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Introduction

On 24 February 2022, when Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe experienced an apparent fog-clearing moment. (Besch & Quencez, 2022). For several years, the European Security debate followed a caricatured binary opposition between the US-led transatlantic security and the need for EU autonomy as a geopolitical power, partly motivated by the notion of an imminent US retreat from Europe (Tocci, 2021). Now, while the war (temporarily) restored general confidence in American commitment to European security, it also revealed how dependent European states are on the US for their defence (Puglierin, 2024). As a result, after more than two years of conflict, the subjects of the binary intellectual confrontation have emerged with more defined roles: NATO has reaffirmed its prerogative in conventional deterrence, while the EU has given proof of its crisis management abilities, primarily through financial tools (Weber, 2023). Accepting the transatlantic partnership as the sole and definitive European deterrence strategy is imprudent and short-sighted. The US' shifting priorities and waning leadership require Europe to decide on a path forward to more strategic responsibility. Among the priorities, an increased commitment to NATO is imperative – especially with a Republican in the White House. At the same time, efforts must be made to reconsider the US national commitment and investments in European deterrence, as well as the role of the EU and its initiatives.

The Atlantic Pillar: the European Contribution to NATO's Conventional Force

After the Russian Armed Forces invaded Ukraine in 2022, the European response was slow and atrophied due to decades of free-riding under American protection (Grand, 2024). It is not a matter of financial means: according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), European defence budgets combined were four times larger than Russia's in 2023 (IISS, 2024). Instead, NATO reacted by strengthening its deterrence and defence posture and reinforcing its military presence along the Alliance's eastern flank (Department of Defense, 2022). The Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) force was incremented by compounding the four existing multinational battlegroups and establishing four additional ones.[1] Additionally, in June 2022, the Alliance agreed on a new force model based on a three-tiered system providing over 300,000 high-readiness troops instead of the 40,000 previously available (Deni, 2024). NATO's conventional (and nuclear) capabilities proved to be the only credible deterrent against Russian aggressive behaviour (Weber, 2023). Because the relations with Russia will presumably remain hostile for the foreseeable future, any European deterrence strategy must embrace the Alliance's conventional forces and draw on its framework.

[1] The EFP is a NATO initiative that deploys multinational battlegroups in member states along the Eastern flank with the aim to deter aggression and reassure Allies of NATO's commitment to collective defence. The first four battlegroups were established in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in 2017. The additional battlegroups created in 2022 are deployed in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

Not only is the vast majority of NATO's critical 'strategic enablers' supplied by the US, but American political leadership within the Alliance cannot be replaced by any European country (Bergmann, 2024). The governments of Europe are prudent of one another's leadership potential, especially Germany and France, given their respective renewed activism (Graziano, 2024). The United States has no replacement, and a vacant NATO would mean leaving a security void by taking away the cornerstone of European conventional deterrence. To prevent this from happening, European members of the Alliance must give up the "sponger" mentality and take on their fair share of responsibility for enhancing deterrence by meeting spending and capabilities targets (Puglierin, 2024). They must do so for two reasons. First, the US renewed commitment to European defence after February 2024 must be regarded as a transitory solution, with the Asian-Pacific theatre being the long-term priority of US foreign policy. Any theory of sustained American engagement in Europe rests on an overly optimistic assessment of the country's capacity to permanently dissuade China and Russia (Ashford et al., 2023). Second, the prospect of a Republican president in the White House worsens the scenario as the Republican Party is also home to – besides 'prioritisers' – many 'restrainers', who would be ready to reconsider even the existence of the Alliance if the European members failed to meet the targets (Ruge & Shapiro, 2022). Prioritisers think that gradually receding from Europe and the Middle East is necessary to reinforce American presence in Asia – where it matters, as their purpose is to avoid Chinese hegemony rather than pursue one for the US (Wertheim, 2024b). This represents the predominant thinking within "the Blob", meaning that Europe must quickly catch up to the US before disengaging (Wertheim, 2024a). Meanwhile, meeting the spending conditions would also help appease the less moderate restrainers. However, the conclusion to deal with 'hard security' exclusively within the NATO framework and not leveraging other institutions to advance European defence interoperability is "intellectually and politically lazy" besides being highly risky (Weber, 2023).

The European Pillar: the Role of the EU in Advancing Deterrence

The most immediate and concrete framework that European states may use to increase interoperability and contribute to deterrence is the European Union. It became even more evident after Finland and Sweden joined NATO, as only four EU states are now not members of the Alliance. [2] Although it remains unthinkable that the EU will be able to match or replace NATO capabilities shortly, it offers an excellent platform to harmonise and facilitate capability development through available policies and initiative (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2022). Instruments like the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) can help Member States identify gaps and needs to meet the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) targets, while financial mechanisms like the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) provide funding. However, the EU must prepare to assume a more active role in deterrence.

[2] Austria, Cyprus, Ireland and Malta.

Because of its institutional structure, the EU seems better qualified to set the standard for cooperation against hybrid threats (Weber, 2023). It is also because many policies that would support 'hybrid deterrence' do not come under the defence policy area, for which EU funding is not permitted (Treaty on European Union, 1992, art. 41.2). The Strategic Compass featured an entire chapter dedicated to countering "fast-emerging challenges", including hybrid, cyber and transnational threats (EEAS, 2022). Nonetheless, while the EU may find the hybrid domain less problematic, a more 'strategically responsible' Europe must rely on the Union for 'hard deterrence'.

The EU currently carries out 24 missions and operations, of which only ten are military. The nature of these symbolises how the defence forces of the EU function more like an armed branch of development policy (Lefebvre, 2024). Moreover, the 60,000-strong force envisioned in 1999 and the eighteen battlegroups (1,500 troops each) that reached total capacity in 2007 have never been mobilised. The same will likely happen to the new 5,000-strong Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) set out by the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022). At the same time, European armaments cooperation suffers from the lack of a single budget, the lack of large-scale programmes, and the resulting fragmentation of the EU members' military budgets, which are already relatively low (Lefebvre, 2024). The tools to catalyse joint initiatives have been for a long time limited in their scope until a more expansive €8 billion European Defence Fund (EDF) was established over the period 2021-2027. The EU has improved regarding military operations and cooperation; yet, it remains far from being able to autonomously guarantee continental defense and conventional deterrence against Russia. In the long term, this could be achieved through more integration in foreign policy, although the option currently lacks political will and a common position. More realistically, the EU must continue expanding its capacity as a cooperation platform that Member States leverage to build conventional deterrence, developing bilateral and European interoperability. Gradually reducing dependence on the US by replacing American soldiers deployed on the continent with European troops could be the first step (Weber, 2023). However, this would require rethinking the American commitment to European deterrence.

The American Pillar: a New Approach for the US European Deterrence Initiative

In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea pushed the members of the transatlantic alliance to redefine their strategic and security perceptions. US President Obama responded by announcing a reassurance programme to address European concerns by increasing US military presence in Europe. The programme, known as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) since 2017, is still the main channel of US contributions to European security (Laïçi, 2018). Its budget is branched in five lines of effort (LOE): increased presence, exercises and training, enhanced prepositioning, improved infrastructure, and building partnership capacity. Through the latter two LOEs,

the initiative also aims to support advancing European capabilities and forces. This endeavour seems in line with the expectation from the United States for its European allies to take over higher security responsibilities (Binnendijk & Vershbow, 2021). However, a significant part of the Department of Defense budget allocated for the EDI continues strengthening the US military in Europe rather than European forces (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [OUSD], 2023).

The EDI is an essential pillar of the strategy to preserve peace in Europe by building a credible deterrence posture (Scaparrotti, 2018). Its budget has significantly increased since the program's inception, from less than \$1 billion in 2015 to around \$4 billion consistently over the last three years (Congressional Research Service, 2021; OUSD, 2023). However, it does not appear to be moving in the direction that would address the strategic issues of US overcommitment and European undercommitment. The primary expenditure items continue to be 'increased presence' and 'enhanced prepositioning', which account for between 60 and 70% of the total investment (OUSD, 2023). Essentially, about two-thirds of the funds are allocated to enhancing the readiness of American troops, while only the smallest portion of the budget is left to strengthen the military forces of allied nations. The fifth line of effort, committed to improving European states' ability to defend themselves and enable their full participation in responding to crises, accounts for about \$100 million – 2.5% of the total budget (excluding the \$300 million annually directed to the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative).[3] The strategic emphasis is still on direct American military involvement, as the "continuous presence of forces in Europe's air, land, and waters is considered the cornerstone of the US' commitment to NATO Article 5" (Lațici, 2018). However, by focusing more on investing in European capability development, the US could support a more sustainable form of deterrence vis-à-vis its need to pull back from Europe.

[3] DoD budget for FY 2022 and FY 2023 include \$300 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), FY 2024 excludes \$300 million for USAI based on revised EDI guidance issued on February 21, 2023.

Conclusions

Over the last two years, the shallowness of the binary discussion between Atlanticists and Europeanists has become evident. The conflict in Ukraine has made clear both the chronic dependence of European states on the US for their defence and the existent division of labour between NATO and the EU (Besch & Quencez, 2022). While NATO is responsible for almost every aspect of 'hard deterrence', Europeans should prepare for the US to gradually retreat from its commitments to European defence. More crucially, European nations must shoulder a larger share of NATO's burden to appease future American administrations and avoid them from pulling out of the Alliance. In addition, European states must explore other frameworks for advancing their deterrence capabilities to improve their capacity to meet NATO targets and provide a medium-term alternative. The EU, with its initiatives, presents an ideal cooperation platform for encouraging defence interoperability and contributing to deterrence. While the EU cannot realistically match NATO's capabilities any time soon, it can already set standards effectively for cooperation against hybrid threats and offer the tools to incentivise bilateral and multilateral cooperation for capability development. Ultimately, an update in the approach of American commitment through the EDI will likely facilitate a transition that would benefit both sides of the transatlantic partnership. As evidence of US disengagement, the EDI budget has been constantly declining after reaching its peak in 2019 – except for 2023 (Congressional Research Service, 2021; OUSD, 2024). A new approach favouring investment in local capabilities, leveraging European industrial strengths and regional expertise, must be a testament to the future of transatlantic defence cooperation, aiming to deter adversaries and empower allies.

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