

A new security order in Europe

Ian Anthony

March 2, 2022

A statement of the current problem facing Europe

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the second in the space of eight years, signals the collapse of the European security order as it was designed in the 1990s. Talk of an order under stress or being challenged is rendered irrelevant, the order is dead. The final blow is the culmination of a process of erosion and degradation that has taken place over more than a decade.

The problem facing European states and security institutions is how to act now that the existing system cannot be saved—what will replace it and how can the optimum solution be reached?

The security order was built around legal and political agreements as well as institutions to monitor and implement the substantive content of those agreements. Russia has worked systematically to challenge and then fracture the order.

The comprehensive concept at the heart of the order balances politico-military questions with democracy, human rights, and the rule of law alongside the economic and environmental dimensions of security. The OSCE and the Council of Europe are therefore essential elements of making the concept real, but Russia has blocked or abused those institutions with increasing regularity.

Russia has tried to manoeuvre the politico-military dimension of security back to a place of primacy, but even here Russia has ignored the relevant parts of the OSCE when it is clear that using the procedures would require compromise to national security as defined in Moscow. This has happened in Nagorno-Karabakh and Kazakhstan as well as in Ukraine. In all three cases the OSCE was side-lined and Western countries were excluded from the important decisions.

Russia is not interested in the EU as an interlocutor. As the currency of European security is now military power, Russia sees no purpose in paying close attention to an entity with nothing in its bank account.

The primary target for Russian diplomacy (including the 'diplomacy of violence') is the United States, but among the European institutions with a security focus, NATO has now moved to the centre from a Russian perspective, exemplified by the draft treaty text published in December 2021 addressing the alliance.

The objectives and timing of Russian military aggression

The primary factors that have influenced the current military campaign appear to be the following.

President Vladimir Putin intends to consolidate the opportunity he gained through the revision of the Russian Constitution to remain in power for an extended period, if not indefinitely.¹ Unless he cancels

¹ As amended in 2020 the Russian Constitution 'reset the clock' on the eligibility of Mr Putin to run for President and introduced new restrictions that would make it more difficult to organize opposition to him. Anna Zotéeva, From the Russian Constitution to Putin's Constitution: Legal and Political Implications of the 2020 Constitutional Reform, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Stockholm, October 25, 2020.

the elections and simply declares himself ‘President for Life’ – a scenario that cannot be excluded, particularly if there is an extended state of emergency – he will have to run for office in 2024, albeit in an election that is very unlikely to respect democratic standards. From mid-2023 President Putin will have to pay close attention to the domestic political context rather than focusing his attention on external affairs.

The plans made by NATO states for military reform and modernization will progressively enhance the capability of the West. The Concept for Defence and Deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) document and the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept were designed within political guidelines established by the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept. The revised Strategic Concept in the summer of 2022 is expected to revise those guidelines to remove restrictions on the permanent forward deployment of significant combat forces. New guidelines may also release NATO from past promises to Russia on the stationing of nuclear weapons made in the past. The military staff at NATO will have greater flexibility in framing their recommendations to the political leaders who ultimately decide future plans.² Russia has probably reached a plateau in military capability after 15 years of major reform and modernization. After a long period of growth in real terms Russia’s military spending appears to have stabilized at around 4 per cent of gross domestic product and 11 per cent of total government spending—both very high figures in international comparative terms.³ Increasing the military effort will probably become progressively more difficult for Russia as the impact of extensive economic sanctions is felt. Therefore, this is the moment of maximum military opportunity for Russia to have any impact on NATO plans.

President Putin has made it clear that he sees Russia, Belarus and Ukraine as essential elements of Russian power going forward.⁴ The domestic reaction to the election of President Aleksander Lukashenko that was declared neither free nor fair created a serious internal crisis. The progressive consolidation of the Union State with Belarus accelerated, and the effective diminution of the sovereignty of Belarus opened the pathway to the use of territory in the current military operation.⁵ Belarus will have to finalize the measures that Lukashenko has presented to try and convince the public of political change, but the public reaction to a process that lacks democratic credibility would have been unpredictable. President Putin saw this as the moment to consolidate political control over Belarus, and he has taken the opportunity.

Russian leaders probably saw this as a moment of Western weakness and division. In the United States the polarisation of domestic politics is combined with a reassessment of overseas military intervention following the withdrawal from Afghanistan as mid-term Congressional elections approach. France has entered a Presidential election campaign in which candidates opposed to President Emmanuel Macron have questioned the benefits of trans-Atlantic alliance to France. Germany is learning how to govern with a new political configuration in power. The European Union continues to work through the implications of Brexit.

Can we assess the impact of the war in Ukraine?

In the short term the limited steps that can be taken are being taken. These include statements of political solidarity, a renewed attention to collective defence, a range of sanctions and restrictive measures with escalating impact and a growing number of countries providing military assistance to Ukraine. However, the strategic shock that Europe is now experiencing is going to demand more far-reaching responses. Decisions by European countries and by the European Union indicate an awareness of the need for more fundamental changes.⁶ It is not possible today to predict the outcome of events in the

2 Julian Lindley-French, ‘After You, Please? Enablement and Deterrence’, *Atlantisch Perspectief*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2021.

3 According to the data collected by SIPRI, China and Russia were the only two countries in the world that increased their military expenditure in real terms in every year between 1998 and 2016.

4 Olivia Durand, ‘Putin’s invasion of Ukraine attacks its distinct history and reveals his imperial instincts’, *The Conversation*, February 23, 2022.

5 At the end of 2021 President Aleksandr Lukashenko labeled Ukraine a ‘second front’ in Western hybrid attacks on Belarus and subsequently stated that ‘stated that if conflict between Ukraine and Russia escalated ‘it is clear whose side Belarus will be on’. ‘Lukashenko talks about seven stages of Belarus destruction scenario’, Office of the President of Belarus, Minsk, September 16, 2020; ‘Belarus announces military drills with Russia near Ukraine border’, *Reuters*, November 29, 2021.

6 The speech by Chancellor Olaf Scholz to the German Parliament on 27 February indicated a fundamental change in German security

coming weeks and months, but it is possible to track some difficult and important questions that will shape developments.

The current events indicate that the main influence on the future of European security is not exercised from Moscow, Washington or Brussels, but rather in two critical decision locations.

How hard and how successfully Ukraine fights for its independence is the single most important determinant of the European future. Recent decisions indicate a step-change in the level of military support to Ukraine. While Ukrainian forces cannot confront Russian forces in open spaces, a decentralized campaign to degrade Russian forces and maintain corridors to supply major cities enduring urban warfare appear to be the main lines of action. However, the outcome of the war is not possible to predict today.

The second key decision location is Turkey, which has tried to follow a policy of strategic balancing with Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the United States. The sustainability of this balancing is going to be determined in the coming weeks. Early indications are that Turkey will choose to ‘turn West’ when it approaches the crossroads. Turkey is the most important NATO military asset in the Black Sea region. Moreover, a Western orientation could help remove the main issue that has been preventing raising NATO/EU cooperation to a new level—something that is now a strategic imperative.

The place of collective defence as the primary task of NATO has been reinforced. While crisis management and cooperative security (as NATO defines those terms) remain, they are almost certain to be relegated in importance in the next iteration of the NATO strategic concept that heads of state and government are expected to endorse in the summer. Russian control over Belarus and Ukraine is a fundamental change in the strategic geography of Europe, with the land border between NATO and an adversary extended by thousands of kilometers. Further changes that would have seemed impossible a short time ago are now under discussion. In Finland the political parties came together on 1 March 2022 to discuss a potential application to join NATO, and the issue of NATO membership is also becoming a salient issue in Sweden as the country heads to new elections in September 2022.⁷ At a meeting with Belarussian security and defence officials that was broadcast, President Lukashenko displayed a map that included Moldova in the current war plan.⁸

A military front in Europe stretching from the Arctic to the Mediterranean where large forces are in proximity is one outcome that no longer seems impossible to imagine. At their extraordinary meeting on 25 February the heads of state and government of NATO agreed that ‘Russia’s actions are also a flagrant rejection of the principles enshrined in the NATO-Russia Founding Act: it is Russia that has walked away from its commitments under the Act’.⁹ Together with the outcome of the ‘Article 4’ meeting of the North Atlantic Council the day before, the leaders effectively cancelled the NATO-Russia Founding Act. The implications of this are yet to be seen, but the decision releases NATO from its commitments to Russia on the scale of forward deployed forces and the location of nuclear weapons.

Although NATO has moved to the centre of the European security order, the final shape of the enhanced political dimension to the Alliance that has recently been promised is yet to emerge. The word resilience is now very prominent in the discussion of how NATO will adapt.¹⁰ Resilience probably won’t become a core task, but the resources for the basket of issues it covers is expected to grow. However, on those issues NATO is not going to become a “first responder” which will increase the salience of working effectively with partners.

and defence policy. The decision by the EU to use €500 million of common funds to finance some of the military assistance provided to Ukraine by its member states is also indicative of a new approach to security and defence. Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, Berlin, February 27, 2022; Council of the European Union, EU adopts new set of measures to respond to Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, Brussels, February 28, 2022.

7 ‘Sweden and Finland see ‘historic’ surge in support for NATO’, The Local, March 1, 2022.

8 Ellen Mitchell, ‘Belarus president stands in front of map indicating Moldova invasion plans’, The Hill, March 1, 2022.

9 Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government on Russia’s attack on Ukraine, Brussels February 25, 2022.

10 Heads of State and Government of the North Atlantic Alliance, Strengthened Resilience Commitment, Brussels, June 15, 2021.

The political centre of gravity for security decision-making in Europe may have shifted because countries of central Europe no longer trust the Franco-German capacity to make a clear analysis or produce an effective response to the challenge. A rebalancing of political authority for shared security decision-making with more weight given to the views of central Europe seems likely. The new German government has differentiated itself to a degree from its predecessor, whose policies can now be confirmed as a total failure. However, there is a significant trust gap to be closed.

The partnership with the EU that was created in Warsaw in 2016 is the single most important relationship for NATO.¹¹ The statements that the EU and NATO are doing more together than ever and the statement that the level of cooperation between them is insufficient to meet the challenge are both true. It is not known whether the current strategic shock is sufficient for the senior political leaders to remove the obstacles to the much closer partnership that is obviously required. Turkish reactions will play an important role in defining what is possible.

While NATO is planning to update the Strategic Concept that is an important political guide to alliance actions at the Summit in Spain in June 2022, the European Union is also preparing a so-called Strategic Compass that will lay out the main lines of action for EU security and defence policy for the coming decade.¹² The NATO strategic concept discussion and the EU strategic compass discussion are not entirely compartmentalized, but there is a concern that they are not integrated to the required extent.

Many countries are still of the firm conviction that the comprehensive concept of security is the appropriate pathway, including those outside NATO and the EU. Collecting these states together is an important task requiring a new level of seriousness and an accelerated timetable in integrating the Western Balkans into security-relevant institutions is a high priority. The political and strategic reasons for integration now far outweigh the technical approach of the current accession process, but whether this view has traction among senior leaders is not known.

Even as the tragedy is unfolding in Ukraine there will come a time when some dialogue and communication with Russia will be needed, and already now it is useful to think about all options. On 25 February the United States suspended bilateral talks with Russia on strategic stability that had developed a certain momentum in 2021.¹³ Significant institutional engagement now is out of the question, but at some point, a process to reduce the most dangerous risks associated with the collapse in the security order will be needed. A return to the traditional approach to arms control could, at the appropriate time, deliver value. However, resources now need to be re-channeled from the well-intentioned but misguided arms control discourse of the recent past into the “why, what and how” of any future processes.

Implications for the European Union

The comprehensive concept of security remains the correct framework for the EU approach. Bringing together as many countries as possible around that concept is the correct objective for diplomacy and a matter of urgency.

The strategic direction of the EU has placed a main emphasis on two important processes: the need to address climate-related issues – first and foremost the need for energy transition; the need to develop the digital economy on which the future prosperity of EU citizens depends. These important priorities must not be derailed, and each is a significant field within the comprehensive security concept.

To this point the EU demonstrated that it is not capable of leadership on politico-military dimensions of security. A previous German government under a Social Democrat Chancellor led NATO to a decision in the context of the Euromissile crisis of the late 1970s. At that time German leaders made difficult de-

11 Joint declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Warsaw, July 8 2016.

12 EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission Josep Borrell, A Strategic Compass to make Europe a Security Provider, Brussels, November 12, 2021.

13 Michael Gordon and Vivian Salama, ‘US Halts Arms Control Talks with Russia’, Wall Street Journal, February 25, 2022.

cisions, but ultimately helped pave the way for important breakthroughs in the political-military security of Europe. Today the legal and institutional changes under the umbrella of the EU have not enhanced European leadership on politico-military security matters, and may have weakened them.

The plaintive message from the head of the German armed forces that in a time of crisis the armed forces are ‘standing there more or less empty-handed. The options we can offer the government in support of the alliance are extremely limited’ is a painful reminder of the degree to which European states have neglected their responsibilities. The German government needs to be supported as it implements the outcome of the fundamental review of the approach to national security that has been triggered by the current conflict.

Correcting the neglect of military capability is principally a national task to be carried out under the NATO umbrella. Nevertheless, there are key contributions for the EU to make. A new sense of urgency should lead to the correction of the poor decision to underfund the military mobility line item in the current financial framework.¹⁴ An honest assessment of cooperation projects leading to more rapid progress in delivering capabilities is needed—perhaps starting with the Medium-Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) drone project yet to deliver a system that could be bought off the shelf from Israel or the United States tomorrow.¹⁵

As noted above, NATO has no ambition to be a ‘first responder’ on many dimensions of resilience where the EU has many advantages. The discussion of resilience has emphasized the need to take account of Chinese actions as well as Russia, which will still have to be an important factor in considering next steps.

- ▶ Russian acts of sabotage on targets in Ukraine is a clear warning of the price for failing to act on critical infrastructure protection.
- ▶ The difficulty of establishing and disseminating information underlines the importance of work to combat misinformation and disinformation, including the need to support responsible public interest media with the appropriate level of resources.
- ▶ The impact of agile and creative messaging by Ukraine has underlined that strategic communication should be elevated to a more significant place within the resilience “toolbox”, including the need for effective influence operations in Russia, Belarus and China.
- ▶ The geopolitics of energy and the need to consider how climate-related goals and energy security can be promoted hand-in-hand was a prominent theme in the presentation of the European Commission at the Munich Security Conference. The integration of climate policy and energy security is an urgent task.
- ▶ The discussions over how to use the sanctions instrument effectively have underlined the need for the digital economy to develop in ways that take account of new geopolitical conditions.

The strategic implications of relations in the immediate neighbourhood have created a new urgency around the need to find a cooperative relationship with Turkey, to accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans and to develop a security compact with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The technocratic approach must give way to a more political process.

As a final reflection, the fantasy of strategic autonomy needs to be abandoned in favour of positioning the EU as a responsible and essential actor within a united West.

¹⁴ Alexandra Brzozowski, ‘EU lawmakers call on Commission to preserve budget funding for military mobility’, Euractiv, June 2020.

¹⁵ ‘France, Germany and the UK all took different approaches to gaining UAV capabilities, with the result that, almost two decades on, all three operate or have ordered US-made MALE drones while their joint EuroMALE project stumbles along unresolved’, ‘Airpower: How did Europe miss the MALE drone revolution?’, Defense-Aerospace.com, January 3, 2022.