benefit from continued access to US intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities. The Europeans for these reasons are unlikely to achieve strategic autonomy and would do a better service to themselves by operating with an ambition to increase their strategic responsibility. They need to clarify two further questions to this end.

The first is whether they see meaning in committing to providing a certain share of the number and size of operations that NATO should be ready to conduct at any given time (also known as the alliance's "level of ambition"). The [Strategic Compass](#), which the EU published in the midst of the Russia's invasion, envisages the operationalisation of a 5,000-person strong rapid deployment force for nonpermissive environments by 2025. More ambitious voices have called for the Europeans to provide half of the NATO forces and capabilities required for a sufficient defence capability against Russia and to become first responders to crises in and around their southern periphery. A geographical differentiation may be appropriate, whereby the eastern frontier allies concentrate their resources on the defence of their own territory, while the West Europeans can maintain a more expeditionary mindset.

The second question the Europeans need to clarify is that of a separate EU command that would empower the EU to become a first responder to crises requiring smaller crisis operations. The existing "Berlin Plus" command structure allows the EU to request NATO to make its assets and capabilities available for an EU-led operation. To date, the EU conducted only two peacekeeping missions under "Berlin Plus", of which one, *European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina*, is still operational. The command structure is available, e.g., for an EU takeover of the Kosovo Force if the

Union wants to take full responsibility for stability in the Western Balkans. Potential operations under "Berlin Plus" may be held hostage to the dispute between Cyprus (EU member) and Turkey (NATO member) if one wants to veto the other's participation in a joint EU-NATO operation. Missions under EU command are, therefore, likely to be decided *ad hoc*.

Defence, Trade, and Technology

Russia has crossed a Rubicon, forging a convergence of threat perceptions not seen since the Cold War among the European countries, which thus far failed to agree on more than peacekeeping operations and civilian and military missions with limited mandates. This policy brief made the argument for conceiving efforts toward European strategic responsibility in three steps in order of increasing difficulty. The third step is obviously the most significant: getting the European countries to muster the main fighting force to defend against Russia, but with continued reliance on the US military, and the possibility of a separate EU command for non-Article 5 missions. It goes together with the first step, i.e. military mobility which is crucial for the swift reinforcement of the future NATO forces in Poland and the Baltic States to deter large-scale Russian aggression. Neither can be seen as separate from Russia's political warfare, where the EU and its members are better positioned to coordinate the civilian efforts.

Europe should look to trade and technology, rather than military readiness, if it wishes to realise its ambition of autonomy. The failed Russia policy over the past 15 years holds the lesson that economic growth does not change the character of an illiberal competitor but is likely to embolden its foreign policy. Europe's naivete about the ability to separate commercialism and geopolitics in the relationship with Russia will perhaps translate into an awakening about the relationship with China. As the West is no longer the world's main technological innovator and economic powerhouse, China poses a strategic challenge worse than during the Cold War. The awakening about the risk of economic dependency on Russia may provide new impetus to protect the European markets against Chinese tech competitors and acquisition of critical infrastructure. Principal agreement on values is ultimately what binds the transatlantic community together against illiberal great powers, provided that Europe is able to defend itself and build resilience against their infiltration.



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