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Article

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The EU's Ukraine Watershed: Fast Forward to European Defence Union

Beyond the implications of the war in Ukraine for energy resources, migration, food security and value chains, it has led to major shifts in the EU's security and defence orientation. These have been accompanied by developments at the member state level that suggest a gradual converging of strategic cultures, with industrial, institutional and operational implications for EU security.

The ideological debate on how to respond, first to troop build-up and then full-blown invasion, boiled down to a clash between realists and liberals. The former have argued that it is inevitable that great power blocs be accorded spheres of influence in which grey zone buffer areas help safeguard the national security and economic interests of great powers (e.g. Russia) and the expansion into those areas (e.g. NATO enlargement) is just cause for an array of responses including armed aggression. This position, however, downgrades the opinion and actions of Ukrainians to secondary importance, arguing that war in Ukraine is first and foremost about pan-European security. Diplomatic channels were thoroughly explored in the run-up to Putin's senseless aggression, especially by those member states with strong economic ties to Russia, a high degree of energy dependence and/or large pro-Russian constituencies; these failed, however, to prevent a full-blown invasion. Unable to justify active intervention by the West for fear of nuclear escalation, realists recommended a policy of restraint, backtracking suggestions that Ukraine join NATO and negotiating limited agreements on issues such as arms control.

Since Russia's decision to up the ante with its so-called special military operation, realists have framed (re)actions by the EU and its member states beyond diplomatic efforts to change Russia's calculus as active engagement in a proxy war and strategically short-sighted. As their argument goes, the EU continues to face threats from Russia such as nuclear proliferation, disinformation and weaponised migration, and should not poke the proverbial bear. The EU will also have to manage relations with Russia long after the (literal) dust settles in Ukraine. As a result, their policy prescription is a negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia that might include armed neutrality and a return to pre-24 February frontlines along with EU/NATO/US negotiations that may explore new formats of pan-European security. In short, realists believe that the West should offer (conditional) off-ramps to Russia.

On the other hand, liberals ascribe Putin's motives to a fear that Ukrainians will continue along their path towards being a full-fledged liberal democracy and will deepen their political, security, and socioeconomic integration with the like-minded EU and US. The consolidation of freedom, the rule of law, and democracy on Russia's borders challenges the stability of Putin's regime. Indeed, Putin's declarations prior to invasion regarding the de-militarisation and "de-Nazification" of Ukraine and subsequent full-blown invasion confirm a much broader values-based motive: laying authoritarian and imperialistic claim once more to what he considers to be an integral part of Russian territory. Contrary to realists, liberals hold a strong conviction that Ukraine, and indeed EU member states along the eastern flank, maintain a degree of agency independent of powers such as Russia, the US, France and Germany. However, besides a concerted diplomatic effort led by the US to rally allies and signal to Putin that the West would be united in its response, liberals had few policy recommendations in the run-up to war. Troop numbers of NATO countries bordering Russia were bolstered, but this did not enhance Ukraine's bargaining power to avoid large-scale loss of life. While Putin paid diplomatic lip service to the West, this only served to buy time and continue military build-up on Ukraine's borders. Russia's course of action had already been set:

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Putin could only react to such a values-based threat through the so-called de-Nazifying use of force to (partially) occupy Ukraine or install a puppet government.

Believing that internal pressures – both grassroots and elite – generated by economic depravity and the internal spread of counter-narratives may force Russia to halt its senseless war, the West has agreed upon economic sanctions on Russia. Agreeing with realists that actively intervening – in defence of common values – would significantly raise the possibility of nuclear conflict, most liberals have nonetheless been vocal about supporting Ukraine by any other means necessary.

War in Ukraine has led to widespread strategic reorientation in defence of common values and interests within the EU – and a largely liberal framing and response to Russia's full-blown invasion. In terms of military assistance, EU member states have provided lethal equipment to the tune of €2 billion via the EU's European Peace Facility for the very first time. In line with a flourishing "Team Europe" logic, EU member states have also sold, leased and/or provided arms on a bilateral basis with the purpose of strengthening Ukraine's relative positioning vis-à-vis Russia in the current war. Most EU member states have contributed in some way to the delivery of anti-aircraft systems, grenade-launchers, machine guns and ammunition.

Beyond this immediate assistance to Ukraine, Putin's war has also had significant institutional effects. Denmark will hold a referendum on 1 June 2022 on its opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Although latest polls tell the story of an undecided Denmark, the change in strategic orientation is significant. Furthermore, Finland and Sweden applied for NATO accession with the aim of reinforcing Europe's immediate deterrence posture. Despite Turkish objections, they will be welcomed into the Alliance – positive both in terms of EU-NATO integration as well as enhancing Europe's ability to reinforce the Baltics and project into the Arctic.

On the industrial and capabilities development side, EU member states have committed to significant increases in their military expenditures in order to replenish and enhance their capabilities, reduce their vulnerabilities and better protect their soldiers. Germany, Denmark and Sweden have decided to meet their EU-NATO Wales Summit-enshrined goal of spending 2% of GDP on defence in the medium to long term, with Romania, Lithuania and Poland set to exceed the 2% benchmark in the coming years. Parallel to this, EU member states have committed to spend better together with a view towards improving interoperability. Further European Defence Technological and Industrial Base integration would also be essential to leverage civilian-defence industrial synergies, create economies of scale, foster strategic culture convergence and build resilience.

The latest sign from EU institutions and member states that they are serious about greater security and defence integration is the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, a roadmap for greater cooperation and coordination in crisis management, resilience building, capabilities development and partnership consolidation. The threat assessment underpinning it highlights the *Zeitenwende* (watershed) represented by war in Ukraine for the EU, and lays out a series of proposals to better place the EU as a security and defence actor. In a first push to implement the Compass after its February 2020 duo of defence-related communications, the EU has broken taboos with a proposal to coordinate joint arms procurement and investment. The proposal stretches Treaty boundaries that prevent the EU from using its common budget for military expenditures. To get around this legal obstacle, the new programme will focus on investment with industrial ambition and could finance joint purchases using innovative financial instruments.

The EU's united liberal response is grounded in the values it shares with Ukraine and opposed to the realist premise that the world be divvied up into spheres of influence. Rather than cause divisions, Putin's war has inspired even greater understanding within the EU that Europe is better together, especially in security and defence. It remains to be seen, however, how the flurry of announcements, initiatives and actions will concretely translate into tangible industrial, institutional and operational progress in what has historically been the remit of national sovereignty.

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