

Seguridad en Europa: más OTAN, ¿menos UE?

Resumen:

La guerra en Ucrania ha puesto de manifiesto la necesidad de recuperar las capacidades militares en Europa, perdidas en las décadas posteriores al final de la Guerra Fría. Las Fuerzas Armadas europeas han reducido temerariamente su tamaño, tanto en efectivos humanos como en equipamiento. Conscientes de la nueva realidad, los Gobiernos de la Unión Europea parecen ahora decididos a invertir los recursos necesarios para solventar esas carencias. Pero el tiempo apremia; la guerra en suelo europeo ya no es una posibilidad remota, sino una acuciante realidad.

Cuando la Europa de la Defensa parecía cobrar impulso con la aprobación de su Brújula Estratégica, la realidad de la industria militar europea pone de manifiesto que a corto, a medio y también a largo plazo, la Seguridad de la Unión sigue dependiendo dramáticamente de la implicación norteamericana, a través de la OTAN, en detrimento de su autonomía estratégica.

Más OTAN, más Estados Unidos, ¿menos Unión Europea?

Palabras clave:

Capacidades militares, vínculo trasatlántico, autonomía estratégica.

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"The question is not whether NATO or whether the EU, but the need for a stronger Europe for a stronger NATO"

Boris Pistorius

Minister for Defence of the Federal Republic of Germany

In the long year since Russia invaded Ukraine, a now rhetorical and unnecessary question has repeatedly been raised in various forums and documents: What would the European Union (EU) have done if the United States (US) had not been as involved as it has been; how would the different member states have reacted without Washington's leadership? These same questions were raised in the summer of 2021 around the



withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan, when they had to leave the country under the cover of US forces, without which the event would have been even more chaotic than it already was.

More NATO

The Atlantic Alliance's Strategic Concept, approved at the summit held last summer in Spain, replaces the Lisbon Strategic Concept, which dates back to 2010. Deeply marked by war in Europe, something considered unthinkable since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Madrid document not only closes a long period of strategic disorientation for NATO but also represents a *back to basics* for the organisation: "*The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace*".¹ The Russian Federation, like the USSR previously, is identified as the most significant and direct threat to Allied security.

Reactions in the 'global West' to Russian aggression in February 2022 were swift. A few months later, countries as geographically distant as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand attended the Madrid summit as guests. Immediately, or rather urgently, two

¹ NATO 2022. Strategic Concept. Available at: [290622-strategic-concept.pdf \(nato.int\)](https://www.nato.int/docu/strat/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf)

significant non-NATO members of the EU, Sweden and Finland, applied to join the Alliance. Article 5² of the Washington Treaty seems more reliable than Article 42.7³ of the EU Treaty. European governments, including the usually more reluctant ones, announced serious commitments to increase their defence budgets to the oft-proclaimed 2% of GDP, without ruling out a further increase in the long term. In Austria, the quintessentially neutral country, the debate on its security guarantees is timidly opening up: Ukraine has been attacked, now as in 2014, for not being a member of NATO⁴.

Only three days after the invasion of Ukraine, on 27 February, German Chancellor Scholz presented in the Bundestag his initiative known as *Zeitenwende*, or change of era, which was surprising not only for the depth of the measures announced, but also for its profound change of course in a society that so many years after the end of the Second World War is still festering from the wound of alleged militarism of which it is still unjustly accused. An initial expenditure of €100 billion to make up for the many shortcomings of its armed forces and an increase in defence spending to 2% of Germany's GDP (the world's fourth largest economy) sends a very strong message.

In short, undoubtedly more NATO.

More United States

The withdrawal of international troops from Kabul airport, referred to above, spread the image around the world of a US that was incapable of executing an operation of this kind in an orderly fashion, and unreliable in supporting a people it had promised to protect, not

² Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: 'The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more Ally in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual and collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as is deemed necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.'

³ Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union: *If an EU country is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other EU countries have to provide assistance in response with all the means they have at their disposal.*

⁴ Austria is wavering on its traditional neutrality, without "antagonising" Russia. 03FEB23. Available at <https://euroefe.euractiv.es/section/las-capitales/news/austria-deshoja-la-margarita-de-su-tradicional-neutralidad-sin-molestar-a-rusia/>

least by preventing a return to Taliban barbarism. Nonetheless, a few months later, Russia's failed takeover of Ukraine and the long war of attrition in which we find ourselves, offer Washington, and especially President Biden, a golden opportunity to make amends for this image of ineffectiveness and to recover the prestige of what it wants: to remain the world's leading power.

The energy disconnection from the Russian market has led the EU to diversify its hydrocarbon sources, with the US among its main suppliers of natural gas. Urgent military procurement, by both Ukraine and European countries, is inevitably directed towards the only market able to provide it immediately. This European dependence on the US military industry predates the current war in Ukraine. All White House administrations have understood allied calls for increased defence budgets as an invitation to spend them in precisely that market. Initiatives from Brussels to develop purely European capabilities have come late, fail to fill all the gaps, face lengthy development and commissioning times, and have been greeted with reproaches from Washington for seeking to sideline the American industry, all of which have hampered European attempts at indigenous rearmament.

So more US, too.

Less EU?

A recurrent argument in relation to the construction of Europe is the insistence that the project is consolidated on the basis of the Union overcoming the difficulties it encounters. This was the case, for example, with the COVID-19 pandemic. After a shaky start, the centralised procurement of vaccines and then the approval of a massive recovery fund for ailing national economies are further examples of how to turn a tough crisis into a good opportunity. The war in Europe and its indefinite prolongation are now once again straining the seams of the Union.

Southern European member states, while unquestioning in their solidarity with Eastern partners and resolute in their support for Ukraine, have been unsuccessfully pointing out to the other partners the pressing threat to European security posed by the spiralling deterioration of stability on the near-Southern front. In some countries of the Maghreb and Sahel, the former metropolis, France is being pushed out, while the growing

penetration of other actors - China and Russia prominently, but not exclusively - calls into question the permanence of European presence in such an important region.

Within the Union, the traditional Franco-German (North-South) momentum is being weakened vis-à-vis the new West-East axis, wherein the decisive support of the US and the UK for Ukraine is boosting and revaluing the role of a traditionally "small" country in the EU such as Poland. Hungary's clearly transactional stance towards Russia, which contrasts with that of its Eastern neighbours, has deactivated the once dynamic Visegrad Group, now replaced by the more recent Bucharest nine, B-9 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), which is firmly aligned with Ukraine.

The war has exposed the weaknesses of EU member states in the area of security and defence. It is now clear that the European Armed Forces had been excessively reduced under the cover of peace dividends following the disappearance of the Soviet threat. Bridging the technology gap between the two sides of the Atlantic will require huge amounts of money and a lot of time, which we do not have right now given the urgency of the war. Furthermore, stockpiles and depots of ammunition, material and equipment have been exhausted as they have been poured into supplying Ukraine. And despite initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Coordinated Annual Defence Review (CARD), the European military industry is far from being capable of providing European armies with the necessary weapons systems within a manageable timeframe. Once the invasion of Ukraine had been consummated, the Russian threat referred to in the Madrid Strategic Concept had ceased to be the remote possibility it had been months before the adoption of the concept in Madrid. The EU has consequently had a rude awakening to the harsh realities, and to provide their armed forces with what they need and to spend the committed budget allocations in a timely manner, European governments once again have no choice but to look to the US market.

The Strategic Compass, the framework document for a Europe of Defence, approved in March 2022 after two years of consultations among capitals, arrived too late. By then Russia had invaded Ukraine, making evident what had not been seen or wanted to be seen until then: that Europe is still dependent on the traditional US security umbrella.

All the above points to a deterioration of the EU's role as an actor capable of defining its

own geopolitical interests and pursuing them autonomously. Having said that, this overly pessimistic view needs to be qualified. Despite the shortcomings pointed out, Europe is not being a passive subject in relation to the war in Ukraine. Contrary to how it might appear at first glance, it is not NATO as such that is getting heavily involved in supporting the attacked country (individual allies are), but the EU. Not without difficulty Brussels has passed a dozen rounds of sanctions on Russia; economic funds have been made available; Ukrainian military contingents are being trained; weapons systems have been provided; and diplomatic support is ongoing. Ukraine has even been granted the status of a preferential applicant country for membership of the European club. The key question now is how to maintain this cohesion as the conflict is prolonged. If Europeans are able to cope with the damage the war is doing to them, the EU will once again have succeeded in turning the crisis into an opportunity.

Less EU, perhaps, but not inevitably.

And then... what should we do?

No, it is certainly not a question of a hypothetical Europe of Defence, sufficiently developed and endowed with the capabilities it currently lacks, and dispensing with the US commitment to guarantee its security. Europe should remain inextricably linked to the NATO success story. The opposite is not possible at present, and nor is it desirable in the future. Without calling into question the transatlantic link, a stronger EU will be in a better position to take on a greater role in this area. As added value, more autonomy and more and better capabilities will also allow partners to lead stabilisation efforts in their immediate neighbourhood: the Gulf of Guinea, the Maghreb/Sahel, the Mediterranean, the Caucasus, the Balkans and, of course, Ukraine. The US will have to continue to provide the support and capabilities that Europe lacks, but at the same time it could concentrate all its efforts on the scenario which, as envisaged in its recently published National Security Strategy⁵, is at the centre of its concerns: China and the Indo-Pacific region.

⁵ US National Security Strategy, OCT22. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

Conclusion

There have been many analyses of the causes of the breakdown of security in Europe due to the war in Ukraine, and the debate will continue to rage regardless of the outcome. What is certain is that deterrence has failed. Deterrence in the defence sphere is fundamentally based on two factors: the credibility of available military capabilities and the political will to use them decisively, if necessary. In light of events in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, it is clear that Moscow assumed that the weak point for Europeans and Americans in terms of an invasion would be the second of these factors, that of the political will to help Ukraine. This was a miscalculation. It is now up to us to remain firm in our stance, to prevent the chronification of the conflict from taking its toll on Western societies and to restore the credibility of the military tool, the Armed Forces of European countries, as soon as possible.

To this end, the Union has considerable strengths, especially when compared to the Russian Federation. Its economic power, its technological, even demographic superiority, its membership of the most important trade, political and security fora and agreements, and the legitimacy of its democratic values give old Europe a starting advantage it must not squander.

It is in the specific area of defence that Europe's shortcomings and dependence on its US ally are most evident. It is a dependence that entails a clear loss of autonomy and a subordination of European interests to those of Washington. But this reality should not make European societies and leaders pessimistic. It is time to learn from past mistakes, to accelerate efforts to build Europe, including militarily, and to seek a reasonable balance between the US commitment to Europe and the contribution of the allies on this side of the Atlantic to their own security.

Gone are the days when talk of a strong and autonomous Europe within NATO was considered anathema. As German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius says in the sentence that precluded this analysis, it is not a question of pitting the Alliance against the EU, but of understanding that a strong Europe benefits a stronger NATO. And all the allies will benefit from this - every one of us.

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