



Annus Horribilis: Russia's War, Ukraine's Struggle, Europe's Future

Daniel Fiott | 24 February 2023

Key Issues

- One year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a series of important questions for European security have emerged that relate to the continent's unity and ability to defend itself.
- While military, political and economic support to Ukraine has been encouraging, the war has not yet led to any momentous change in how Europe organises and plans for its defence. Genuine EU-NATO cooperation needs to be unleashed.
- The longer the war continues, the more it will become entangled with American strategy in the Indo-Pacific. This gives even more reason to defeat Russia in Ukraine, but Europeans must be prepared for a more volatile transatlantic relationship in the future.

War weariness: the luxury of those not fighting. After one year of war, we continue to see the Ukrainian armed forces and people resist the Russian aggressor. Ukrainians have repelled Russian forces from the heart of the country and now fight the Kremlin largely in the East of the country. No one can doubt the steadfastness of Ukraine, but Kyiv's partners and friends – who have decided against direct military intervention in the war – are being largely judged in steel and gold or how far and fast they are able to arm and re-supply the Ukrainian armed forces. Europe has welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees, imposed extensive sanctions on Russia and opened the EU accession process with Ukraine, and the core objective remains to ensure Ukraine's victory.

Inevitably, war raises difficult questions: how far can America

and Europe continue to support Ukraine's war effort? Is the defeat of Russia a realistic prospect and what does "defeat" mean in reality? On what footing should Europe's relations with Russia be placed after the war? Even after a year of war, there are still no easy answers to such questions. Today, Europe has largely severed economic and energy ties with Russia, but Putin still looms over European security, not least because of the ideology and goals that drive him and his nuclear arsenal.

With potentially dramatic political shifts on the horizon in America, Europe has greater pressure on its shoulders to assist Ukraine and to keep Russia at bay. True, European governments have reinforced NATO's military presence in central and eastern Europe. They have also understood that the German-led logic of binding

Russia in peace through economic interdependence has failed. Through the European Union (EU), they have even broken an important taboo: namely, that the Union – once shy about funding arms – can finance the provision of weapons to partners most in need through the European Peace Facility (EPF).

After a year of war, is it still too early to draw lessons from Russia's war on Ukraine? This is often asked. Yet, the war has already revealed both the shortcomings and boldness of European approaches. This Policy Brief analyses Europe's response by looking at its intelligence on Russia's invasion, supply of military equipment to Ukraine, Military Mobility initiative, treaty-based security guarantees, EU-NATO relations and the transatlantic relationship.

Artificial intelligence?

One of the immediate issues to have emerged out of the war on Ukraine relates to the state of Europe's intelligence services. Although a handful of European states had the precise military intelligence necessary to predict Russia's invasion, the truth is that key states such as [France](#) and [Germany](#) did not follow through on the information they had at hand. Even with Russia's illegal seizure of Crimea in 2014, and the amassing of Putin's troops on Ukraine's borders in advance of the 24 February 2022 invasion, many European governments still did not believe that Russia would attack Ukraine again. In contrast, the United States (US) engaged in a very [public](#) exposure of Russia's plans to invade. A day before the large-scale invasion, the US [reported](#) that some 160,000 to 190,000 Russian troops were sitting as close as 5 kilometres to Ukraine's border. The fact that some European intelligence services downplayed these steps by the Kremlin would be laughable if the situation were not so tragic.

For Europeans, the period before the war therefore revealed a mind-boggling inability to act on intelligence. Why was that? One answer could be that some European states believed that intelligence was being skewed to advance a more hawkish stance towards Russia. Accordingly, there was the distinct impression that states close to Russia were being [ignored](#) despite their repeated warnings about the threat posed by the Kremlin. Another answer, by extension, was the lack of faith in American

intelligence: those that saw US intelligence being manipulated in advance of the Iraq War bought into the idea that American intelligence can never really be trusted. This was obviously wrong. Alternatively, some European governments simply did not want to entertain the idea of a Russian invasion because they knew it would obliterate years of accommodating foreign policy towards the Kremlin. Hence, some [European leaders](#) were still expending energy on diplomatic talks with Putin even while he mobilised for war.

These intelligence shortcomings beg the question: what future case of military aggression will European states try to downplay before they are forced to act? True, with hindsight everything becomes easier and clearer. It is far too easy today to say that, had intelligence been acted on earlier, Europe could have sent arms to Ukraine, fired up its defence factories, turned more states against Russia's actions and weened itself off of Russian energy sooner. In this sense, hindsight sets an unrealistic benchmark. Nevertheless, given the lessons learned from Russia's invasion Europe has now no excuse to know what it must do in future wars. Russia's invasion was a rude awakening for European intelligence, but it should also help write the "playbook" for European responses to future wars.

Venus armed?

Despite the serious European failures to act on intelligence, one of the surprise developments was the EU's move towards financing weapons, ammunition and supplies for Ukraine's war effort. The unattractive and typically bureaucratic sounding EPF has been one of the EU's major contributions to Ukraine's war effort. In 2022, the Facility was supposed to have a financial ceiling of €540 million but, such was the demand to help finance arms for Ukraine, it was increased to [€2 billion](#) for 2023. A powerful symbol of the EU's solidarity with Ukraine, we should recognise that the EPF was never truly established to help Ukraine fight back Russia. While most EU states believed the Facility would largely apply to Africa, this meant that EU planners were ill-prepared to reimburse the type of military equipment inventories used in conventional wars. Consider that the Union first started to ship helmets and medical equipment to Ukraine, but after one year of fighting

Europeans are transferring air defence systems, armoured vehicles, aircraft and even tanks.

The war should certainly put into perspective the remaining regulatory and legal hurdles that have so far hampered progress on Military Mobility. Although transport infrastructure will take some time to build or adjust, there can be no doubt today that Europe needs sound military transport infrastructure to deter Russia from further aggression. Yet, more is needed. Europe should transform Military Mobility. Thus far, the focus has been on better helping to rotate forces in and out of NATO eastern flank countries. However, as NATO appears to be moving towards a more permanent force posture in central and eastern Europe, the EU and NATO will need to start thinking about the protection of military bases and civilian populations, which will entail large-scale investments in missile and air defence systems. The

the Mutual Assistance Clause, and to better connect it with NATO's Article 5, before Ukraine becomes an EU Member State?

In war, prepare for...?

The war on Ukraine has offered European states and institutions the opportunity to prove their ability to act autonomously. They are providing military, financial and political support to Kyiv. Europeans are now running to keep up with defence production, and there are whispers in the air that Europe needs to be put on a "[war economy](#)" footing. Other events, such as Washington's Inflation Reduction Act, have spurred on European decision-makers to find ways of supporting Europe's industry. In the midst of war, the EU has sought to launch major strategic projects such as IRIS² to bolster space communication assets. European states have launched major

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German-led "[European Sky Shield Initiative](#)" hints at this, but a more lasting solution beyond the 16 European states currently signed up is needed.

Furthermore, the war on Ukraine has raised important questions about security guarantees in Europe. Today, states in both the EU and NATO benefit from treaty-based security guarantees. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and Article 42.7 of the Treaty on the EU (TEU) set out the basic logic that an armed attack on one state is an attack on all. The war on Ukraine has shown that any NATO-EU state would want both organisations to help in its hour of need. Yet, the EU is [woefully unprepared](#) to act on the basis of its own Mutual Assistance Clause (the more palatable name for Article 42.7 TEU). Finland's and Sweden's impending NATO accession may imply even less attention to the Mutual Assistance Clause, yet some may have noticed that Ukraine has been offered EU membership. Ukraine, as a future EU member, will not allow any wayward drift on Article 42.7. Surely, the EU will have to find ways to bolster

defence programmes such as next-generation fighter aircraft too. Furthermore, European defence budgets are slowly creeping up and allies may agree in [Vilnius](#) this summer to set "2% of GDP" as a baseline rather than a ceiling for defence spending.

In other respects, however, cooperation has only gone so far. The EU and NATO are still unable to jointly articulate a "master plan" for European security because respective member states do not genuinely want one. Thus, EU-NATO relations are restricted to joint declarations, common actions or staff-to-staff meetings. These are largely bureaucratic actions. Yet meaningful cooperation is possible, even if it can be frustrating. Think of Military Mobility. Ideally, any credible Europeanisation of NATO would see bold plans for EU-NATO cooperation on air and missile defence, critical infrastructure protection, cyber defence and space. These are by no means easy areas to get right in an EU-NATO context, but the war on Ukraine has only raised the bar higher for European security.

Yet Europe's security challenges do not end at the continent's borders. Too often, security in the South and East of Europe have been seen as a trade-off. Today, there certainly appears to be little to no appetite in Europe for out of area military operations. Experiences in Afghanistan and the Sahel have taken the wind out of open-ended stability missions. However, saying that crisis management is passé is not the same as saying that Europe should not respond to war and conflict beyond its shores.

wait for America's permission to arm Ukraine with heavy weapons or not? Should Europe heed Putin's nuclear threats or not? Should Europe push Ukraine to accept negotiations with Russia or not? Should Europe tone down its sanctions on Russia or not? The dividing lines are everywhere.

Fortunately, the leaders of the EU and NATO as organisations and the US have done a rather [good job](#) of keeping a lid on these divisions. Some may



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If Europe is still not fully prepared to defend the homeland alone, however, then it has little hope of securing its interests globally. The war on Ukraine has already taken on global proportions, and this invites Europe to ask whether it should be a regional or global power. The [Indo-Pacific](#) is home to core European interests, but it is also the location of a massive arms build-up and the erosion of trust. What happens if Taiwan asks the EU to deliver arms through the EPF in case China invades? If you believe that this question is overly dramatic, then nothing has been learned since 24 February 2022.

well ask how the response to Ukraine would have unfolded with Donald Trump in office, but the Biden administration has played its hand relatively well in terms of delivering aid to Ukraine and shepherding allies. Yet, in other respects, the war has glaringly exposed Europe's continued [dependence](#) on the US. Think of how Washington provided political cover for Germany over the Leopard tank debacle. The US is making it [abundantly clear](#) that the bulk of its attention should be placed on China. Yet, perhaps the US government is not being loud enough on this point.

Operation Unified Europe?

One of the constant refrains heard since the outbreak of war has been how unified NATO and the EU have been. Thus far, there has certainly been a remarkable unity of purpose. The people of Ukraine deserve nothing less. Both the EU and NATO have been able, so far, to generally paper over the cracks of structural grievances. [Hungary](#) has threatened to veto numerous EU initiatives on Ukraine. [Turkey](#) has threatened to scupper Sweden's accession to NATO, as well as upping its bellicose rhetoric towards Greece and Cyprus. Larger states have sought to "lead" Europe in its response to the war, but only to the annoyance of the rest. Should Europe

The longer the war on Ukraine lasts, the more it becomes entangled with US priorities in the Indo-Pacific. If the US wants to both maintain European security and check China's rise, one plausible short-term approach is to ensure a [swift defeat](#) of Russia in Ukraine. Yet a "two front" approach creates its own difficulties. The US has historically proven that it can fight wars in two geographical areas simultaneously, especially if allies are involved and defence spending remains high. The question is whether Washington has the resources and will to do so again. A real danger for Europeans is that America talks itself into a "China only" strategy at a time when Europe is unprepared to take more of its defence into its own hands.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Fiott

Dr Daniel Fiott is Head of the Defence and Statecraft programme at CSDS, Brussels School of Governance. He is also an Assistant Professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Real Elcano Institute. Previously, he was a defence analyst at the EU Institute for Security Studies and a Visiting Lecturer at the Brussels School of International Studies, University of Kent.

daniel.fiott@vub.be

 [@DanielFiott](https://twitter.com/DanielFiott)

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BRUSSELS
SCHOOL OF
GOVERNANCE

Visitor's address:

Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Mailing address:

Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

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info_bsog@vub.be

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