



# The Road to A Renewed European Security Architecture

*by Marta Dassù and Roberto Menotti*



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The concept of a European “security architecture” has been most often a somewhat vague topic for periodic official statements on the margin of international summits or for passionate academic discussions. However important as a sort of “infrastructure” for diplomacy, defense planning and even regular economic exchanges, it is not perceived by most European citizens as a primary concern. Until a major crisis erupts – which is precisely what we have witnessed since February 24, 2022.

The aftershocks of the Russian aggression against Ukraine will have, in fact, structural and long term consequences on security arrangements across the Old Continent and even beyond.

## **NATO’s present and its future**

NATO has been revitalized, refocused on its traditional “East-first” tasks, and further strengthened politically by the (unexpected) application by Finland and Sweden. Not only has the Alliance become once again the core of the security policies of its members, but the broader Transatlantic bond has been reinforced – with potential benefits beyond security and defense in economic and technological matters that remain particularly controversial. Despite the return to a major emphasis on securing the Eastern borders vis-a-vis Russia, this new trend implies a renewed NATO : indeed, the Alliance still needs to turn

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“more European” in the sense that the American commitment cannot be the solution to all its collective problems.

In particular, in tackling the complex issue of the Russia-Ukraine war, various forms of military support to Kyiv (largely a US contribution) are proving crucial to countering Moscow’s aggression but are just part of the answer, as there is an immediate humanitarian challenge to be addressed and a costly reconstruction task ahead. In addition, the costs of international sanctions on Russia are being incurred largely by the European members of NATO, but this is not an arbitrary decision made in some secret war room; instead, it is the logical consequence of the high level of (past) interdependence of important European economies with Russia. The combination of these factors means that we are not even discussing a traditional “burden sharing” issue when it comes to Ukraine’s needs, but rather an objective asymmetry in the exposure of various allies. In turn, this requires more effective and more coordinated efforts especially by the Europeans.

An additional consideration affecting allied attitudes toward Russia is deterrence in the widest sense. By its very nature, deterrence (conventional as well as nuclear) is based on credibility (i.e. political will) as much as on capabilities; therefore, the United States looks at the Ukraine crisis in a very broad perspective, knowing full well that each move is being closely monitored and evaluated also in Beijing and elsewhere.

If the European members of the Alliance wish to make their own perspective relevant, they have to learn some hard lessons from 2022 in terms of capabilities, the resources needed to acquire them and the public support at the national level for a more active security policy down the road.

As Julian Lindley-French recently put it, “the focus should be on developing capabilities across the future war mosaic of hybrid, cyber and super-fast hyper war. This would fill the gap between Europe’s conventional and nuclear deterrents, which going forward will take on an increasingly important role in deterrence. That must be complemented by a demonstrable commitment to robust political cohesion, and resilient decision-making in an emergency” (<https://aspensiaonline.it/is-europe-self-detering/>).

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The crucial role of deterrence is closely linked to the future of NATO as the main pillar of stability in a very broad geographical setting. Even the prospect of a negotiated solution to the Russia-Ukraine war hinges on securing Ukraine's borders and preventing a repeat of 2014 or 2022 – otherwise, the current efforts will be seen as a waste of lives and treasure. Any credible guarantee will only be as valuable as the political cohesion among NATO members; in other words, it will truly be a collective guarantee. This is a basic premise of any future European security architecture.

Despite the unmistakable centrality of the Russia threat in the short and probably medium term, the Alliance will also continue to tackle what was traditionally known as the Southern front. The Middle East and North African (MENA) region remains rather fragmented and characterized by various sources of instability, although there are increasing mutual influences between MENA and the Persian Gulf as well as the Sahel. Moreover, Russian presence in Libya and Syria connects the Eastern and Southern fronts. In other words, while risks and threats can easily travel in all directions, there is no overarching security framework, much less an institutionalized forum for security consultation and cooperation. Yet, disengagement is not an option for most NATO members, as it would only mean relinquishing the limited forms of influence (mostly indirect) that they can exercise. Thus, this long and fragmented Southern neighbourhood continues to affect Europe in many ways.

From the Alliance's perspective, the current priorities include ensuring the safety of crucial maritime routes, enhancing energy security, but also dealing with the repercussions of the food crisis and the green transition on several countries of the Southern shore and beyond.

It is an extremely diverse array of challenges, risks and threats, to which we can add the renewed importance of the Black Sea and the unfinished business in the Western Balkans – both sectors that are directly linked to the Mediterranean as a whole.

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## The EU's ambitions, limitations and potential

The EU is facing a moment of truth after having stated its growing ambitions as a “geopolitical actor” and a more “sovereign” entity on the world stage. In reality, terms such as “energy sovereignty” or “technological sovereignty” are not truly self-explanatory and can even be misleading, given that both energy networks and technological innovation require transnational links – they are mostly about managing interdependence rather than exercising sovereign prerogatives. Beyond legal definitions or Weberian “ideal-types”, sovereign attributes are actually a matter of degrees.

The same can be said of the expression “strategic autonomy” (introduced in official documents almost a decade ago), which has caused some tension at the Transatlantic level and actually begs clarification: after all, when applied to defense efforts the concept inevitably seems to imply a form of competition vis-a-vis NATO, if not outright disengagement from NATO commitments.

American counterparts – both in government and in the expert community – are understandably alarmed especially in light of the well known fact that “there is only one set of resources” and those devoted to defense by the Europeans are limited indeed.

At times, these declaratory policy exercises – however well intentioned – seem to have a largely motivational goal, prodding EU governments to allocate more resources while also making a consistent effort to persuade national public opinions of the value added of integration. Yet, it would be wise to focus, first and foremost, on **improved collective effectiveness, capacity to act, and resilience**. These features are a precondition for autonomy, but do not preclude or hinder the ongoing cooperation at the Transatlantic level. A more effective, capable and resilient EU in the multiple fields that are relevant to security and defense would be a welcome addition to NATO as well as a good thing in themselves, and would be appreciated in Washington as a tangible change of course. Instead, concentrating on autonomy and sovereignty without first allocating adequate resources and making the necessary decisionmaking arrangements in Brussels is a bit like putting the cart before the horse.

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This reasoning is reinforced by the lessons of European military transfers to Ukraine, with the rapid depletion of existing stocks: defense industries in Europe cannot become more productive until procurement remains purely nationally oriented.

There is also an underappreciated EU dimension to the ongoing conflict for the future of Ukraine: back in 2013-14, few in Brussels seemed to fully realize the extent to which the Association Agreement with Kyiv was seen as an almost existential threat by Vladimir Putin, or at least as a hostile bid. The first invasion of Ukraine was in fact launched as partly a reaction to the “Maidan revolution”, in which it was EU flags that protesters were waving – not NATO or US flags. An economic move by the European Union did produce major geopolitical consequences: this is a lesson worth learning, looking forward.

## **Adjusting the EU model for a more secure Europe**

There is a major internal challenge that will determine how the EU deals with external security issues: the underlying geoeconomic structure of the Union needs to be partly redesigned. While the EU as a whole has normally enjoyed a rather healthy balance of trade, its main economic actor, Germany, has been (proudly) recording a long series of trade surpluses – with just the most recent 2022 figures showing a trade deficit. Not only is this strong reliance on exports a constant source of friction with some of Berlin’s partners, but it has significantly affected the EU’s aggregate economic policies. In particular, heavy dependence on (cheap) Russian gas has been accompanied by growing dependence on (cheap) Chinese consumer goods and components, including important technologies. Such a combination cannot fail to have consequences on foreign and security policy in the broadest sense, complicating the indispensable Transatlantic dialogue at various levels. The significant change of tone in Germany’s statements since last February, especially on defense commitments and energy issues, have been welcome in most European capitals as well as in Washington, but it is too early to say whether we are at an inflection point and whether the key EU members will accept difficult compromises and make sufficient mutual concessions in order to achieve common objectives.

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In addition to the legacy of economic arrangements that underestimated the reality of political risk, the EU's vaunted internal market is actually an incomplete project, with defense and energy being conspicuous exceptions to economic integration. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis dramatically highlighted the lack of a common health policy and even of basic elements of coordination within the Union, although it then produced a common reaction and the Recovery Fund. Yet, new divisions are apparent in facing the energy crisis and its repercussions. A fully functioning internal market and common policies are exactly what would be needed to manage supply chain disruptions, the shift to a new energy mix, the complex effects of economic sanctions and counter-sanctions, as well as unexpected crises like the pandemic. And, of course, defense capabilities critically rely on strategic technologies and long-term industrial policies with the related investments.

In sum, in order to make a better contribution to the European security architecture the EU also has to improve and reform its internal functioning as regards economic coordination and policy coherence more broadly. Rethinking certain aspects of its growth model is also a priority, in light of a global system that has become less benign than just a few years ago.

The EU's enlargement process has been instrumental to the "fair weather" approach adopted by Brussels over the past several years, to the point of almost acting as a substitute for foreign policy in and around Europe. The idea was that by gradually expanding the area where EU rules are directly applied the EU could act as a "normative power" or, a bit more modestly, a "standard setter". By keeping the process open, despite its technical complexity and the requirement of unanimity for any new accession, the Union hoped to offer a model for others to adopt or emulate – and indeed the EU's attractiveness is beyond doubt, if one only looks at the candidates' waiting list as well as migratory flows. Such power of attraction is not confined to traditional policy frameworks like basic civil rights and the generous welfare state but extends to more innovative areas like privacy protection and the promotion of the green transition – as epitomized in the notion of a "green and global Europe" to borrow from a recent book by Nathalie Tocci.

The problem with this approach, however, becomes apparent when the weather turns bad or even stormy, as in the case of Russian aggression against Ukraine. In times of

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acute crisis, no amount of “normative power” or other forms of soft power can make a difference by themselves. Being a security provider requires readily available and well tested capabilities and decisionmaking arrangements that are still lacking. In this context, it is of great importance that the European offer of candidate status to Kyiv be treated as a serious commitment and not just a statement of principle.

Under the pressure of recent events, EU members have also come to better appreciate the importance of the unique contribution that non-EU partners could make to joint efforts, especially looking at the UK and Turkey. This was the logic behind the launch of a complex exercise in October 2022 under the name of “European Political Community” (EPC) – essentially a pan-European forum minus Russia and Belarus. Self-styled as a “platform for political coordination”, the 44-member gathering in Prague reflected a growing concern with the paralysis of OSCE but also with the inherent limitations of EU enlargement (as well as NATO enlargement) as the only framework for pan-European security cooperation.

In other terms: EPC will work if it is not conceived as an alternative to all future enlargements but as a soft security cooperation forum, allowing Turkey and the UK to remain part of the evolving continental security architecture and allowing candidates and future members to cooperate on specific issues even as the accession process is incomplete.

## **The global context of European security**

The European security architecture has become more contested and uncertain than before, especially in its pan-European version – which, to be fair, was always going to be very challenging. Now, more than ever, the continental security setup must be viewed in a global context, as its future is inextricably linked to growing American commitments in the Indo-Pacific, to the evolution of the entire MENA region, and to emerging dynamics in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Indo-Pacific focus of US security policies is a fundamental shift, but hardly a sudden surprise given that it has been in the offing since the Obama years and has been systematically articulated in various official documents. What has been less clearly articulated, and possibly misunderstood in Europe, is the meaning of a new

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Pacific strategy for the rest of the world. Especially under the Biden administration, Washington has been pursuing a policy that, in EU parlance, could be defined as simultaneously of “widening and deepening”: it consists of acquiring new partners in rather flexible coalitions (the most consequential being India, in an ideal scenario) and cultivating closer ties with established allies. In this context, NATO is going to remain a unique organization but the level of cooperation with some US partners in the Indo-Pacific will probably be comparable with what NATO allies are used to.

In parallel, Washington will expect from its European allies a willingness to take on additional responsibilities in and around the Old Continent – in terms of tangible operational capabilities, not lengthy statements on “strategic autonomy”. Practical help around the Strait of Malacca or the Taiwan Strait would be welcome, but the key European contribution to international security should be around the Bosphorus, Suez and perhaps Hormuz. Here we can envisage the contours of a new Transatlantic division of labour, also based on the observation that regional, macro-regional and global security developments are often interlinked.

As is well known, both China and Russia have been raising their profile in the MENA region – albeit in different ways, so far – while the G7 and even to some extent the G20 (where the European presence is essential) have been mobilized to counter Russia’s tragic Ukraine adventure and to manage some of its worst repercussions. These are all signs that the European security architecture cannot be seen in isolation: there is no alternative to looking simultaneously inward and outward to address the multiple challenges we face.