**Europe First: A new division of labour in European Security**

****

Dr Ken McDonagh is Associate Professor of International Relations in Dublin City University. His research is focused on EU Foreign Policy and Common  
Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the role of small states in CSDP.(©: McDonagh)

Europe has faced a series of ever more alarming wake up calls in the field of security and defence over the past 25 years. The slowness of both the EU and NATO to recognise and respond to these challenges in that time is a puzzle for future historians to figure out. What circumstances those historians will find themselves writing in depends on the decisions that are taken in the present.

Much has been made of the shocks that the European security system is currently facing, whether that is the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the wobbling of the Trans-Atlantic relationship as both the UK and the U.S. experience political instability, and the rise of illiberal governments within the European Union. However, the reality is that these shocks are neither new nor all that unexpected.

Russia has been a persistent source of instability in the European neighbourhood, and any doubts about the need for credible deterrence should have been removed following the invasion of Georgia in 2008.

Washington has been calling on Europe to do more for its own security since at least the Clinton administration and the underlying strategic logic that suggested the United States commitment to European security was likely to wane has been evident since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2012, Barack Obama dismissed Russia as a regional power – and he was correct, Russia is a source of instability for Europe and its neighbourhood but unable to project the kind of global influence it had in the Cold War.

Similarly, the rise of illiberal forces within EU member states is nothing new. Europe reacted strongly to Austria electing the far right to government in 2000 but has been found wanting when faced with democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia or with the rise of far right parties in Italy, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany and France.

Europe then finds itself facing a crisis of its own making but also an opportunity to address some fundamental weaknesses in security and defence. The positive news is that, perhaps for the first time, the European political consensus has shifted to understanding the precariousness of the security situation and to more agreement on what should be done. In addition, the steps currently being taken will pay off even if the worst-case scenarios about the future of trans-Atlantic cooperation do not come to fruition.

Existing EU initiatives such as the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act ([EDIRPA](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/edirpa-addressing-capability-gaps_en)) and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production ([ASAP](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/asap-boosting-defence-production_en)) and calls for the swift adoption of the Security Action for Europe ([SAFE](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6d6f889c-e58d-4caa-8f3b-8b93154fe206_en?filename=SAFE%20Regulation.pdf)) regulations to allow the EU to provide up to €150 billion in finance to member states to meet the necessary increases in defence spending to meet the capability needs of Europe into the future. If EU member states take up the additional fiscal space enabled as part of the ReArm Europe initiative this additional financial capacity could reach 800 billion euro.

Critically, this is a win-win situation for both the EU and NATO. The EU member state capabilities are in most cases at NATO’s disposal as well. It also serves as a useful signal to Washington that Europe is willing to pay its own way when it comes to security and defence, whatever party controls the White House.

While defence spending is one part of the necessary European response to the present challenges, more difficult is replacing the military equipment that the US provides and the security reassurance created by US boots on the ground, either in permanent bases or as part of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics and Poland.

As regards to military equipment, the short term challenge is the need to plan to replace US supplies to the Ukrainian military particularly in areas such as air defence and rocket artillery systems should the need arise. In the medium term, European states need to address their over-reliance on US capabilities in force-enabling technologies particularly, but not limited to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and air-to-air refuelling. The above-mentioned initiatives have taken some steps in this direction, but more urgency is needed.

Europe also needs to develop contingency plans for replacing the US presence in Europe. The recent meeting in Paris that indicated 26 countries would be willing to provide forces as part of a security guarantee in Ukraine suggest that where there is political will such a deployment is possible. This could be a model for similar deployments in the Baltic States, Finland, Poland and other countries seeking security reassurance should the US withdraw.



Maidan encampment Kyiv (©: McDonagh)

The internal challenge of rising illiberal forces is a more difficult one. Compounded by the need to balance regulating largely non-European owned digital media companies with broader economic interests in positive trade terms with the US may shift the political calculus. This is where security interests bleed into the wider society and policy space. Finding the right strategy to communicate the nature and immediacy of the threat is a key challenge for European leaders not least when the need to increase defence spending may come at the cost to other parts of public spending.

The EU also faces the challenge of moving forward with defence cooperation while operating with the consent of member states who for reasons of longstanding strategic policy (the neutral states Ireland, Malta and Austria) may oppose further integration with both EU and NATO defence and security structures. However, Finland and Sweden’s decision to join NATO and Denmark’s ending of its CSDP opt-out indicate that national orientations are not set in stone.

Europe has reached a point where the political consensus in national capitals and in Brussels are largely in agreement. The Russian invasion of Ukraine focussed minds on the vulnerability of Europe’s Eastern flank. The unpredictable foreign policy emanating from Washington has similarly underlined the need to develop, fund and deliver an independent European capability in security and defence. At both the policy and institutional level, the last few years have seen an unprecedented rate of development of the EU as a coordinating actor in the defence realm but this progress remains precarious. A ‘Europe First’ approach to defence within NATO and the EU will make Europe a more credible partner to the US and enhance the deterrent factor of both Article 5 of the NATO Charter and Article 42(7) of the TEU. Delivering this approach is the defining challenge of this generation of Europe’s leaders.