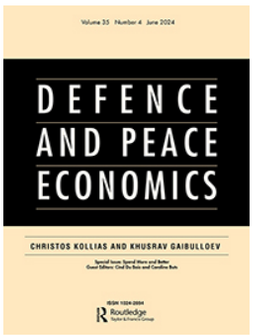

Defence and Peace Economics

ISSN: 1024-2694 (Print) 1476-8267 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/gdpe20

# European Defence: No *Zeitenwende* Yet

Sven Biscop

**To cite this article:** Sven Biscop (2024) European Defence: No *Zeitenwende* Yet, Defence and Peace Economics, 35:4, 516-520, DOI: 10.1080/10242694.2023.2201739

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2023.2201739

Published online: 10 Apr 2023.

DEFENCE AND PEACE ECONOMICS
2024, VOL. 35, NO. 4, 516–520
https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2023.2201739



# European Defence: No *Zeitenwende* Yet

Sven Biscop

Egmont - Royal Institute for International Relations, Brussels, Belgium & Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

**ABSTRACT**

The EU and its Member States have taken unprecedented collective steps to support Ukraine militarily. That has not yet translated into a stronger momentum to further cooperation between their own defence forces, however. Ideally, Member States would integrate national capabilities into large multinational formations. NATO's New Force Model could provide an extra stimulus to that end.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 6 February 2023
Accepted 8 April 2023

**KEYWORDS**
European Union; NATO; defence

**JEL CLASSIFICATION**
Y20

## Introduction

In the debate on defence, *Zeitenwende* is the most overused term of the year 2022. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made the term the headline of his speech for the Bundestag on 27 February 2022. In reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine three days before, he spoke of a turning point for German defence policy and announced a €100 billion investment package in defence. Subsequently, *Zeitenwende* came to describe the response of the European Union as a whole to the brutal war at its border. But has the defence policy of the EU and its Member States really made the qualitative leap that the notion implies?

## Supporting Ukraine

For sure, the EU reacted swiftly and adopted severe economic sanctions against Russia, going much further than anybody had expected. Since the Member States surprised themselves, they definitely also surprised Russia. In an unprecedented move for the EU, it also put to use the European Peace Facility (EF) to fund transfers of arms and equipment to Ukraine by the Member States (Giusti and Grevi 2022). By early 2023, €3.6 billion had been committed. The EPF was an existing instrument, but few would have imagined the EU applying it at such a scale, to support a country at war. This has contributed to a shift in the mindset at the EU level: if the Union aspires to be a geopolitical player, as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced when she took office, this is the sort of thing that one has to be able and willing to do. In November 2022, the EU further launched a military assistance mission, aiming to train 15,000 Ukrainian troops on various locations in the Union over the next two years.

EU Member States themselves had but limited stocks, however, so the majority quickly reached the limit of what they could pass on to Ukraine without denuding their own armed forces (Antezza et al. 2022). The reality is, therefore, that for now the Ukrainian war effort depends on the military support of the US. The EU should prepare, though, to gradually take over the main effort. For one, Ukraine is a neighbour of the Union, not of the US, so EU interests are more directly at stake. Moreover, the EU has accorded candidate status to Ukraine: that ought to imply a greater

**CONTACT** Sven Biscop s.biscop@egmontinstitute.be Egmont Institue FPS Foreign Affairs,Rue des Petits Carmes 15, Brussels 1000 Belgium

assumption of responsibility. At the same time, there are doubts whether the US would continue to offer the same amount of support to Ukraine if the Republican Party gains more power. The EU will thus have to continue financial support, and step up transfers of arms and equipment, and training.[1]

Combined with the need to replenish Europe's own stores, the need to support Ukraine created a buying frenzy on the defence market. Demand greatly surpassed supply, as the defence industry in both Europe and the US cannot step up production in the short term, or is unwilling to open new production lines unless governments can guarantee orders over the longer term. As EU Member States did not coordinate demand, they drove up prices and competed with each other, rather than making optimum use of existing production capacity. In the spring of 2022, the EU institutions made a strong push to coordinate and align Member States' additional defence efforts, but no strong European dynamic emerged. A new EU instrument, the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), meant to provide a short term solution, got bogged down in negotiations, and its adoption ended up being pushed into 2023. In March 2023, the Council, faced with a looming munitions crisis in Ukraine, decided on the joint procurement of artillery ammunition and missiles, to be coordinated by the European Defence Agency (EDA).

## A European Dynamic?

The absence of a European dynamic was surprising, because in March 2022 the EU had just adopted the Strategic Compass, which had been two years in the making. This can be seen as the Union's first ever defence strategy. The Compass includes important decisions: the creation of a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), able to conduct brigade-size expeditionary operations (5000 troops); the introduction of the notion of deterrence of hybrid actions; and the undertaking to step up collective investment in military capabilities through the European Defence Fund (EDF). None of these decisions has become any less relevant because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – quite the opposite. And yet in many EU capitals the perception reigns that the Compass has already been overtaken by events. Although the Brussels bodies are pushing hard for the full and speedy implementation of the Compass, most Member States remain focused on the national rather than the European level. If all states will spend the increased defence budgets separately, there will be no synergies and effects of scale, and the added value will be much less that what it could have been.

There are exceptions, such as the announcement by 14 states, in October 2022, that they will join the European Sky Shield Initiative, launched by Germany, which would rely on American and other non-European suppliers. Yet, typically, France and Italy have not joined, because they are developing their own systems. In a similar vein, projects that were announced more than five years ago as flagships of European defence industrial cooperation, such as the next generation main battle tank and combat aircraft, have since advanced very little – and have also seen competing projects arise, such as FCAS and TEMPEST. It would be a missed opportunity if in areas where most until now they had little or no capability, such as missile defence, offensive missiles, military cyber, and military space, EU Member States would once again create a plethora of small-scale national capabilities that are too insignificant to make a difference for the defence of Europe. Or continue with competing projects, with the probable end result that neither project will survive, and Member States will have to buy off the shelf from non-European suppliers anyway.

Franco-German cooperation remains the key to unlock this situation. If Paris and Berlin would manage to overcome their differences, essentially merge their 'defence industrial complex', and kick-start their major projects together, the other Member States will be obliged to follow suit.

## Towards an Integrated Defence Effort

Ideally, though, coordination would not stop at common design, construction, and procurement of weapon systems. It can and should go further and eye the capabilities themselves: the actual military units that will be equipped with the new weapon systems. The key to maximise the efficiency, but

also the interoperability and employability of Europe's armed forces, lies in the creation of permanent multinational force packages, with national units as building-blocks. How would this work? (Biscop 2020).

Taking the army as an example, the building-blocks would be national brigades, to be permanently anchored in a multinational army corps or division. Today, most Member States still operate at least one brigade in their armies, but often these are incomplete, lacking key capabilities, such as air defence or combat engineers. A three-pronged approach could be followed.

Firstly, in the framework of a multinational army corps or division, a combination of integration and specialisation would be organised in the various support functions. In areas where some, or all, of the Member States contributing a brigade had only limited capabilities, these would be integrated into a single multinational support unit. In areas where some contributing Member States had no capabilities at all, a division of labour would be established, with the national support units of some countries supporting the brigades of the others. Thus, all brigades would be more useable, in more scenarios, than in cases where they had to rely on national support only. This approach would also be much more cost-effective.

A second element of this approach is that, in the framework of a multinational corps or division, the participating Member States would harmonise doctrine as well as weapons and equipment. This would allow for deep interoperability between all constitutive units, make integration or a division of labour much more feasible, and generate synergies and effects of scale. If all brigades were to use the same vehicles, for example, that would drastically reduce the logistics tail on operations, while making procurement simpler and more cost-effective.

Thirdly, the multinational corps or divisions would serve as the benchmark to quantify the need for strategic enablers. The Member States that made up a multinational formation would acquire the necessary strategic enablers without having recourse to the assets of others.

The same approach could be applied to navies, with national ships as the building-block of multinational squadrons, and to air forces, with multinational wings made up of national squadrons. One could also imagine a European drone command, cyber command, air defence command, etc., operating national assets as if they constituted a single fleet or force, under one commander, and with a single multinational structure for training, exercises, and logistics.

Creating such permanent multinational force packages would allow European states to greatly improve the readiness of their forces and increase their capacity to generate larger-scale deployments, be it for expeditionary operations or for the forward deployment of troops in the context of territorial defence. It would be the model on which to construct both the RDC. This model actually has been on the EU's drawing board for some time: the Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC), one of the projects under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). But even as this remains a mostly conceptual exercise, it has been watered down already. It is not too late to resurrect the approach, however.

## EU and NATO Cooperation

Not just the EU, but of course NATO too has announced new defence initiatives. At the June 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO leaders adopted a new Strategic Concept. This did not contain any spectacularly new provisions – nor were those expected or necessary. Rather less noticed but probably more important is the green light NATO leaders gave to transition to the so-called New Force Model (NFM) in the course of 2023 (Biscop 2022). The avowed aim is to create a pool of 300,000 troops in a high state of readiness, and to pre-assign these to specific defence plans. This is very ambitious, all the more so because these will mostly be European troops.

The rationale behind the NFM is that to be able to respond to all eventualities, the NATO military commander, SACEUR, requires a better view of the available forces, and their state of readiness, beyond the 40,000 currently on rotation at any one time in the NATO Response Force (NRF). Hence the NFM provides for the organisation of forces in three tiers: 100,000

troops in tier 1 should be available within 10 days; 200,000 more in tier 2 within 10 to 30 days. Adding to the existing scheme of pre-deployed battlegroups in the Baltic states, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, some additional tier 1 and 2 forces will be pre-deployed on NATO's eastern flank, on a rotational basis, but probably not substantially so. More importantly, NATO aims for all tier 1 and 2 troops to be assigned to specific geographic defence plans for which they can then train. Tier 3, finally, provides for at least 500,000 troops more within one to six months.

The rationale goes further, however. To prevent any incursion from establishing a foothold on the territory of a NATO ally which would be difficult to reduce, the response must be immediate and in force. In other words, a counter-attack cannot wait for reinforcements to arrive from across the Atlantic, but must be undertaken with forces present in Europe. That, in turn, means: with mostly European forces. If there are signs of an aggressive military build-up, North American Allies could of course pre-deploy forces preventively. But even since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although the US has brought its forward presence in Europe to 100,000 troops, the bulk of these are headquarters and depots, not combat forces. The core of the NFM will be 300,000 European high-readiness troops, therefore, and the first line of conventional deterrence and defence will thus increasingly be European. This de facto Europeanisation of the European theatre is in line with the evolution of the global strategic environment, and of US grand strategy. Concretely, if war were to break out in Europe and Asia simultaneously, the US would likely prioritise the latter. The European allies would thus have to hold the line in Europe; reinforcements from North America would arrive later and in smaller numbers than envisaged during the Cold War. That is the real (though usually unspoken) strategic significance of the rise of China: not that it poses a military threat to Europe (it does not), but that the US identifies it as the main military threat, and allocates resources accordingly.

Less conspicuous in NATO's communication about the NFM so far, though potentially very important, is that it encourages Allies to cooperate and organise the tier 1 and 2 forces in large multinational formations. NATO should learn from the EU's experience with the Battlegroups and accept that temporary multinational formations bring little added value. Permanent formations are required, along the lines outlined above, but composed of heavy, including armoured units. Several multinational initiatives exist already, with different degrees of integration, such as the three groups led by Germany, Italy, and the UK in the context of NATO's Framework Nation Concept, and bilateral cooperation such as the German-Netherlands Corps and the Franco-Belgian Motorised Capacity. Rarely are they used, however, to generate deployments, although, arguably, that is exactly what it would take to instil a real sense of purpose into these schemes. The fastest way to an effective NFM would be to deepen some of these existing frameworks, turning them into standing formations with units permanently assigned to them, and linking each to one of the regional defence plans. In a later stage, new formations can be created.

Eventually every sector of Europe's eastern flank could be covered by a large European (national or multinational) formation, in tiers 1 and 2, from which rotational pre-deployments would be generated, in coordination with the rotational presence of non-European Allies. This would not be a single European army, of course, but it would begin to constitute what in principle is the aim of PESCO (though in reality it is not moving in this direction): a comprehensive, full-spectrum force *package*. That would be a tangible European pillar within NATO, on which conventional deterrence and defence in the European theatre would come to rest, together with the Alliance's military command structure.

Such a European military pillar within NATO can only work optimally if underpinned by the EU, notably by the EDF and EDIRPA. They alone can ensure that additional defence budgets are spent in the most cost-effective way and push for the harmonisation of future equipment without which no really coherent force package is possible. Moreover, they will guarantee that new funds and projects will strengthen the European technological and industrial base, within the framework of the EU's overall economic strategy, which is not an objective as such of NATO or its new initiative, the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA). Finally, only collectively, through the

EDF, can the Europeans field their own enablers, without which the European pillar would not be complete. For as deterrence and defence are being Europeanised, the European role cannot be that of a mere troop provider whose forces can only be put to use when the US deploys its enablers.

## Conclusion

Those who follow the development of EU defence policy since the start, from 1999 when the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP, now CSDP) was launched, know that a *Zeitenwende* or breakthrough has been announced more than once. Time and again the same cycle was repeated: with great fanfare, EU Member States adopt a new initiative, with the full intention of not stopping the other 26 from doing it – but without the willingness to play a leading role themselves. Thus the initiative fizzles out, and a few years later a new attempt is undertaken. The urgency to strengthen Europe's capacity to defend itself has only increased. Perhaps EU Member States will finally rise to the occasion.

## Note

1. Though, actually, Ukrainian forces could also usefully instruct their EU counterparts, passing on some of the operational and tactical lessons learned on the battlefield.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

Antezza, A., K. Bushnell, A. Frank, P. Frank, L. Franz, I. Kharitonov, E. Rebinskaya, and C. Trebesch. 2022. "The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which Countries Help Ukraine and How?". Kiel Working Paper, No. 2218, 1–65.

Biscop, S. 2020. "Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence." *Survival* 62 (5): 105–118. doi:10.1080/00396338.2020.1819654.

Biscop, S. 2022. "The New Force Model: Nato's European Army?". Egmont Policy Brief No. 285, 1–5.

Giusti, S., and G. Grevi. 2022. *Facing War: Rethinking Europe's Security and Defence*, 1–116. Milan: ISPI.