

European Security in a Changing International Order

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the profound evolution of US policies with the Trump administration and, more generally, an overall reshaping of the global international order, with a renationalisation of foreign policies by key players and the weakening of multilateralism and of the respect of the basic rules and principles embodied in the UN Charter and other key documents such as the Helsinki Final Act, has relaunched the debate about European security and the position and role of the European Union in this changing international environment.

I would at the outset to share my own perception the evolution of the situation following the end of the Cold War, having operated with NATO, the EU, the UN and the OSCE in the last quarter of the century.

In 1991 I joined NATO as the head of the arms control and cooperative security department in the Secretariat in Brussels, where I spent the following 6 years. It was the time of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet Union itself. The NATO agenda changed completely. There were many issues that required attention, especially in the disarmament area, both conventional and nuclear. The Russians were all in all cooperative, working groups were established with participation of Russia and other

former Soviet countries, including Ukraine, in the context of the NATO-driven initiatives for a North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and Partnership for Peace (PfP). Russia even participated in a working group defining principles for NATO involvement in peacekeeping, which produced an agreed document submitted to Ministers in 1994. Russian diplomats became regular visitors of NATO Headquarters and their Ministers (Kozyrev being the most active at the time) were pushing for some kind of more formal NATO-Russia partnership. But Russia had its own vision: NATO should evolve towards a becoming a common Euro-Atlantic defence cooperation platform, supporting the UN in peacekeeping and engaging in promoting intra-European cooperation, a process which would ideally include Russia at some point. On the other hand, Russia was intent in restoring its influence on the former soviet space through the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and other initiatives of cooperation in various fields, while the US - and more generally the West - were engaged in strengthening the democratic development of the new independent countries emerged after the end of the Cold War, including the Soviet Union successors. Washington's decision to begin expanding NATO into Eastern Europe inevitably strengthened the Russian internal opposition to Yeltsin's policies and, accompanied by the strain created by the crises in the former Yugoslavia, and in particular the NATO bombing of Serbia, contributed to creating conditions for the a more nationalistic, assertive and potentially antagonistic stance of the Russian leadership.

Relations between NATO and Russia progressively deteriorated over the following couple of decades. Working in Kosovo with the UN at the time of the unilateral declaration of independence by Pristina I found myself operating again in a near Cold-War

environment and when, immediately afterwards, I took over the role of SG of the OSCE I realised that there was very little trust left and no more real dialogue, which was instead replaced by regular sets of contradictory statements. The space of cooperation created in the 1970s with the CSCE had largely vanished and there was no common vision for a strategy to reinvigorate it. Arms control agreements and other confidence-building mechanisms in the security sphere were terminated or became progressively ineffective and no efforts were made to repair this, once very effective, web of cooperative security arrangements. Overall, as security conditions were deteriorating, those tools that had been put in place to improve European security and stability were being lost. Suddenly, but not surprisingly, the question of the geopolitical positioning of Ukraine became the centre of the confrontation between Russia and the US-led West. The Baltic states had already joined NATO and the EU in the previous decade, and this had contributed to the progressive strain of relations between the Euro-Atlantic community and Moscow, which then intensified its initiatives for shoring up the former Soviet space also in the economic and trade domains. The loss of control over Ukraine would have been a major blow for Russia, which had managed to maintain its strong influence over the country in spite of the convulsions of the "orange revolution" in 2004.

After the annexation of Crimea and the years-long separatist campaign in Donbass following the overthrowing of Yanukovich, facing a continuing risk of Kiev drifting towards the West, president Putin ostensibly decided to follow the path taken by the Soviet Union in reestablishing control over Hungary or Czechoslovakia, massively underestimating the hostility, the resolve and the strenuous resistance of the Ukrainian people.

Interestingly, on the eve of the invasion, Russia and China adopt-

ed a joint statement proclaiming an open-ended partnership between the two countries, in open opposition to the Western approaches and with a clear condemnation of NATO's gradual expansion. Not surprisingly, more substance was injected in the new geopolitical alignment that had already been surfacing in previous years.

As clear preparations for the war in Ukraine were underway, the absence of an active role by the EU, which should have been expected to play a key role, became very notable. I myself wrote an article for the Italian newspaper Repubblica just a few days before the beginning of the invasion, underlining the need for urgent action by the EU.

This lack of a strong coordinated stance brings us to take a closer look to what was going in the EU, on its policies towards Ukraine and Russia and, more broadly its current and prospective role in the context of a future, potentially more challenging, new security environment in Europe and globally.

Let us begin with the EU and Ukraine. Also in this case, I would like to share a personal perspective. In 2013 Ukraine held the rotating Chairmanship of the OSCE. As Secretary-General I travelled regularly to the country. I met a few times with the then President Yanukovich and worked closely with his Foreign Ministers Gryshchenko and then Kozhara. The President told me in no ambiguous terms that there was a strategic decision to move towards the EU, and that the ambition was to sign a first set of agreements, including, most importantly, a free trade agreement, at the EU Summit in Vilnius at the end of the year (interestingly, my understanding was that this reflected a decision jointly taken with a number of "oligarchs" who were interested in opening the doors to a fuller economic and commercial interaction with the EU and this reminded me of similar dynamics driving the Rus-

sian interest to expand cooperation with the West in the early 90s). Yanukovych added, however, that he needed some flexibility to be able to manage Ukraine's complex relations with Russia, and that the transition should be a progressive one. He asked me to use also my channels to convey these points to Brussels, which I did repeatedly with the then Commissioner for External Relations, Füle, and with other high-level officials in Brussels. In spite of these efforts, I found little interest at the political level in the EU. The question was followed by the Commission, and it was mainly considered a technical issue, without any sign of concern for the consequences of possible divisions within the country or of potentially robust reactions by Moscow. As a result, no creative approach to adjusting the association concept to a country with complex relations with Russia was even considered. This question reached the political level only on the eve of the Vilnius summit, when Yanukovych, under mounting pressure by Putin, was forced to delay the decision of signing the Association Agreement, which in turn started the Maidan protests. Following Yanukovych's demise in early 2014, the EU appeared to believe that the new circumstances would create a better environment for progress towards the association agreement and encouraged the urgent adoption of internal reforms that were, instead, perceived by many former supporters of Yanukovych as discriminatory and divisive (and, I might add, skilfully used by Russia media to develop a hostile narrative towards the new leadership in Kyiv). The EU also opposed the OSCE suggestion to create a contact group on Ukraine, but, following events in Crimea and the Donbass, had to accept the engagement of the OSCE on the ground with its largest ever civilian observation mission and, later, the establishment of the Normandy Group, a belated French initiative to in fact establish a Contact Group. As the situation deteriorated

further, the EU chose not to engage with Russia at the political level but decided to adopt subsequent waves of sanctions, which made EU relations with Russia even more complicated and antagonistic. As fears of a possible Russian invasion grew, individual European leaders tried, without success, to engage with Moscow, but, once again, the EU as such proved unable to put in place any significant collective effort and ended up playing a relatively marginal role. In the following period, the US and Turkey, along with the UN and some other external facilitators, remained the main players when it comes to efforts to facilitate some kind of a dialogue between Kiev and Moscow, while still today a divided EU, while openly supportive of Ukraine, has not been able to present itself as a key player with the goal of designing a path towards the cessation of hostilities and the beginning of a peace process which will inevitably impact the future European security conditions and architecture.

On the other hand, the war in Ukraine has inevitably relaunched a debate about European defence, fuelled by fears of possible future Russian threats against EU members.

This debate has shown the full extent of the challenge of engaging in a process of strengthening the common defence if difficulties remain in the political sphere: building a common defence without a clear shared foreign policy vision would make decisions on possible future military initiatives extremely difficult, as also in this field decisions would require consensus – which means that any EU members would have veto power. And this is not a marginal concern, since reticence towards limitations to national sovereignty, in addition to concerns related to the protection of national defence industry, affects also the security and defence sphere of the EU.

Unfortunately, safeguarding national priorities and sovereign de-

cision-making when it comes to foreign policy has been, from the beginning, a key limiting factor for a common EU foreign policy. The need for consensus on any political initiative has made the process of EU political cooperation rather complex and slow-moving, at the pace of the lowest common denominator. In addition, the asymmetry created by the fact that the EU initially included two nuclear-weapons states, Permanent Members of the UNSC, (only France after Brexit) with their own priorities and perceptions, added to the complexity of the discussions.

The issue of EU representation in the UN, and specifically the desirability of a EU permanent seat in the Security Council, has in itself been object of analysis and heated debates over many years. In the absence of decisive progress towards a real European federation of states as a recognised international legal entity, these ideas remained abstract and unrealistic and ended up lost in the inconclusive debate on the reform of the Security Council itself.

The process of EU enlargement, as the result of a choice between deepening and widening the EU that was made in the 90s, did not facilitate decision-making at the political level, of course. It had been in many ways easier to find common ground between member states on foreign policy issues at the time of the Cold War. At that time, however, most EU members relied for their security on cooperation within the NATO framework. With the subsequent waves of EU enlargement over the following decades, mainly dictated by economic and trade considerations, this degree of like-mindedness decreased substantially, especially when on the table were key questions involving, for instance, the further course of EU relations with Russia (which had been a less challenging, but not entirely uncontroversial, issue among the small group of founding members). In addition, the increasing complexity of contemporary security challenges, from terrorism

to migration, coupled with the progressive return of geopolitics, led to a renationalisation of foreign policies which in turn made it increasingly difficult to find common ground for coherent and significant EU policies.

These difficulties have become particularly visible in organisations within which the EU, especially after Lisbon, aimed at portraying itself as an autonomous key player. In the OSCE, for instance, where I served in various capacities over many years, I observed how the EU developed a very elaborated process of internal consultations, which resulted in regular statements by the Head of the EU Delegation, introduced by the subsequent Presidencies – as the EU as such does not have a seat in the organization. While at first sight this conveys the image of a common EU stance on all relevant issues on the agenda, over time it brought to the fore the real weakness of the common foreign policy, as EU statements were at the level of the lowest common denominator, often echoing the conclusions of EU Ministerial statements in Brussels. The EU delegate was unable to take the floor for any significant, substantive reaction to statements by others, in absence of a previously agreed line, while member states were discouraged from intervening individually to avoid exposing possible differences of view among them. This weakened decisively the concept of dialogue within the OSCE, turning it into a place for an exchange of prepared statements and undermining its ability to serve as an effective conflict prevention tool.

These difficulties also have a direct impact on the efforts to develop a credible autonomous EU defence capability. First of all, the objectives of a common European defence should be clearly set out in agreed strategic documents. True, there has been a series of agreed strategies over the years, which allowed to progressively update the EU vision of its own security. The most recent of

these documents, the Strategic Compass, sets out a multi-layered security approach to address conflict and crises, including in co-operation with other international partners, in a global environment where both traditional and new hybrid security challenges have evolved substantially. However, while these successive documents outline policy implications for EU security and defence, they fall short of introducing rules that would activate mechanisms of protection of individual or groups of member States against the potential threats that have been identified. In practice, it is for the EU members to achieve consensus to equip the EU institutions with the tools needed to address the new challenges and to decide, on a case-by-case basis, to undertake joint action to address them.

This is where weaknesses emerge. The inability of the EU to jointly decide on a course of action to provide military assistance to Ukraine in the face of the Russian invasion has led to the creation of a coalition of the willing which includes the UK as one of its promoters, thus putting it outside the scope of action of EU institutions operating in the defence field. Calls by the President of the Commission to “re-arm Europe”, with a number of specific initiatives, such as the drone wall defence, have become the object of heated political debates within member states and have well shown the challenges ahead.

The fear that Russia could over time also pose a direct threat to individual EU members, coupled with concerns about the degree of future US engagement in Europe, has also sparked a debate about European nuclear deterrence. After Brexit, in the EU only France can offer, on a significantly lower scale, the kind of security guarantee that the US has extended to for more than half a century to the European members of NATO. In fact, France, which has recently announced plans to modernise and upgrade her nuclear

arsenal, has invited other interested EU members to participate in nuclear deterrence exercises, while revitalising her cooperation with the UK in the nuclear field, reviving the spirit of the 1998 Saint Malo agreement. However, much remains to be done in terms of clarifying the conditions of the French offer to consider putting its nuclear deterrence at the disposal of a larger community of interested European countries, such as the doctrinal basis or the decision making process on how to react to a possible nuclear threat, also keeping in mind the fact that France does not participate in the NATO nuclear planning process.

In the face of these difficulties, some experts have argued that the only solution is the introduction of a community approach also in the field of foreign policy and defence, to replace the consensus rule with majority vote in the decision-making process, possibly as a significant step towards the further deepening of the process of EU institutionalisation. Obviously this would be ideal and would solve most of the problems I have outlined. Yet, as I have pointed out, these are areas where, especially in the current phase, governments are very unlikely to renounce their sovereign decision-making prerogatives and thus accept any kind of majority rule.

There are alternatives, of course.

One way would be to further develop what already exists in terms of practical cooperation. For instance, the coalition of the willing for Ukraine could be a starting point for a more effective coordination among European members of NATO and would help design a path for a progressive return of the UK towards certain aspects of the EU integration process.

Another alternative would be to return to the concept of different speeds in the European construction process and start with the creation of a core group of like minded member states, which

would accept more advanced forms of cooperation in foreign policy and defence matters, leaving other members with the option of joining then when ready, for instance by using an adapted concept of enhanced cooperation. These countries would then be able to engage as a united, visible actor in international fora, such as NATO in the first instance, but then also the UN or the OSCE, without the constraint of having to stop and double-check at every step. They could establish more effective structures for cooperation in the field of defence, with advanced common defence planning structures and processes, which others will be able to join over time, ensuring proper division of labour, interoperability, avoiding duplications and ensuring optimisation of resources.

At any rate, seeking more effective interoperability and division of labour among EU members remains in the meantime the priority objective to ensure effective cooperation between national armies and a more efficient use of defence budgets by individual member states. Urgent progress is needed in the process of standardisation of military equipment, where, once again, national priorities stand in the way of effective division of labour, while cooperation between national armament industries appears to be left more to initiatives among individual industrial groups rather than being a result of strategic decisions by European leaders.

As governments are increasingly affected by new security challenges, they will feel compelled to rely on closer cooperation with trusted partners to address their needs and boost their capabilities, while they are under pressure within NATO to step up their investments in the field of defence. A stronger role of the EU, also within NATO, is bound to be part of the response to this call, but for this to happen, strong leadership leading to a serious re-evaluation of the state of European defence and to deep re-

forms has become imperative also because, depending also on electoral results in the US, the possibility that transatlantic relations may come under additional strain cannot be discounted. Over time, this would cast a shadow on the credibility of NATO's deterrence, which rests primarily on the US nuclear arsenal and its overall superior defence capabilities (not only numbers and delivery means of nuclear weapons, but also space programmes, intelligence, advanced military AI capability, projection of naval and air power and so on). It is imperative, therefore, for Europe to work on strengthening the Union and invest more in upgrading its own defence capabilities.

Let me now, before concluding, take a quick look at the broader possible evolution of the European security architecture.

Much depends, of course, on the further course of the war in Ukraine and on the way it will be concluded. EU-Russia relations are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, with little prospect for the end of the current sanctions regime, the firm refusal by Moscow to even entertain any kind of dialogue with a High Representative coming from a the EU country that has one of the most controversial relationships with Russia (and with little interest by the EU to appoint a different representative for the dialogue with Moscow). In fact, we are looking at a protracted Cold War-like relationship for the foreseeable future, with the risk, however, that over time this situation might deepen divisions within the EU. The risk, of course, is that the US will continue to play the key mediation role, keeping open the option of subcontracting future security guarantees to Ukraine – a necessary condition for Kyiv – to the EU directly or through the coalition of the willing formula.

Security arrangements following the (hopefully early) the conclusion of the war in Ukraine will indeed have a key role.

Should the path of a “coalition of the willing” military presence be followed, this would almost certainly take place without agreement from Russia since it would essentially provide a security guarantee to Ukraine. How solid this guarantee would be remains to be seen, since there is a concrete risk that the EU as such may not be able to reach a decision on endorsing such move and that the Americans might keep saying that this is a task for the Europeans, thus denying them of the kind of security guarantee based on Art. 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and leaving them to figure out how deterrence would work in case of a new crisis, potentially even involving threats of use of nuclear forces. In any case, this would result in deepening the Cold-War like divisions with Russia and would set a new “iron curtain” in the immediate vicinity of Russia, with potential security risks for the future stability of Ukraine.

A second scenario might involve the presence of a UN peace-keeping force (or of an ad hoc coalition composed of military forces from few countries acceptable to both Ukraine and Russia). This scenario would be closer to the one I dealt with in Kosovo, with ambiguity on the status of the territories occupied by Russia during the war, a potentially long-term ceasefire and a political stalemate which would see the global community divided along geopolitical lines for a potentially extended period.

Whether any of these scenarios is realistic, however, is still too early to say.

Over the longer term, the possibility of reinvigorating the OSCE or of recreating a broader process of cooperation in Europe, similar to what was achieved through the CSCE, will have to be explored. The CSCE was established some 50 years ago as a process of dialogue and cooperation between adversaries. It was initially slow and largely controversial, but with time ad visionary leader-

ship it started to deliver positive results. If today it is difficult to imagine the revitalisation of a wider security dialogue with Russia, over time the conditions might arise with a stable settlement of the Ukraine issue and a progressive phasing out of EU sanctions to Russia, as a first step towards restarting some interaction, especially in the economic and trade spheres. Inevitably, this will take a long time, may require leadership changes and may be influenced by external events, such as developments in the Middle East, the Mediterranean or the Arctic regions. Yet, in the long term even Russia might have to come to recognise that a significant part of its identity is European and that may slowly reopen the door to a new phase in intra-European relations.