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Introduction

Since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's war in Ukraine has adversely affected the international system, destabilising both Europe and the international order (Grevi, 2023). The commencement of the full-scale invasion in 2022 has served to further exacerbate long-standing security concerns among the Baltic states and Eastern European countries (Gioe et al., 2024). But more importantly, the current crisis has underlined the failure of deterrence and European security strategies on the continent (Polyakova et al., 2023). European states quickly rallied around a sanctions regime against Russia and provided essential political-military support to Ukraine (Heidbreder, 2024). Nevertheless, the United States represent the most vital supporter of Kyiv in light of the strategic and material shortcomings of the European Allies (Biscop, 2023; Biscop, 2024). This reality has severe ramifications for the future security of Europe when confronted with the upcoming Trump administration's foreign policy planning (Biscop, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the European Union (EU) faces an urgent and dangerous scenario. The failure to provide for their defence, engage and develop a unified strategy for Ukraine risks sidelining the interests of the Union's constituencies vis-à-vis Washington's priorities and the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions (Bergmann, 2024; Ash, 2024; Besch & Fix, 2024). This study examines the implications of the lack of a coherent European security strategy on Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2024 US presidential elections. The article begins with a brief analysis of the EU's response in Ukraine through the lens of the 2022 Strategic Compass. The following sections continue the argument by highlighting the vulnerability of European member states to American decision-making due to the increasingly prevalent passive divergence across the Union's security posture.

1. Since the Compass: A Disjointed European Response in Ukraine

"The history of European integration is full of plans and initiatives to strengthen the EU's security and defence policy. Most have come and gone. Therefore, sometimes people ask me why this time should be any different. For me, the difference this time lies in the speed at which the geopolitical context is changing. This makes the case for action more urgent and indeed compelling" (European Union, 2022, p. 7).

The acknowledgement by former High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy/Vice-President (HR/VP) of the European Commission Josep Borrell of the dire state of the Union's progress towards a Common Defence and Security Policy in the 2022 European Union Strategic Compass demonstrates a novel awareness of Brussels' persistent failure to move "from words to deeds" in reference to the geopolitical ambitions of the EU (Mauro, 2021, p.

2; Smith, 2018). Indeed, since the joint Saint-Malo declaration in 1998, the EU has displayed a consistent gap between its defence aspirations and concrete achievements, what Menon (2011) rightly describes as the inability to address fundamental strategic issues beyond the level of an institutional rhetorical debate with limited results in practice (Faiia, 2023). This awareness seems to drive the spirit of the document itself: “[M]ore than the papers that we usually produce in Brussels, the Strategic Compass sets out concrete actions—with clear deadlines to measure progress” (European Union, 2022, p. 7). In other words, the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence was crafted to address the long-standing capability gap in European defence by adopting an unprecedentedly pragmatic approach to the achievement of the EU security and defence ambitions with a clearly defined timetable (Fraïoli, 2022; Nováky, 2021; Alexandru, 2022). Thus, the Compass strives to clarify the convoluted and contradictory process of enhancing and developing EU-wide military capabilities.

Since the publication of the first EU strategic document—the European Security Strategy—in 2003, European defence has largely remained confined to the theoretical domain. Security and strategic doctrine at the level of the Union have consistently lacked an acknowledgement of the operational realm (Fraïoli, 2022). On March 21st, 2022, the EU unveiled its most realistic security doctrine to date with the presentation of the Strategic Compass (Koenig, 2022). The document has considerable merits. The most evident is that the document outlines a single strategic vision built upon a joint threat analysis that recognises the tectonic shift in the security landscape that the 2022 invasion signalled (Koenig, 2022). The return of high-intensity conventional warfare in Europe is at the core of the geopolitical threats facing the Union and its member states (European Union, 2022). Further, the document has sharpened the focus and ambitions of the EU within the wider European neighbourhood. At the same time, it underlines a newfound sense of urgency for developing an integrated European defence (Koenig, 2022).

Despite its claim of being a “quantum leap [forward]” (European Union, 2022, p. 62) regarding pan-European defence, the Compass remains bound to the usual process-heavy gradualism and the capability-expectations gap intrinsic to all EU defence endeavours following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Witney, 2022; Sweeney & Winn, 2022). On the one hand, the Compass highlights the core issue of European defence, namely, the pooling and integration of defence efforts, capabilities, and resources with an invitation to spend more and better (Witney, 2022). On the other hand, the richly detailed roadmap for developing EU military aspirations starkly contrasts with the absence of any debate regarding the geopolitical aims at the strategic and political levels (Koenig, 2022). This is symptomatic of the lack of a common strategic culture and threat perception within the EU, making European leaders reluctant to imbue it with strategic autonomy (Witney, 2022; Sweeney & Winn, 2022). Indeed, although the EU spearheaded the initial political response to the Russian attack on

Ukraine, with the development of the European Peace Facility (EPF), most member states have continued to unilaterally pursue US protection through NATO, hindering the formation of an autonomous European strategic approach for their security (Michaels & Sus, 2024).

Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 has undoubtedly fostered a geopolitical awareness of the threat posed by such wanton aggression across the member states. This is evident from the rapid and firm condemnation of the invasion and the strong language the Strategic Compass employs to describe the threat of Russia (Bell, 2022; Koenig, 2022). However, most EU civilian and military leaders across European capitals have persistently failed to move beyond the threshold of ambitious initiatives and rhetorical discussions in the face of changes to the strategic environment (Witney, 2022). Despite a flurry of developments in Brussels after the start of the war in Ukraine, familiar divisions have constrained the emergence of a coherent European action plan in Ukraine beyond the vague pledge of sustaining Kyiv's resistance for as long as possible (Håkasson, 2023; Zagorodnyk, 2024). This presents serious risks for the regional security architecture as the recent US defence repositioning in Europe must be seen as temporary, even without considering the incoming Trump administration and its stated policy goals vis a vis Ukraine (Zagorodnyk, 2024; Costa & Barbé, 2023). As the strategic debate in Europe moved to areas where the EU lacks intrinsic actorhood due to its institutional set-up, the ability of the member states to be relevant actors on the regional scene has declined in the face of an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment; namely, Russian threats to the East and Hawkish American positions over continental security in the West (Witney, 2022; Costa & Barbé, 2023; Michaels & Sus, 2024).

2. From Strategic Convergence to Paralyzing Divergence

The start of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a wide-ranging response as the EU and its member states unequivocally condemned the Kremlin's course of action (Ivančík, 2024). This manifested in economic, political, and military support for Ukraine, including a sanctions regime and procurement of weapons, ammunition, and equipment (Ivančík, 2024). For instance, the EU adopted punitive measures against Russia through sanctions packages the day before the invasion and has started negotiations over Kyiv's accession to the bloc since December 2023 (Riddervold & Rieker, 2024). This has been hailed as a successful foreign policy achievement, demonstrating the ability of the EU to act decisively in matters of security strategy within the overarching ambition of 'strategic autonomy' (Riddervold & Rieker, 2024). Indeed, it must be acknowledged that the war has reshaped the Union's approach to its neighbourhood, with a pivot to a more geopolitical dimension (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024). The EU has reached an awareness of its deficiencies in hard security and the lack of adequate instruments to confront the crisis in its eastern

borders (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024). Nevertheless, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict plays into pre-existing divides among the member states concerning their views on Russia. Although sanctions packages have been unanimously adopted and renewed, Hungary maintains rhetorical, ideological, and economic proximity with Vladimir Putin's regime (Bret, 2024). Further, Germany's reluctance to send heavy equipment and its indecisiveness regarding the use of Taurus missiles for in-depth strikes into Russian territory, combined with Paris's initial lukewarm approach to military aid clashes with the calls for unlimited support and deterrence from Poland and the Baltic States who perceive an immediate security threat from the Russian Federation (Bret, 2024; Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024; Maze-Sencier, 2022; Gioe et al., 2024).

But more than divisions over aid and relations with Russia, the bloc's powerlessness to develop and implement a strategic vision regarding the security of the continent is particularly evident in the re-emergence of the age-old divides between Europeanist and Atlanticist positions (Costa & Barbé, 2023). Specifically, French calls for strategic autonomy and sovereignty with a Eurocentric approach have progressively alienated Central and Eastern European states (Costa & Barbé, 2023). This has provoked the inter-Union fragmentation of the initial unified response to the war. Despite its commitment to the *Zeitenwende*, Germany has adopted a rather conservative approach to military aid even before the recent coalition government collapse, which worsened the political paralysis of the largest EU country (Ash, 2024). Further, the reaction of most European leaders in the aftermath of French President Macron's proposal to send troops to Ukraine as part of a wider deterrence strategy shows the inability to foster consensus at the EU-wide level (Dempsey, 2024).

In conclusion, Europe's response to the war must be categorised as passive and defensive rather than active (Ardakani & Hosseini, 2024). In other words, the EU reaction evolved from initial strategic convergence to the present passive divergence. The emergence of political divides in the face of the Russian invasion, combined with the failure to articulate a realistic and coherent vision of the future European security and defence systems, has opened a leadership vacuum within the EU (Ardakani & Hosseini, 2024).

3. A Second Trump Presidency and its Consequences for Europe

The outcome of the November 2024 US presidential election has confirmed the dangerous reality that Europe faces as American disengagement becomes a very real threat (Heisbourg, 2024). President-Elect Trump's transactional, unilateral and isolationist foreign policy outlook means the US will increasingly expect Europeans to care for their defence (Witney, 2022; Besch & Fix, 2024). The first point of friction will certainly be the war in Ukraine. Indeed,

Ukraine primarily relies on American military aid as the EU deliveries of military equipment and ammunition have been delayed and remain severely underwhelming (Kayali et al., 2024). American refusal to approve military assistance would have an immediate and catastrophic effect on Kyiv, as European defence resources are unable to compensate for the incoming shortfall (Heisbourg, 2024). For instance, the already dwindling stream of ammunition has impacted the warfighting capacity of the armed forces of Ukraine, with daily consumption of shells falling from 8,000 to 2,000 in January 2024 (Heisbourg, 2024). Similarly, Russia possesses a significant advantage in the rate of fire for heavy artillery of 5:1 on the battlefield (Heisbourg, 2024). Increasing American isolationist tendencies would decrease the interception capabilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, as anti-missile systems are predominantly American, and EU countries do not have the willingness nor the resources to supply sophisticated air and missile defence batteries (Heisbourg, 2024).

Although European leaders frequently debated over the possibility of Donald Trump's return to office, they failed to develop any meaningful action over two years of conflict to prepare for a potential US financial and military withdrawal from Europe and Ukraine (Besch & Fix, 2024). Against the backdrop, the European inaction regarding the possibility of a Ukrainian defeat and its implications for the wider defence of Europe leave EU member states in a strategic void as negotiations would be monopolised by Washington and Moscow (Biscop, 2024).

Conclusion

The European refusal to engage in a nuanced debate to develop a strategic approach regarding their security and defence is now self-evident with the looming prospect of President Trump's geopolitical posture, emphasising a withdrawal from the defence of Europe (Biscop, 2024). Despite a large series of initiatives at the European level, enshrined in the Compass at the start of the war in Ukraine, the EU has been grounded in familiar divides and divergences among its Member States whilst failing to foster the development of shared political goals at the strategic level in Ukraine. European security depends on the war's outcome (Bret, 2024; Bond, 2024). The strategic void that has resulted from the inability to implement pragmatic and acceptable defence initiatives has left Europe facing the combined pressure of the Russian threat on the eastern flank and the declining American interventionism in matters of European defence to the West (Witney, 2022). Thus, governments across the Union should prioritise their policy in Ukraine by preparing for the end of US financial and military support and directly engage with Kyiv for the implementation of a coordinated strategy (Besch & Fix, 2024).

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