



The Paradox of Europe's Defense Moment

Nathalie Tocci



The war in Ukraine has been a wakeup call for European countries, alerting them to the reality that defense matters. But do some recent promising steps in the right direction actually signal a revival of the European Union's drive for strategic autonomy and a security and defense union? And will it lead to greater defense cooperation and integration? In terms of European defense capacities and operational action, it is a mixed bag, at best.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 came as a bombshell to Europe. After decades of relative peace and prosperity, the Russo-Ukrainian war has brought back horrors to Europe that echo the continent's dark past. Europeans get it. Most governments and publics understand that this war represents a turning point in European history. It is a rude awakening to the reality that defense matters. However, it bears asking how deep and widespread this acknowledgement is and what its implications are for the defense of Europe, European defense, and the trans-Atlantic partnership.

Europe's Watershed Moment

The military invasion, occupation, and illegal annexation of the territory of an independent country driven by fascistic imperial fervor is something that Europeans believed belonged to the past. It is true that, since World War II, the world, including Europe and its troubled neighbors, has seen far too many wars and atrocities. The wars in the Balkans, Africa, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Asia have demonstrated that peace is not a given. It is also true that European countries, much like America, are partly to blame, with their overt misdeeds and covert complicity, for many of the violations of rights and international humanitarian and human rights law that humanity has suffered over the years. Yet, an ideologically driven global power waging a conventional war under a nuclear umbrella to take over an independent state is something that Europe had not seen since World War II.

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war dealt the final blow to Europe's faltering security

architecture and the ironclad belief that interdependence, while not a silver bullet for preventing all conflicts, would at least help to mitigate them. This is the premise on which the European project was built and the conviction that has guided its internal integration and external role in the world over the last seven decades. The war has also further shaken the normative foundations of the multilateral system, which is based on sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition, the Kremlin's threats that it will do whatever it takes to win this war — indiscriminately killing civilians, attacking critical infrastructure, and threatening nuclear Armageddon — imply that the international order, including what was painstakingly built over decades of arms control agreements and non-proliferation diplomacy, risks being destroyed.¹ As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz put it at the outset of the war, Russia's invasion marks a *Zeitenwende*, a watershed moment in history.²

Oftentimes, a watershed moment is the culmination of a dynamic that was already present. In this case, Europe's security order showed signs that it was broken well before Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022. It was clear that it was broken in the 2000s, when Russia invaded Georgia and began weaponizing energy vis-à-vis Ukraine. It was evident in the 2010s, when the Arab Spring quickly slipped into a long dark winter, jihadi terrorism shook European cities, and Russia annexed Crimea and intervened in eastern Ukraine. Its broken state was once again made obvious in the 2020s with the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought home to European countries that interdependence, especially with China, is not just a source of peace and prosperity, but also a cause of insecurity.

The gradual realization that Europe was no

1 Jessie Yeung and Katharina Krebs, "Ukraine War Is Going to 'Take a While,' Putin Says as He Warns Nuclear Risk Is Increasing," CNN, Dec. 8, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/07/europe/putin-ukraine-russia-nuclear-intl-hnk/index.html>.

2 Olaf Scholz, "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin," Bundesregierung, Feb. 27, 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

longer so prosperous, free, and secure as its first security strategy claimed two decades ago,³ and that it could not take these public goods for granted, meant that, since the mid-2010s, defense has become a topic of somewhat more serious conversation in Europe. This “seriousness” has meant that European leaders have been talking a great deal about the subject. They agreed that Europe had to assume more responsibility for its security and defense, a call that was also heard from across the Atlantic — from the gentle nudges from the Obama administrations to the threats made by President Donald Trump, who went so far as to call into question America’s security guarantee to Europe, which forms the bedrock of NATO’s collective defense.⁴ European leaders disagreed on whether taking on such defense responsibility implied “strategic autonomy,” as the European Union’s global strategy posited, an autonomy that French President Emmanuel Macron was in support of.⁵ This disagreement was evidence of a lively debate that European officials and pundits felt passionately about, at times to the amazement of friends across the Atlantic.⁶

During this time, national defense budgets, while generally remaining far below the 2 percent mark pledged at the NATO Wales summit in 2014, did start to increase. Between 2014 and 2022, defense expenditure by NATO members rose by approximately \$140 billion (15 percent).⁷ By 2022, nine out of 30 NATO allies had met the 2 percent target, up from three in 2014.⁸ The European Union, which had traditionally considered “defense” to be a dirty word, cobbled together a European Defence Fund in 2020. While standing “only” at €8 billion for 2021–2027, a figure that pales in comparison with European national defense budgets, not to mention America’s, the fund matches the national research and development budget of a sizeable E.U.

member state.⁹ The European Commission is now the third-largest investor in defense technologies in the European Union, after France and Germany.

The European Defence Fund was designed to induce joint European defense research and capability development, serving both the aim of spending more and, more importantly, of spending better and therefore spending together. In the years following the 2016 E.U. global strategy, the European Union finally approved the Permanent Structured Cooperation between member states, an article that already existed in its treaty but had never been activated. By creating the legal and institutional framework for willing and able member states to cooperate on specific defense projects, the Permanent Structured Cooperation was supposed to enable its members — and, after fraught negotiations, third-state partners — to take joint steps forward on defense. All of this, went the narrative, would also be a boon for NATO. The most frequently cited example to illustrate this point is military mobility, a European defense project that would also benefit NATO.¹⁰ Testifying to this benefit is the involvement of the United States, Canada, and Norway in this project, more recently followed by the United Kingdom, notwithstanding the tension in E.U.-U.K. relations since Brexit.

Yet, Europe’s defense impulse, which was strongest between 2014 and 2018, started to lag. Much like the 1950s, when Europe’s plans for a defense community hit the brick wall of French resistance, and the 2000s, when the nascent Common Security and Defence Policy started running out of steam,¹¹ by the turn of the last decade Europe’s grand plans for strategic autonomy and a security and defense union began to ring hollow. Once funds were approved, instruments created, and mechanisms established, European countries were left with the uncomfortable option of

3 *European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World*, Council of the European Union, 2003, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf>.

4 Robert Gates, “Text of Speech by Robert Gates on the Future of NATO,” Atlantic Council, June 10, 2011, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/text-of-speech-by-robert-gates-on-the-future-of-nato/>; and Rosy Gray, “Trump Declines to Affirm NATO’s Article 5,” *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/trump-declines-to-affirm-natos-article-5/528129/>.

5 *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, European External Action Service, June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf; and Emmanuel Macron, “Sorbonne Speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full Text/English Version,” *Ouest France*, May 26, 2017, <https://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.

6 Nathalie Tocci, “European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It,” *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, Feb. 26, 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/european-strategic-autonomy-what-it-is-why-we-need-it-how-achieve-it>.

7 “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2022),” NATO Press Release, June 27, 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220627-def-exp-2022-en.pdf

8 NATO, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2022).”

9 Annual research and development spending in Europe was around € 8.8 bn in 2021.

10 Isabella Antinozzi, “UK–EU Defence Cooperation and PESCO’s Military Mobility Project,” *RUSI*, Nov. 17, 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uk-eu-defence-cooperation-and-pescos-military-mobility-project>.

11 Sven Biscop and Jo Coelmont, “A Strategy for CSDP - Europe’s Ambitions as a Global Security Provider,” Egmont, Paper No. 37, October 2010.

actually acting. This they remained reluctant to do. There was underwhelming action taken in terms of joint spending on new military capabilities, and there was even less joint operational action to address the metastasizing conflicts to the European Union's east and south. European leaders kept talking about defense, compiling and negotiating documents like the "Strategic Compass of the EU,"¹² while the United States increasingly took a back seat in its presence and influence in Europe's neighborhood. Other players, like Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf countries, actually acted, displaying increasing assertiveness and at times aggressiveness in the region, both directly and through the use of proxies. Unsurprisingly, they did not do so in Europe's interest.

It is against this backdrop that Russia invaded Ukraine, forcing European leaders to make the move from talking the talk to walking the walk when it comes to defense. Many European countries signaled that they would increase their defense budgets. The few countries that were already serious about defense and had a strong strategic culture became even more so: France announced plans to increase its defense budget by 7.4 percent year on year, reaching the 2 percent GDP mark in 2023,¹³ and the United Kingdom, already spending more than 2 percent, approved a trajectory that would see its defense budget rise to 3 percent of GDP.¹⁴ Countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania, as well as the Baltic and Nordic countries, all announced plans to increase their defense spending to 2 percent or more.¹⁵ The laggards have stepped forward too. Most significant is Germany's announcement of an additional €100 billion in defense spending in 2022, bringing its defense budget to 1.6 percent of GDP and putting it on a trajectory to reach the 2 percent goal.¹⁶

In addition, E.U. member states activated the

European Peace Facility to channel military assistance to Ukraine. They first approved €2.5 billion for seven years, but had already spent most of this by late 2022, when they negotiated an increase, bringing the total to €5.5 billion, as well as approving a military mission aimed at training 15,000 Ukrainian soldiers in the European Union.¹⁷ While this may seem underwhelming compared to the \$50 billion in assistance approved by the U.S. Congress,¹⁸ it represents an unprecedented move. It is the first time that European institutions have directly provided military assistance (including lethal aid) to a state, on top of finally ending their resistance to getting involved militarily in support of a third state at war. In other words, Europeans have begun to put their money where their mouth is in terms of defense. There is no doubt that the Ukraine war represents a defense *Zeitenwende* in Europe.

The Defense of Europe or European Defense?

Despite these promising steps, does Europe's defense *Zeitenwende* actually signal a revival of the European Union's drive for strategic autonomy and a security and defense union? Will it lead to greater defense cooperation and integration? In terms of European defense capacities and operational action, it is a mixed bag, at best.

First, it is true that defense spending is increasing overall, with the European Commission estimating a total of €200 billion in increased European defense budgets in the coming years.¹⁹ But spending is not on the rise everywhere. There are stark differences in defense spending between eastern and northern member states, which are closer to the frontline of the Ukraine war, and southern and western member states, which feel less threatened by Russia. This also reflects the different attitudes

12 "The Strategic Compass of the EU," Council of the European Union, March 21, 2022, <https://www.strategic-compass-european-union.com/>.

13 Vivienne Machi, "French 2023 Defense Budget Adds \$3 Billion to Fund 'War Economy,'" *Defense News*, Sept. 28, 2022, <https://www.defense-news.com/global/europe/2022/09/28/french-2023-defense-budget-adds-3-billion-to-fund-war-economy/>; and Laurent Lagneau, "La France pourrait augmenter ses dépenses militaires d'environ 30% sur la période 2024-31," *Opex360*, Sept. 28, 2022, <https://www.opex360.com/2022/09/28/la-france-pourrait-augmenter-ses-depenses-militaires-denviron-30-sur-la-periode-2024-31/>.

14 Malcolm Chalmers, "From Famine to Feast: The Implications of 3% for the UK Defence Budget," RUSI, Sept. 2, 2022, <https://rusi.org/ex-plore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/famine-feast-implications-3-uk-defence-budget>

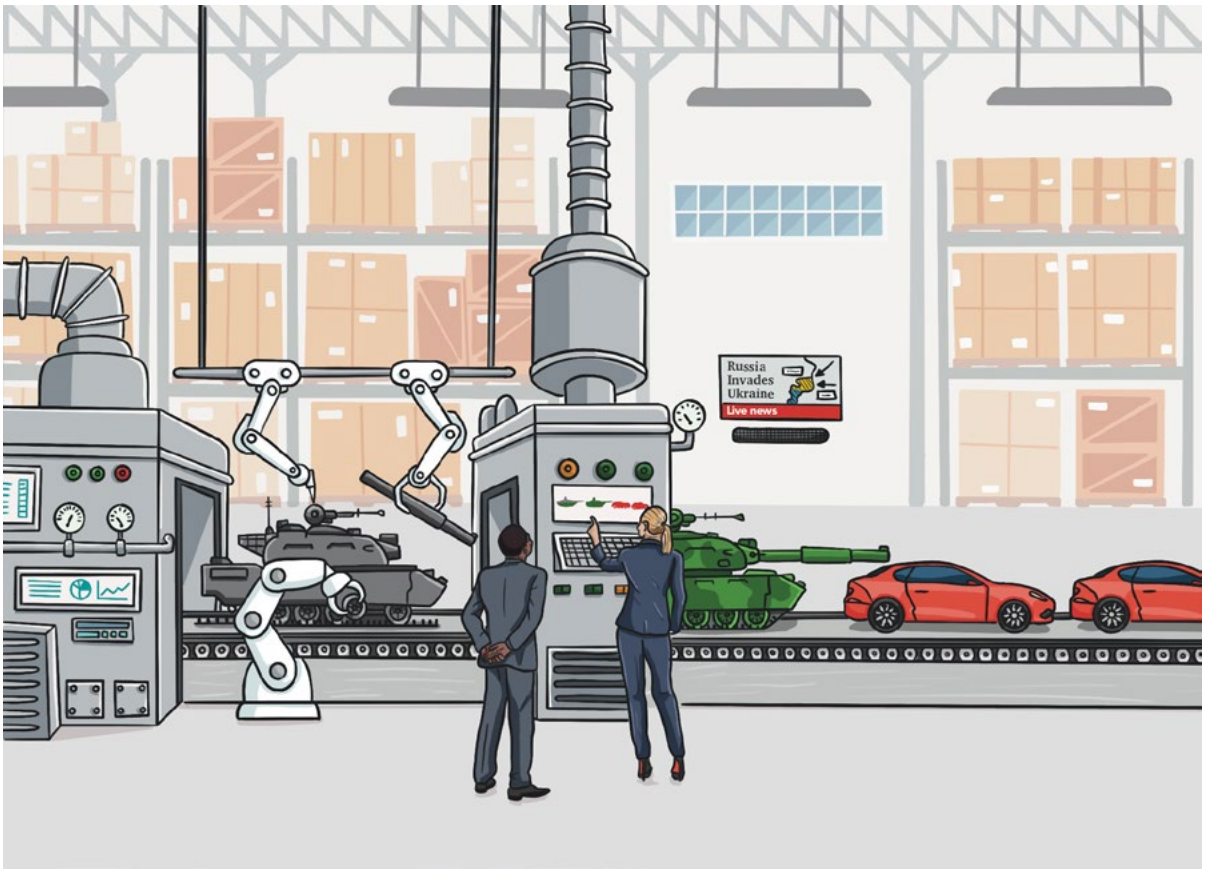
15 Christina Mackenzie, "Seven European Nations Have Increased Defence Budgets in One Month. Who Will Be Next?" *Breaking Defense*, March 22, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/seven-european-nations-have-increased-defense-budgets-in-one-month-who-will-be-next/>.

16 Holger Hansen, "German Lawmakers Approve 100 Billion Euro Military Revamp," *Reuters*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-lawmakers-approve-100-bl-euro-military-revamp-2022-06-03/>.

17 "EU Council to Increase European Peace Facility Fund Used to Provide Arms to Ukraine by 2 Billion Euros," *Kyiv Independent*, Dec. 12, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/news-feed/eu-council-to-increase-european-peace-facility-fund-used-to-provide-arms-to-ukraine-by-2-billion-euros>.

18 Jonathan Masters and Will Mellow, "How Much Aid Has the US Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts." Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 16, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts>.

19 "Collective Defence Investment: Europe Must Do More and at a Faster Pace," *Euractiv*, Nov. 7, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/opinion/collective-defence-investment-europe-must-do-more-and-at-a-faster-pace/>.



across the European Union when it comes to supporting Ukraine.²⁰ Furthermore, the hikes in spending may not achieve the objectives and respect the timetables that have been set out by leaders. The German Economic Institute reported that Berlin is not actually poised to hit the 2 percent target: The country is expected to be short €18 billion in 2023. Germany's spending plans are projected to remain below the announced targets until 2027. After that, either new funds will be pledged or defense spending will fall back to around 1.2 percent.²¹

In addition, new financial clouds are gathering, including inflation that is corroding the value of real spending, as well as an energy and economic crisis that risks both diverting funds to other public policy priorities and reducing states' fiscal

space to maneuver. In Germany, it is notable that, whereas Berlin pledged €100 billion of additional spending on defense, it announced that it would spend double that amount to subsidize consumers' energy bills.²² Europe as a whole — including the United Kingdom and Norway — already spent €600 billion to shield consumers from soaring utility bills between September 2021 and October 2022.²³ By way of comparison, NextGenerationEU, the European Union's post-pandemic recovery plan, would disperse €807 billion over the seven-year budget cycle.²⁴ Now a recession is looming on the horizon. When it hits, it remains to be seen how deep and long it will be, and whether governments will be able — socially, politically, and economically — to maintain their increased defense spending.

20 "Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine," European Parliament, Oct. 6, 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine-20221006.pdf>

21 Carlo Martuscelli, "Germany to Miss 2 Percent NATO Defense Spending Target: Think Tank," *Politico*, Aug. 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-to-miss-2-percent-nato-defense-spending-target-think-tank/>; Klaus-Heiner Röhl, Hubertus Bardt, and Barbara Engels, "Zeitenwende für die Verteidigungswirtschaft," *IW Köln*, Aug. 15, 2022, <https://www.iwkoeln.de/studien/klaus-heiner-roehl-hubertus-bardt-barbara-engels-sicherheitspolitik-und-verteidigungsfahigkeit-nach-der-russischen-invasion-der-ukraine.html>.

22 "German Parliament Approves €200-billion Energy Relief Plan," *DW*, Oct. 21, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-parliament-approves-200-billion-energy-relief-plan/a-63517489>.

23 Giovanni Sgaravatti, Simone Tagliapietra, and Georg Zachmann, "National Fiscal Policy Responses to the Energy Crisis," *Bruegel Datasets*, Nov. 29, 2022, <https://www.bruegel.org/node/7844>.

24 "Recovery Plan for Europe," European Commission, accessed Jan. 12, 2022, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/recovery-plan-europe_en.

Second, to the extent that new spending on defense is actually taking place, it will not necessarily strengthen Europe's military capacity. European states are investing in available weapons systems and platforms, especially those that have long been identified as being in short supply or that have become more critical. France and Germany are buying helicopters and armored vehicles, while eastern European countries like Poland are massively investing in replacing the Soviet weapon systems that they have sent to Ukraine.²⁵ Their military assistance to Ukraine is creating a national defense emergency in each country, which they are addressing by buying whatever is available.²⁶ In some cases, European countries are identifying European solutions. Where European acquisitions were already ongoing, such as those from the European missile consortium MBDA, increased defense spending is incentivizing the development of European defense capacities. Other mini-lateral defense initiatives are emerging, such as the defense pacts between France and Greece or between the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Finland, which could eventually lead to the development of new European military capacities.²⁷

However, in many cases Europe's industrial capacities are either nonexistent or insufficient to meet this surge in defense demand, as is the case with next-generation main battle tanks and some air defense systems. European defense companies also question whether the rise in funding will persist and make it worthwhile for them to invest in new production lines. Germany, for instance, urgently needs to replace its obsolete nuclear-capable Tornado fighter jets. The absence of advanced European alternatives, such as the Franco-German Future Combat Air System or the British-Italian-Swedish Tempest, which are still under development, obliges European countries to look beyond Europe's borders to meet demand. This, among other considerations, is driving Germany, Switzer-

land, Finland, and Poland to buy American F-35s, putting them in line behind the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway.²⁸ European countries are not only "Buying American," they are also buying military capabilities from other countries like South Korea and Israel.²⁹ The uptick in European defense spending is — perhaps inevitably — concentrated on the short term and thus is not spurring the long-term development of European defense capacities or the acquisition of European defense equipment. In the urgency of the moment, Europeans are buying what is available, can be delivered on time, and is cheaper, and this often leads them away from Europe.

Third, insofar as Europe's defense moment translates into greater spending on non-European defense capacities, the main malady of European defense — fragmentation — risks being exacerbated, with short-term uncoordinated national procurement decisions having long-term impacts on the composition of the armed forces. Defense fragmentation is a major problem in Europe, with around 90 percent of investments spent on national defense industries. Spending more on defense does not necessarily mean spending better. In order for Europeans to become more capable when it comes to defense, they both need to spend *more* and spend *together* to address the gaps, duplications, and unrealized economies of scale that riddle the European defense field. All of the E.U. defense mechanisms and funds set up in recent years — from the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, to Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund — are aimed at this two-pronged goal.³⁰ Some interesting initiatives are underway, such as the European Patrol Corvette or the EUROMALE, which produces medium-altitude, long-endurance drones. Furthermore, since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, E.U. institutions have presented new initiatives

25 Rojoef Manuel, "Poland, South Korea Ink \$5.7 Billion Main Battle Tank and Howitzer Deal," *Defense Post*, Aug. 30, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/08/30/poland-south-korea-tank-howitzer/>.

26 Michelangelo Freyrie, "Difesa europea a corto: le sfide degli aiuti militari all'Ucraina," *Affari Internazionali*, Sept. 19, 2022, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/difesa-europea-a-corto-le-sfide-degli-aiuti-militari-allucraina/>.

27 "Greek Parliament Approves Defence Pact with France," *Reuters*, Oct. 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-france-defence-pact-protects-against-third-party-aggression-greek-pm-2021-10-07/>; and Anne Kauranen, "UK Strikes New Security Agreement with Sweden and Finland," *Reuters*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uk-strikes-new-security-agreement-with-sweden-finland-2022-05-11/>.

28 Constantine Atlamazoglou, "Why the F-35 Is at the Top of the Shopping List for Militaries in Europe," *Business Insider*, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/militaries-in-europe-are-buying-the-f35-fighter-jet-2022-2>; and "Germany to Buy 35 Lockheed F-35 Fighter Jets from U.S. Amid Ukraine Crisis," *Reuters*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-decides-principle-buy-f-35-fighter-jet-government-source-2022-03-14/>.

29 Michael Nienaber, "Germany Snubs Lockheed, Opts for Israeli Air-Defense System," *Bloomberg*, Sept. 12, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-12/germany-set-to-buy-israeli-manufactured-arrow-air-defense-system>; and Sebastian Sprenger, "Scholz Revives Vision for German-led Air Defense Network in Europe," *DefenseNews*, Aug. 29, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/08/29/scholz-revives-vision-for-german-led-air-defense-network-in-europe/>.

30 Nathalie Tocci, "Towards a European Security and Defence Union: Was 2017 a Watershed?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. S1, (September 2018): 131–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12752>.

on joint defense research and technological development to address the major European shortfalls and build a more competitive European defense industrial and technological base. These include the establishment of a defense joint procurement taskforce and a new €500 million fund available in 2022–24 to coordinate and incentivize joint acquisitions. Furthermore, the European Defence Investment Programme aims to establish the European Defence Capability Consortia that would jointly procure European capacities, eventual-

shares. The good news about increased defense spending does not change this trend. Paradoxically, it is contributing to greater defense fragmentation. This means that the net effect on European defense effectiveness and efficiency is not necessarily positive. And, as discussed below, this is bad news for the United States, too.

Finally, turning from defense capacity to operations, the war has given NATO a vital new lease on life. After the end of the Cold War, NATO's attempt to reinvent itself as an out-of-area alliance failed to gain much steam. Its mixed record in the western Balkans and Western failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya added to skepticism about this new role for the alliance. Divisions within NATO itself, notably between the United States and Europe during Trump's presidency and surrounding President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's

Not only has the alliance demonstrated unprecedented unity with regard to Ukraine, but NATO has also been the key operational vehicle both for coordinating military assistance to Kyiv and for bolstering the alliance's deterrence and defense.

ly benefiting from Value Added Tax exemption. Work is also underway to explore the potential role of the European Investment Bank in the development of the European defense industry, in an effort to leverage and broaden the bank's recent opening on dual-use products.³¹

All of this is extremely important, but these mechanisms and funds are unlikely to reverse Europe's defense fragmentation. This is because these initiatives generally focus on the long-term development and procurement of European capacities. They do not, and cannot, meet the short-term drive to fill military gaps and deficiencies. Moreover, they are not a substitute for member states taking responsibility and making key decisions to invest jointly in defense. It is up to European countries — and them alone — to make major changes to their defense industries. With defense remaining a national competence for the foreseeable future, it is European countries that need to radically revise how they think and act when it comes to their multi-billion-euro national defense programs. There is only so much nudging that Brussels can do. The initiatives launched by E.U. institutions are simply too limited to break the resistance among member states to proceeding on European defense integration and to unjam stalled compromises on defense industrial work-

Turkey, fueled doubts even further. It is against this backdrop that Macron dubbed the alliance as "braindead" only a few years ago.³² The war in Ukraine has radically reversed this view. Not only has the alliance demonstrated unprecedented unity with regard to Ukraine, but NATO has also been the key operational vehicle both for coordinating military assistance to Kyiv and for bolstering the alliance's deterrence and defense. Far from being brain-dead, NATO is alive and kicking.

This does not mean that its strategic direction is set in stone. Some believe that it should focus uniquely on Russia, while others think that it should pay as much attention to China and the Indo-Pacific. NATO's 2022 "Strategic Concept" dodges a clear-cut answer to this question, prioritizing the Russian threat and therefore territorial defense as a cornerstone of the alliance, while also emphasizing the mounting challenge posed by China and the need to strengthen security in the Indo-Pacific.³³ Notwithstanding this ongoing debate within the alliance, however, what is clear is that NATO has found its primary purpose once again. It is indeed as terrifying to think what European security would look like had NATO withered away after the end of the Cold War, as it is reassuring to know that it is still there. It should come as no surprise that NATO membership is

31 "The EIB continues its support to the EU's Security and Defence Agenda," European Investment Bank, March 10, 2022, <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2022-123-the-eib-continues-its-support-to-the-eu-s-security-and-defence-agenda>.

32 "Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead," *The Economist*, Nov. 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

33 NATO 2022 *Strategic Concept*, NATO, 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>.

growing, with Sweden and Finland set to enter the alliance soon.³⁴

If NATO is to remain the key operational locus for ensuring the defense of Europe, where does this leave European defense, that is E.U. defense initiatives? The short answer is that it is not clear, although there are two main possibilities. With NATO being primarily responsible for defense and deterrence in Europe — in no small part due to America's nuclear umbrella, something that nuclear powers France and the United Kingdom could not replace — and having demonstrated its clear limits outside of Europe, the future of E.U. defense could lie beyond the continent. The 2022 U.S. *National Security Strategy* hardly mentions regional instability and crises, focusing primarily on China.³⁵ E.U. defense could play a key security role in places like north and sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps even in some areas of the Middle East, like Lebanon and Iraq. Without NATO's political-military baggage, especially in the Middle East, European defense could be better equipped than NATO, at least politically, in these regions. European countries could also play a greater role further afield in Asia. Whereas France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany have sailed and flown through the South China Sea to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight, these operations remain few and far between, and generally do not pass through the Taiwan Strait. Not only should they become regular occurrences, but they should involve other E.U. member states too.

However, there is no discernible movement in this direction. If there has been any movement, it is in the opposite direction. In Africa, for instance, France has been forced to leave Mali and thus to significantly scale back its security presence in the Sahel, indicating that European countries are not stepping up and taking on more risk and responsibility in this part of the world. Quite the opposite.

Another possibility is that European defense could provide the backbone of Europe's collective defense within NATO. In other words, the rather abstract notion of a "European pillar of NATO," often referred to but never spelled out in policy discussions over the years, could finally come about. At the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO leaders agreed on a New Force Model that would create

a pool of 300,000 troops in a high state of readiness in Europe.³⁶ This represents a massive uptick from the current 40,000 troops that are on high readiness alert in eastern Europe. Were the majority of this comprehensive force package to be European — as it should be — this would give a sense of what such a European pillar could look like. It is ironic that it may end up being NATO, and not the European Union, that does the most to build a European army, an idea that has traditionally been viewed with skepticism and scorn across the Atlantic.

However, NATO's defense planning system has been unable to prevent Europe's endemic defense fragmentation. Without E.U. support in the form of institutional, legal, and financial incentives, the risk would be that of a potpourri of incomplete national forces cobbled together by NATO. Once Sweden and Finland enter the alliance, the growing overlap between E.U. and NATO membership — with 23 out of 27 E.U. member states being NATO allies — will strengthen further the logic of the European Union providing the incentives for a cohesive and effective European pillar in NATO. Some European defense observers are arguing in favor of this, but are seasoned enough to wonder whether European countries are serious this time.³⁷ There are no concrete signals yet indicating they are. Although the "Europeanization of collective defense" sounds like an attractive proposition, it is difficult to imagine that European national contingents could constitute a coherent warfighting force by themselves. Furthermore, conventional and nuclear deterrence cannot be separated and, as mentioned above, it is the United States that provides Europe's nuclear umbrella, with discussions about a Europeanization of France's nuclear capabilities never having matured.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has done more to wake up Europeans on the subject of defense in 11 months than have years of American cajoling about burden-sharing and European grand plans for strategic autonomy. The war has shattered the foundations of European security, causing many

34 "NATO: Sweden and Finland Very Close to Joining Alliance, Blinken Says," *Euronews*, Dec. 9, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/09/nato-sweden-and-finland-very-close-to-joining-alliance-blinken-says>

35 *National Security Strategy*, The White House, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

36 "NATO to Boost Troops on High Alert to Over 300,000 –Stoltenberg," *Reuters*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-massively-increase-high-readiness-forces-300000-stoltenberg-2022-06-27/>.

37 Sven Biscop, "The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?" Egmont, Sept. 8, 2022, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/the-new-force-model-natos-european-army/>.

European governments to finally start taking defense seriously. This has translated into some concrete action, most visibly regarding defense spending, military assistance to Ukraine, and NATO's defense and deterrence. Although this is not enough, it is more action than we've seen before. This is good news.

And yet, Europe's defense moment is not necessarily strengthening European defense either in terms of industry or operational capacity. There is a serious risk that the opposite will occur in the form of a weakening of the European defense industrial and technological base and the reduction of European responsibility and risk-taking in their troubled neighborhood to the east and south. European strategic autonomy on defense remains an ever-distant chimera.

The contrast between European energy and defense is stark. In both cases, the war has been a wake-up call to European leaders. In the field of energy, the urgency to wean Europe off Russian fossil fuels in light of E.U. sanctions and Russia's weaponization of energy has led to remarkable results. In ten months, Europe's gas dependence on Russia has plummeted from 40 percent to under 9 percent, with new supplies coming from Norway, Azerbaijan, Algeria, sub-Saharan African countries, the United States, and Qatar, as well as through a new drive on renewables.³⁸ European countries are also working together to address their gas storage capacities, coordinating on reducing energy demands, and moving together to contain gas prices and jointly procure gas in the future. It is a bumpy ride ahead, but after years of talk of European energy security, resilience, and diversification, it is finally happening. Painful as it is, the war in Ukraine is strengthening European strategic autonomy when it comes to energy.

The opposite is true on defense. As with energy, the war has given rise to a European defense moment. But hardly anyone in Europe talks of European strategic autonomy in defense these days, largely because the topic had become so contentious in Washington. E.U. institutions are doing what they can to seize the moment to strengthen European defense capabilities, but there is only so much they can do. Defense remains firmly in national hands, and structural forces are not necessarily pushing European countries to work

more together. European defense spending is not strengthening European military capacities and may even lead to greater fragmentation in the splintered European defense industrial sector. In the midst of war, Europeans are relying on the only defense organization that can operationally ensure their security, and that is NATO.

This is bad news for Europe. And European governments will ultimately be responsible if they are unable to prevent the risk of European defense fragmentation from materializing. However, it is bad news for America too. The war in Ukraine has diverted America's attention back to Europe. But this is not where the United States wants to be or should be focused. With the escalating tensions between Washington and an increasingly nationalistic Beijing, and the risk of war in Asia becoming more tangible by the day, the U.S. strategic predicament is ever clearer. The *2022 National Security Strategy* indicates that America is focused primarily on China and then on Russia, and will not be able to fight two regional wars at the same time. It is therefore in America's interest to ensure a strengthening of European defense so that it can focus more on its strategic priorities in Asia. In principle, U.S. policymakers recognize this. In practice, they often stall the already complex quest for E.U. defense with warnings of duplications with NATO and concerns over U.S. industrial access to European markets. As soon as the trans-Atlantic defense conversation gets concrete, the old political instincts and institutional inertia militating against E.U. defense surface in Washington.

The headwinds against E.U. defense have always been strong. War in Ukraine has paradoxically made them stronger. Today, the increase in Europe's demand for defense is not driving a parallel surge in European supply, but rather it is increasing European dependence on the United States. This does not bode well either for European or U.S. security and could add to the trans-Atlantic tensions brewing over the Inflation Reduction Act.³⁹ A handful of Americans recognize this, seeing that it is in Washington's best interest to make Europe an ever more indispensable defense partner rather than being indispensable to Europe's defense.⁴⁰ The European Union will never become primarily responsible for collective defense, but

38 "Statement by President von der Leyen on Energy," European Commission, Sept. 7, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_5389.

39 Leigh Thomas, "Explainer: Why the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act Has Europe Up in Arms," *Reuters*, Nov. 30, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/why-us-inflation-reduction-act-has-europe-up-arms-2022-11-30/>.

40 Max Bergmann, "Europe on Its Own: Why the US Should Want a Better-Armed EU," *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 22, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/europe-its-own>; and Sandy Vershbow, et al., "Strategic Responsibility: Re-balancing European and Trans-Atlantic Defense," *Brookings*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/strategic-responsibility-rebalancing-european-and-trans-atlantic-defense/>.

it can help develop full-spectrum forces that will enable European countries to contribute more to territorial defense in the context of NATO. Unless the European Union and the United States work together, European defense will not become a reality, to the detriment of both. 🇺🇸

Nathalie Tocci is director of the *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, honorary professor at the University of Tübingen, independent and non-executive board member of the energy company *Eni*, and Europe's Futures fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (*Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, IWM*). She has been special adviser to E.U. High Representatives *Federica Mogherini* and *Josep Borrell*. In that capacity, she wrote the European Global Strategy and worked on its implementation.

Image: European Defence Agency (CC BY-SA 2.0)⁴¹

41 For the image, see: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eudefenceagency/14557213832>. For the license, see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>.