

Russia's War Against Ukraine is Changing Europe's Strategic Culture

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Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine has led to a turning point in Europe's thinking on security and defence. The EU's decision to finance the supply of lethal arms and equipment to Ukraine, along with Germany's and other countries' announcement to massively increase military spending, marks a remarkable reversal in Europe's strategic culture.

The shockwaves of war

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched an unprovoked war against Ukraine. This follows weeks of speculation about the purpose of the Kremlin's [military build-up](#) along the Ukrainian border, which [began](#) in late 2021. The masks have come off, war has shown its ugly face in Europe, and casualties among civilians are rising day by day.

Despite Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014 and the conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions ever since, Europe hoped until the very end that Russia's military build-up was simply a tool to coerce the West and Ukraine into providing diplomatic concessions related to Europe's security order and NATO enlargement. Russia had also built up its forces along the Ukrainian border temporarily in spring 2021 and, by doing so, gained a [bilateral meeting](#) between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Putin in Geneva, Switzerland.

Russia's decision to go to war in Ukraine sent

shockwaves through Europe's political and military elite, causing both massive and sudden changes in Europe's strategic culture. The EU has shown remarkable unity in the face of Russia's aggression and agreed to [unprecedented sanctions](#) and other restrictive measures against Russia: from suspending broadcasting activities within the EU of Russian state-backed media outlets to banning seven Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment system. [Germany](#) has also announced that it will increase its defence spending massively and created a special fund of the amount of €100bn to achieve NATO's 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) defence spending target. Other countries, such as Austria, will follow.

To help Ukraine defend its sovereignty, multiple European countries have decided to provide lethal military aid to Ukraine. Poland is also considering providing [fighter jets](#) to Ukraine to support Kiev in its war effort. Perhaps most strikingly, the EU has agreed to provide a €450 million [lethal arms support package](#) to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (EPF). This is the first time ever that the Union has approved the supply of lethal weapons to a third country fighting a war.

Europe's changed strategic culture

Within the space of a week, we have observed a revolution in the entire underlying culture that has guided the discussions on national and EU security and defence policies since the end of the Cold War.

The EU has now shown that it can speak the language of power and take substantial geopolitical action, not only in the field of geoeconomics, but also in the field of security and defence. The development of the EU's Common Security and Defence policy (CSDP) has until now focused mainly on low-key crisis management operations in Europe's neighbourhood and joint capability development projects.

Against all the suffering and losses of the current war, this change in the EU's strategic culture is also good news for all those who have called for the Union to evolve in the direction of a Defence Union. The EPF decision in particular increases indirectly also the credibility of the EU's own mutual assistance clause ([Article 42\(7\)](#) of the Treaty on EU), which states 'if a member state is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.' So far, Article 42(7) TEU has been invoked only once [by France in 2015](#). After the Paris terror attacks, France requested other EU countries to contribute to various crisis management operations so that France itself could focus on the fight against ISIS.

The EU's decision to provide lethal military aid to Ukraine also increases the Union's attractiveness as a security and defence partner to countries in other regions – and will be carefully watched by both like-minded countries, i.e., in the Indo-Pacific, as well as by its opponents, in particular China. In February, the EU decided to extend its Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept to the [North-Western Indian Ocean](#) to have a permanent naval presence in the Indo-Pacific and to contribute to its security and stability. The EU's partners in the region are now likely to see that the EU is able to act decisively enough to be considered a global actor. And the harsh and rapidly-imposed economic sanction regime, in which major democratic powers in Asia such as Japan and South Korea joined in, contributed to this.

Implications for the Strategic Compass

Given that events are now moving rapidly and political realities are changing quickly, the EU should *not*

rush to adopt the Strategic Compass, which will set new goals and targets for the Union's security and defence policy and guide its development until 2030. At the time of writing, it seems that the member states are planning to stick to the original schedule and adopt the document in March, despite Russia's war against Ukraine. There are some worries that the EU would look weak if the adoption of the Strategic Compass would be delayed at this critical moment in time.

However, if the earlier drafts of the Strategic Compass are not sufficiently revised, the document will look outdated from the moment it is adopted. The member states and the European External Action Service (EEAS) should therefore develop additional proposals when it comes to provision of mutual aid and assistance through Article 42(7) TEU or Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) –the solidarity clause–. The latter article has never been invoked; it is designed to be used in a natural or man-made disaster and also involves EU institutions, unlike Article 42(7).

In addition, the Strategic Compass should be clearer on how the EU can provide support to its partners engaged in a conflict. If there is not enough time to sufficiently revise the Strategic Compass, then its adoption should be postponed. The EU will look weaker if it adopts a document that does not reflect current security and defence political realities.

But to truly root a different security culture into European policy and societies, it will take more than this. Other democratic nations, such as in the Indo-Pacific, have already acknowledged years ago the grim reality of the rise of authoritarian regimes and their revisionist policies. For too long, Europeans have tried to ignore that violence and war have always been a reality in international policies – and have sheltered under the illusions of "eternal peace". Without broad support from European society and a comprehensive approach across different policy fields (i.e., in energy and trade policy), increased defence spending will fall short of expectations and will not strengthen Europe's role in maintaining a rules-based international order. The debate on whether and how to re-prioritise and adjust policies in the EU has just started.

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