

Jetzt oder Nie

The time has come to think and act as a European superpower.

In this article, I set out the reasons why the Russian invasion of Ukraine increased the acute need for a stronger European foreign defence policy. I argue that this should come about as soon as possible. This is not just because of a possible Trump re-election but also because of the autocrats within NATO and the EU. Even if Biden is re-elected, the need for a European pillar under NATO is what I will argue. I shall therefore set out an agenda for the EU, not “to become a superstate” but an aspiring “superpower”, as EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen put it. I will discuss some of the actions and reforms that must be taken after the European elections in June 2024, and show what an integrated EU foreign and defence policy should look like. I know it will not happen in the timeframe I illustrate, but I want you to think about the possibility and imagine what it looks like. If you cannot imagine it, it will certainly never happen.

The Time Is Now

When a French president dresses himself in the cloak of Britain’s finest wartime prime minister, it is worth listening to. On French TV, mid-March, President Macron quoted Winston Churchill. ‘*Il faut avoir le nerf de la paix*’, he said to his interviewers. ‘If you seek peace, prepare for war’, it loosely translates to. The French president seems to have chosen to confront Russia. This is a stark difference from the beginning of 2022, when President Macron seemed to opt for a third way to deal with the Russian president, on the eve of his decision to launch an all-out war in Ukraine. Western leaders then tried to make sense of what Putin was all about, and the French president saw a role for France in changing the Russian leaders’ mind. The same Macron, who claimed to have spent hundreds of hours with Mr. Putin and, even after the Russian invasion, argued that Russia shouldn’t be ‘humiliated’, changed his tune. Two years into the most savage war on the European continent since WW2, we see a French leader sadder and wiser, but also more determined not to let Russia win. ‘If Russia wins the Europe’s credibility will be reduced to zero. We have to be prepared to use all means to ensure that Russia does not win,’ added the French leader, addressing his TV audience.

President Macron already primed this message when, after the Ukraine summit of European leaders end of February, he uttered that no option should be taken of the table, including ‘French boots on the ground’. That message was a new. However, instead of being received in Moscow, it quickly got rebutted in various capitals around Europe, mostly in Berlin. Where Macron addressed the Russian leader in his own language, it got blatantly clear that the European ‘*lingua franca*’ is not that of power and confrontation. Talk is cheap, and the strong words of the French leader are not matched by French military or civilian support for Ukraine. ‘*Point d’argent, pointe de Suisse*’ (‘Kevin Geld (Kreuzer), keine Schweizer’) as the French know all too well. France has given €3,8 billion in support to Ukraine, Germany has already propped up €18 billion, and even the Netherlands with €6 billion outranks France by a mile. Perhaps the other European leaders were quick to jump the gun on the French president’s claim not to rule out troop deployment in Ukraine because the French leaders’ rhetoric was in stark contrast to his financial commitment. More likely, the fear of escalation towards Russia was the main reason for the series of press releases sent from the various European capitals, stating that there was no intention to have European soldiers fighting on behalf of Ukraine. Russian President Putin must have mused the plethora of European responses and, after some consideration, rebuked by threatening to respond with nuclear power if a NATO member would enter the war with soldiers.

This French ‘*alleingang*’ shows two things: the need for a coordinated European response, whatever the response might be. Unity in messaging means clarity of purpose. Something that the EU has been lacking chronically in most policy areas albeit the position towards the Russian invasion was remarkably coherent. The other thing that is lacking is the European will to think, speak, and act as a superpower. Nothing new, but

never so existential, now that the Russian military threat to our continent is growing with Ukraine slowly bleeding to a standstill and forced into negotiations on increasingly unfavourable terms.

In this article, I seek to fill some of the gaps to ensure that there is sustained coherence in what European leaders say and do. I argue for a European cockpit that drives the continental plane. However, the plane itself is assembled both inside and outside the EU. For I do not believe that the ambition to become 'strategically autonomous' is a serious one if the EU cannot even match its words and actions. Even its first promise to deliver to Ukraine a million grenades by the end of March this year has already been broken, and had to be pushed to a new goal for end of this year. The EU now follows the NATO-purchasing guidelines to deliver much-needed patriots to the front. In fact, two years into the Ukrainian war, the record of non-EU but NATO member states, such as the UK (Storm Shadow long-range missiles), Norway (NASAM advanced surface to air missiles), and Turkey (Bayraktar drones), have been more impressive than most of the EU member states. However, because even the US Congress has been dragging its feet on the latest support package for Ukraine in an election year that could bring Donald Trump back into the White House, the need for European members of NATO to defend Ukraine has become ever more pressing. The package did eventually come through, pushed by House Speaker Mr. Johnson, however this took a very long time and did not go easily.

The UK-based magazine *The Economist* (Feb-March 2024) asked the question "Is Europe ready?" and summed up the answer; "Russia is becoming more dangerous, America is less reliable, and Europe remains unprepared". With Russia morphing its gas- and oil-driven economy into a full-scale war economy, now spending 7,1% of its GDP on defence, according to Denmark's defence minister Lund-Poulsen, it could attack a NATO-country within three to five years. This might have been the latest and starkest warning from a Western politician about Moscow's appetite for confrontation beyond the war in Ukraine, but he was not alone. Joined by colleagues from Sweden, Romania, Germany, and the UK, the Danish minister sounded an alarm about Russia's increased defence spending and the possibility of a direct confrontation with NATO which would test the alliances' collective defence pledge (Article 5). Together with the potential comeback of Donald Trump, who already undermined the cornerstone of the NATO defence alliance in his first term, this spells a gloomy picture for the European security architecture, which has been carefully woven since WW2. It all spells that the time to change is now!

The Russian threat extends beyond Ukraine.

On the 4th of March the vice-president of the Russian National Security Council, Dimitri Medvedev, spoke in Sotsji and called the existence of Ukraine a 'concept that should be terminated forever' and restated Ukraine is 'without a doubt part of Russia'. Medvedev is not just acting as Putin's clown, he also leads the Russian military industrial complex. According to Boris Kagarlitsky (a Russian sociologist and union-man, now sentenced to five years into a Russian labour camp), Western analysts make a mistake in interpreting Russia's behaviour solely through a geopolitical lens. 'The war is not just rooted in geopolitics' but also finds its origin in the need of the Russian military industrial complex and some oligarchs to 'get more funding through military invasion'. This might have been an extra reason to go to war, but it comes on top of the unbelievable ignorance on the side of most Western analysts for the clear warnings that the Russian leadership itself should restore the Russian-speaking community (Russky Mir) beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Since President Putin addressed the Munich Security Conference in 2007, he consistently laid bare his ideas of Europe carved into spheres of influence, with NATO staying behind the border of Oder-Neisse and the Russian motherland consisting of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and potentially parts of Balticum and Georgia. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, the downing of MH17 – a passenger flight over Eastern Ukraine by a Russian-provided BUK-missile, or a 7-page essay by Vladimir Putin early summer 2021 in which he stated that Ukraine was 'no country' but belonged to 'the Russian motherland'; nothing woke the Europeans up. During the run-up to the war, Russian blood supplies were refreshed, notwithstanding the dire need for blood plasma in Russian hospitals that had already experienced more than a million COVID-deaths. Although US-intelligence services heeded the warning over this observation in NATO headquarters at a time when Russia was pulling together over 120.000 troops at the Ukrainian border, Europeans still dreamed of keeping Putin restrained. Most Europeans that is. Obviously, not in Poland or in the Baltics, where they had seen the Russian military boot in their streets not that long ago.

One year into the war, the first attempt at peace negotiations in Turkey failed because of the horrendous massacre committed by Russian soldiers in Bucha. It showed the ruthlessness of the Russian leadership at the time that the war was certainly not running in their favour. Two years into the war, the murder of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader, incarcerated in a penal colony on February 16th underlines, once again, the ruthlessness and violence of the Russian leadership. After Putin secured his fifth term in office his victory speech, he used the word ‘war’ for the Ukraine invasion that was previously dubbed a ‘special military operation’. It is no surprise that this is the lead-up to an increasing number of soldiers sent to Ukrainian trenches, just falling short of full mobilisation.

The question that should now be at the forefront of European leaders is, can Ukraine lose the war? Is Putin’s appetite for territorial conflicts satisfied?

Former French minister De Villepin once called this situation ‘*nous sommes dans la logique de guerre*’. This logic of war, however, easily leads to the logic of escalation. That is what seems to unite Europeans more than to thwart wider conflict with the Russians. The refusal of German Bundeskanzler Scholz to deliver the Taurus missiles with the range to hit Russia’s soil deprives Ukrainians, who are struggling in their trenches, of the capacity to keep the Russian invader at arm’s length. On the contrary, it also signals to Moscow that support for Ukraine is not steady and European unity is slowly breaking. The solution to this now seems to be found in the German delivery to the UK, after which the NATO-ally Brexiteer can deliver their Storm Shadow-missiles to Kiev. Reluctant countries backfilling their more offensive counterparts are a very ugly and European solution, but do not have to be a bad one per se. As long as the European fear of escalation is greater than our trust in our own deterrence, we keep giving Moscow the chance to cry foul and pretend that it is in war with the NATO. That Russian narrative then seeps into the domain of Western public opinion, and Putin has his fifth column of European voters who are either war-fatigued or simply oppose taunting the Russian bear. The European elections in June will most probably already see a majority of Eurosceptical parties and they have a fault line between anti-Russian (party of Italian prime-minister Meloni, the populists True Finns, the Polish PIS) and Russian-friendly (Hungarian prime minister Orban, Italian populist right wing Salvini, German AfD and die Linke) populist and right-wing parties. In this landscape, European leaders need to manoeuvre and make the case for their electorate that Russia is still a prime security threat.

That case could – no, should – be handled better. First and foremost, the Russian invasion in Ukraine disrupted energy security in Europe, making it necessary to not only decouple ourselves from Russian gas (and mostly oil) but also to compensate ordinary citizens from the state budget because they would no longer be able to afford to pay their bills. Second, to curb rampant inflation and keep purchasing power more or less stable. The expenditures that EU member states have allowed themselves to make so that their own citizens keep paying their bills outcompete the expenditures of supporting Ukraine by almost tenfold. Yet, apart from German Energy and Economy Minister Habeck, no European politician is making this point: ‘We do whatever we can to support Ukraine in its fight, but we will make you pay your bills!’

More importantly, European leaders must make the case for freedom more eloquently. If Ukraine can be attacked at will, then the core liberal principles of sovereignty (no violation of borders and the right to choose one’s own government) are out of the window. The Helsinki-accords, a cornerstone of European civilisation and the behaviour of government towards men, would be void. The security architecture built under the American nuclear umbrella and represented in the Council of Europe and the OSCE will render useless. European member states would become vulnerable to autocratic or straight Russian influence, as would some of the other countries bordering Russia. An 18th century Europe of influence spheres would return with 20th century nuclear weapons and 21st century means of online destabilisation. Every country in the EU would be affected, all European-oriented governments would be challenged, and every European society would see more polarisation and violence as a consequence. Putin would not only grab land to restore his imperial pipe dream, but also grab the opportunity to challenge the Western order that he has come to dislike so much.

There are a few Russian military options on the table. Undoubtedly, the weakest geographical area of NATO is the Suwalki-corridor, where Russia could cut off the Baltic states from Poland. This 100 km wide stretch of land, with the Baltics' most southern state Latvia on one side and Poland on the other, connects Russia and Belarus. On the Russian side lies Kaliningrad, where Russia harbours its naval fleet and has access to hypersonic missiles that are ready to be loaded with nuclear warheads. If Russia decides to cut off and isolate the Baltics, there are only two roads and one railroad that connect them to Poland, making it NATO's Achilles heel. This is where Putin might test the solidarity of the alliance and he would not even have to invade.

The Russian failures in Ukraine in the last two years have exposed some of the limitations of the Russian military. The Russian army has suffered extremely heavy losses, and the total number of soldiers killed in Ukraine is now estimated to be over half a million, most of them Russian. However, these incredible numbers, which would have sent any general rethinking, did not deter Putin. He simply uses soldiers as cannon fodder. After his staged re-election, the Russian leader now calls his invasion of Ukraine right out war. Would Ukraine fall, he is undoubtedly prepared to occupy the country with extra hundreds of thousands of military. A resurgent and emboldened Russia would 'become an empire' again, as the US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski already noted in the 1990s. But, despite Russia invading Georgia (2008), annexing Crimea and kitting the war in the Donbass (2014) the US took its eyes off Ukraine and the Europeans were lulled into negotiations (Minsk I and II) that only provided a springboard for their invasion in 2022. For the US administration of Biden was quick to understand that there was simply no way than to be forced back into the European theatre that it so much wanted to leave to the Europeans, in order to focus on the geopolitical rivalry with China.

Ukraine is now facing the most challenging time since the beginning of the war. It runs out of ammunition and all kinds of supplies and is forced to ration. Russia's invasion is now expected to step up and, especially if it would be able to carve out a giant piece of Ukraine, would remain a source of continuous threats. Would Kiev fall, that would bring Russia straight up to NATO's border. Although the alliance was enlarged and extended with Sweden and Finland, it would discredit this same alliance for its failure to defend Ukraine's independence, as so many of its important member states had vowed at the time Ukraine became a sovereign state and gave up on the deployed (Russian) nuclear arsenal. Therefore, the continued existence of independent Ukraine can no longer be taken for granted.

What must Europe do?

First and foremost, it must absolutely make clear that it will do 'whatever it takes' to keep supporting Ukraine. This reminiscence of Mario Draghi's famous quote that supported and secured the euro would be equally important to secure the freedom and security of our continent against the bullies and baddies in our neighbourhood. If one considers that the Russian economy values \$1900 billion and is smaller in size than that of Italy, this should be possible. Even the price it has to pay for rebuilding Ukraine is estimated at \$484 billion and could already be covered using the frozen assets of the Russian national bank. Worldwide there is about €300 billion in assets of which 2/3 sits in Europe, mostly at clearinghouse Euroclear in Belgium. The interest in this capital alone could be treated as windfall profits and delivers somewhere in the order of €3 to 5 billion yearly, enough to start a European fund for centrally purchasing ammunition the way the European Commission did during the COVID-crisis with the vaccines. The US and the UK would even go as far as using the frozen capital itself which could easily leverage €1000 billion in international capital markets.

Obviously, there are some downsides to taking Russian money that has not yet been legally confiscated on the basis of a court order. It could also damage the trust Euroclear and the euro and dollar as such, or spur countries such as Qatar or China to withdraw their capital from the EU. However, if G7 acts together, it could also be the beginning of the geopolitical rise of the euro, like the dollar has always been used. Finally, the EU could also issue defence bonds. However, it would be far better to have EU member states all commit to 2% spending of their GDP on defence, which would bring another €80 billion in defence spending.

The key to a credible European defence policy is precisely that, increased defence spending. This year, European NATO members will spend approximately €350 billion on defence. So, combined, the European NATO members outspend Russia. However, they spend nearly as much of that on defence, with only 20% of the EU national defence budgets on weapons, according to The Economist. On the eve of the war in 2022 and eight years after the annexation of Crimea, European members of NATO spent no more than they had in 1990 in real terms. However, social spending during the same period doubled.

In a remarkable speech, immediately after the Russian invasion, German Bundeskanzler Scholz spoke about ‘*Zeitenwende*’ and announced enormous increase in defence spending. Germany is now bound to become the biggest spender in defence in the EU but is struck by the typical European problems of bureaucracy. In the German Bundeswehr in 2010, about 8500 people worked in procurement and now there are about 11.000 but Germany buys fewer weapons systems than during the Cold War. In addition to heavy-handed decision-making processes, European NATO-allies suffer from a very fragmented and nationally oriented defence industry, incompatibility of weapons systems, and many duplications, while simultaneously having very low output. The weapons produced cannot keep up with the US or even UK defence companies.

Knowing this all too well as the former Minister for Defence, now European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen aired the idea of a European Commissioner on Defence. This would be a grave mistake. Since a new commissioner also leads to new bureaucracy and no new competencies (the Treaty of Lisbon mostly speaks of exemptions for the defence industry from competition rules because of national interests), it would at best lead to bad duplication of what NATO has already successfully in place, command and control, and deployments of military assets and soldiers in real wars. Better is the idea of Guntram Wolff (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswertige Politik) who pleaded for a European Commissioner for Arms (Rüstung). By default, being a civilian organisation, the EU will never command armies into a battlefield. However, it will be able to coordinate and facilitate the purchase and transfer of weapons using economies of scale and financial instruments. Wolff argues correctly that if a global financial crisis leads to a banking union and a worldwide pandemic can make EU member states combine their purchasing power to buy vaccines, why not weapons in the face of imminent Russian threats? The Europeanisation of weapons tenders and procurement however should also be accompanied by ‘NATO-fixation’ of the existing EU Defence Fund. If the American, British, Norwegian, and even Turkish defence industries could jointly tender with European industry for the EU Defence Fund via the mechanism of co-financing, many more weapons systems could be developed at a much faster pace. It would include important industries from non-EU countries, but NATO countries securing the harmonisation of weapons systems according to NATO standards. For France and Germany, opening up this EU Defence Fund might hurt as it would break their monopoly, but the co-financing mechanism would secure European involvement in any of the agreed funding to defence projects.

This brings me to the danger that Europe is always at risk of overcomplicating its decision making and falling into the trap of institutional bickering. Some even become religious over what has now become known as “open strategic autonomy”. Apart from the obvious contradiction in terms between ‘open’ and ‘autonomy’, the term is a misfit and is both unwise and undesirable. To understand this, it should be noted that those who argue in favour of strategic autonomy mostly mean autonomy from the United States. However, if one thing has become utterly clear since the invasion of Ukraine (2022), the defence of Afghanistan against the Taliban (2021), or every security threat to Europe back to the European attempt to go at it alone in Libya (2011), is that Europe cannot do without the US and certainly not without NATO. NATO is the existing and proven security alliance that has kept our continent free and safe since WW2 and is our only chance to harbour a free and prosperous Ukraine in the future.

Therefore I argue it would be better to relive the old “two pillar idea” that the American president John F. Kennedy proposed in 1962 in Paris (where NATO then gathered). This would mean that European NATO countries form a league of their own under NATO-command and control, but with a specific focus on the European continent and security threats in our own backyard. The deployment of assets in this theatre should first and foremost come from European NATO countries, whether it is a patrolling mission in the Baltics, the deployment of Patriots in Bulgaria, or providing troops to ease tensions in Kosovo. This European pillar of NATO could also backfill the US 6th fleet currently stationed in the Spanish harbour of Rosas. Likeminded and naval-oriented nations like the UK, Spain, France, and even the Dutch could patrol the waters of the Mediterranean to the Barents Sea. They would be de facto acting as a militarised coastguard and could assist

Frontex in its fight against smuggling illegal oil to illegal immigrants. For example, it would free tangible naval assets for the US to be deployed in the South China Sea. If this naval operation of European NATO-members would also include heavier military vessels, including submarines, it could acquire the type of long-distance firepower that is currently only provided by the US. By taking over the tasks of the US 6th fleet in the waters off Europe and acquiring a long-range shooting capacity in the US, we would even be able to keep President Trump happy and inside NATO, since he could boast that he made the Europeans take care of their own backyard while opening up two factories of Raytheon for the long-range shooter capacity that the European industry fails to provide.

It could be the renaissance of a highly developed and innovative new industry in Europe, as long as we do not limit security and defence to EU countries alone, but include non-EU but NATO-member states, such as the UK, Norway, and Turkey. As far as I am concerned, this principle should also be applied to the EU's foreign policy decision-making of the European Union. As it did during the Libyan crises, when the EU tried to act alone militarily, the decision making on foreign policy crises and events should be more effective and smoothed in light of the Russian threat but also in light of the ever more complicated geopolitics in our neighbourhood. Some of the instability, destabilisation, and conflict at our outer EU borders also now manifest themselves in our inner cities. For example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict erupted again in the Gaza-strip after the horrible massacre of Jews on the 7th of October. The EU is always been a '*quantitee negligable*' on this evergreen conflict in the Middle East, bitterly divided on how to deal with the practical eruption of conflict whereas totally united on its outcome and two-state solution. The lack of '*handlungsfahigkeit*', however, in this conflict on our doorstep is increasingly painful for European governments under pressure from the demonstrations in the streets of the respective capitals.

To deal with this conflict, any conflict in the European neighbourhood, such as the civil war in Syria or the failed state in Libya, or a provocative Belarus threatening to push migrants over the Polish border, the EU simply is incapable of apt decision-making or thinking as a super power. However, what the example of Hungary (notoriously the outlier in decisions on sanctioning Russia or providing arms) learns is that sometimes its 'ok to stand out'. Too much emphasis has been placed on the veto-right of member states regarding matters of foreign affairs. In the larger European Union, the principle of QMV (qualified majority voting) must be introduced so that a majority (55% of EU member states representing 60% of the EU population) can respond to ongoing international threats and crises. 'Events, dear Boy, events', the British prime minister Harold MacMillan was supposed to have answered when he was asked what the greatest challenge for a statesman was. The same goes for the *Werdegang* the EU now has to undergo to think and act as a superpower, in the interest of securing our freedom and prosperity in Europe. For example, on decisions to put sanctions in place in rogue countries, terrorist organisations, and/or war criminals, we could start by slowly adapting the unanimity rule. To impose sanctions, we leave unanimity in place, but to extend sanctions, a qualified majority would be enough and to lift them, a reversed qualified majority (like with sanctions on the euro) vote needed to be brought to the European Council.

This brings me to my last proposal for the EU to become a superpower in foreign and security matters, which is urgently needed. That is to reform the European Council itself. Earlier, I used the analogy of European foreign and security policy as a plane, steadfastly steering its course through clouded geopolitical skies over the world, and our region in particular. The first reform that should take place is to give the European president the right to invite non-EU but NATO members to the table of the European Council if a crisis erupts that would potentially bring these countries and/or NATO in play. The council would then have to be prepared by permanent representatives of both EU member states as well as NATO-ambassadors. The council could then ask the NATO-Council to deploy troops or other military assets. This way, a European pillar under NATO becomes a reality and would not mix military and civilian authority. Similar to a pilot and co-pilot, the EU and the NATO would fly this plane. The EU would still be sovereign in its decision-making, though not autonomous. However, who wants auto-pilots in international crises and events, my dear?

We ended where we started. With French president Macron not ruling out to put French military deployment on Ukrainian soil to also defend the integrity of our liberal democracies and principles of sovereignty, birders and freedom of choice. If the EU had a cockpit on foreign and security matters, the French president's public stand could have been coordinated and prepared. It would have been the statement of a superpower coming to age and not the cacophony of the whole crew of the plane being aired. So the next time Macron comes up with something, Sikorsky (Poland), Shultz and Baerbock (Germany), Landsbergis (Lithuania), Kalas (Estonia) and aspiring NATO-SG Rutte (Netherlands) all say 'no boots on the ground'. Strategic ambiguity can only be an asset if it is the purpose of the communication. To leave Putin guessing is wise, but to leave him to pick and choose the response of a European leader to then launch his own threats, plays right into the hands of an autocrat. Moreover, we need a strong hand from Europe. It is really now or never!