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Crisis in the Neighbourhood: A New Impetus for European Defence

Former Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eysens¹ once described the European Union as “an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military worm”. This could not reflect today’s reality better in light of the Russia–Ukraine war in its immediate neighbourhood. The EU as a socio-economic and political construct is also more of a crisis-follower/manager than a crisis preventer. There is no better time than now, to seriously talk about strategic autonomy, but what does this mean?

One of the first instances strategic autonomy was mentioned in a high-level political speech, was by Emmanuel Macron President of France in September 2017 at the Université de Sorbonne.² The President talked about creating a common strategic culture to work together. His vision involves not only grand ideas, but practical and institutional realities, such as the European Intervention Initiative³ (EI2) including a common intervention force with a joint budget involving a doctrine for action. Overcoming this requires a lot of patience and planning from member states; however, the main obstacle needs to be overcome: trust issues. While member states and institutions struggle with maintaining a functional institutional memory their lack of trust in each other is a strong hindering factor. Different historical, political and cultural ways of interpreting the world also define how they work (together) and what interests they follow. Creating strategic autonomy would mean that EU institutions and member states would coordinate much better in the area of security and defence, placing the common interest of citizens and the EU27 above personal ones.

The EU needs to become strategic in thinking and autonomous in operation. The former, meaning it needs to plan ahead and use all tools at its disposal, while the latter meaning not giving in to great power contestation (from the U.S., Russia or China) and foreign interests. The Russia-initiated war, following the fourth sanctions package from the Council and the heavy reliance on

¹ Mark Leonard: *Europe for Itself*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 24 June 2018.

² Ouest France: *Sorbonne Speech of Emmanuel Macron*. 26 September 2017.

³ House of Commons Library: *The European Intervention Initiative (EI1/EI2)*. 23 September 2019.

Russian energy sources point to a certain naïveté of politics, where nobody really calculated with an open conflict (except for U.S. intelligence⁴). Eurocrats and many European politicians were in the bubble of wishful thinking, that business-as-usual can continue with Russia indefinitely. There was no long-term plan or strategy on what energy independence entails and how to define political relations with Russia (unfortunately not even in NATO⁵).

The increasingly weakening security situation changed priorities, where Germany declared an enormous increase in defence spending, France tries to push for pragmatic diplomacy, while border countries like the Baltics, the V4 are all talking about spending more on security and strengthening NATO. While the transatlantic defence umbrella shows its real value, it is important to put European interests first and not let superpowers dictate the terms of the European security structure. Geography matters, which is why those countries closer to Russia see and act differently – more pragmatically and cautiously – than those who are further away from the conflict.

There is no justification for starting a war against another country and the responsibility lies with Russia which made the ultimate decision on launching a military campaign; the relationship with Russia was mismanaged⁶ for decades, as Robert Gates Secretary of Defence for President Bush and Obama said. Political meddling⁷ in Ukraine both from the side of the U.S. and Russia created an imagined reality⁸ in which the Cold War contestation was revisited, as there was less interest in what the Ukrainian society had to say. The détente in the early 1990s with Gorbachev would have been a window of opportunity to change the U.S. vs. Them narrative and to create a new long-lasting cooperation instead of perpetuating an image of a long-gone Russian Empire. The hastily given⁹ European perspective for Ukraine shows the lack of long-term neighbourhood strategy, just as it happened with the Western Balkans. The usual technical-bureaucratic process applies very differently – if at all – for conflict-ridden, multi-ethnic countries and regions requiring a more delicate

⁴ Alberto Nardelli – Jennifer Jacobs – Kitty Donaldson: [U.S. Spies Made Right Call on Russia Invasion, Buying Biden Time](#). *Bloomberg*, 24 February 2022.

⁵ BBC: [Nato Expels Eight Russians from Its Mission For Spying](#). *BBC*, 07 October 2021.

⁶ Ted Galen Carpenter: [Ignored Warnings: How NATO Expansion Led to the Current Ukraine Tragedy](#). *Cato Institute*, 24 February 2022.

⁷ Ted Galen Carpenter: [America's Ukraine Hypocrisy](#). *Cato Institute*, 06 August 2017.

⁸ Thomas L. Friedman: [Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X](#). *The New York Times*, 02 May 1998.

⁹ Cornelius Hirsch: [Europeans Support Ukraine Joining the EU – but not yet](#). *Politico*, 16 May 2022.

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policy approach than with the Big Bang enlargement in 2004. EU accession needs to be adjusted to these new realities.

To become a credible power, the EU will first need to take itself and its own security and defence seriously. This should include applying new technologies and reforming institutions that are more resilient to threats, creating a reality that the EU cannot be divided. Ukraine and the Western Balkans need to be given a credible European economic perspective. The EU started out as a peace project; however, in a world full of contestation people feel that it will need to become a defence one¹⁰ too, which should not lead to a creation of “fortress Europe”, but a “fortified Europe”. It will all come down to political will.

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¹⁰ Jolyon Howorth: European Defence Policy and Subsidiarity: The Imperative of the EU Level. *European View*, 18, no. 1 (2019).