



NATO, the EU and the Return of Collective Defence

By Elie Perot | 13 May 2022

Key Issues

- Collective defence is back as the main strategic challenge facing Europe's security architecture.
- For NATO, this means a return to basics, moving from the 'light' collective defence posture it implemented after 2014 towards a more substantial presence in eastern Europe. How far this adaptation should go, however, remains to be seen, both in conventional and nuclear terms.
- For the EU, the return of collective defence is harder to navigate because its security and defence policy remains, even after the Strategic Compass, oriented towards crisis management. Yet, the EU can contribute to collective defence, either indirectly, notably in the field of defence industry, or directly, via its collective defence clause – which, however, still lacks the necessary measures to make it operational.

Eight years after the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas, Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine since last February confirms that collective defence is back as the main strategic challenge facing Europe's security architecture. This policy brief examines the implications of such a development for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as well as for the European Union (EU)'s security and defence policy.

NATO: from a 'light' to a more substantial collective defence posture

During the post-Cold War era, the Atlantic alliance had broadened the scope of its actions, moving away from the territorial defence of Europe to focus on out-of-area crisis management. Yet, after 2014 and the first Ukrainian crisis, NATO already begun to shift back

to its original mission – collective defence, as enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Russia's second aggression against Ukraine in 2022 is likely to swing back the pendulum even more firmly in this direction, by highlighting the risks that once again hang over the territorial integrity and sovereignty of European countries.

In this context, it is likely that collective defence will expressly take back precedence at the political level among the three core missions that were identified in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, the other two being crisis management and cooperative security. Thus, the first task of the new Strategic Concept that will be adopted at the Madrid summit next June could be – indeed, should be – to clearly acknowledge such a reordering of NATO's political priorities.

The absence so far of a formal recognition of the renewed centrality of collective defence by NATO has obviously not prevented the organisation from adapting at the military level since 2014, the Atlantic alliance having implemented what could be called a 'light' collective defence posture over the last eight years. This has notably led to the deployment of four rotating multinational battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic states – the so-called 'enhanced Forward Presence' (eFP) – in addition to the repurposing and reinforcement of the NATO Response Force (NRF), within which a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) has been created, to be deployed at very short notice. Under this light posture, NATO forces taking part in the eFP could help ward off a limited Russian incursion but not a large-scale attack, such as the one currently perpetrated against Ukraine. Yet, even in the hypothesis of a major attack by Russia, such multinational forward presence could fulfil a political function, by working as a tripwire ensuring that most NATO countries would be de facto involved in the conflict early on.

Nonetheless, in response to the renewed aggression by Russia against Ukraine, the Atlantic alliance has already taken steps to build a more substantial presence on its eastern flank, with NATO heads of state and government underlining last March their determination to defend '[every inch of Allied territory](#)'. The Atlantic alliance has thus activated its defence plans, deploying elements of the NRF, including the VJTF which was sent to [Romania](#), while placing a significant number of ground troops, aircraft and ships under NATO's direct command in eastern Europe. Also, the decision has been taken to create four additional battlegroups, in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, to cover NATO's borders down to the Black Sea.

But beyond these immediate responses, NATO is currently looking at how to adapt its deterrence and defence posture for the long haul. This 'reset', as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called it, could lead to a more substantial and more permanent stationing of troops in eastern Europe in order to be able to directly repel a large-scale offensive by Moscow. This would likely require, however, to formally abandon the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act – although the political cost of doing so has become in truth rather small today, given the

absolute nadir reached in relations with Moscow.

How far should NATO go?

While the direction towards significantly reinforcing NATO's presence in eastern Europe is now clear, the key question that may however soon confront Western military planners is how far this movement should go.

The lessons of Russia's war against Ukraine are indeed paradoxical in this regard – [at least at this stage](#). Russia's aggressive intentions have certainly been underestimated, as few expected that Moscow would engage in such a brazen act of aggression as a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By contrast, Russia's capabilities have probably been overestimated, given the limited progresses its armies have made so far in Ukraine. Thus, while there is now much less reason to dispute that the Russian leadership has expansionist goals and little inhibition to use military force to achieve them, it could be argued that Russia's capacity to mount a massive operation against NATO countries has in fact been reduced, at least in the short and medium term, because of the losses already suffered by Russian forces and the possibility that Moscow could become bogged down in a protracted war against Kyiv.

Besides, additional investments in NATO's defence will inevitably have to be balanced with other priorities. The United States, in particular, may be the most concerned among NATO countries about precisely calibrating such additional investments because of the trade-offs it faces between devoting military resources to Europe or east Asia. The war in Ukraine has not changed indeed the cardinal fact that the threat from China will remain Washington's primary focus in the coming years, as the [upcoming 2022 US National Defence Strategy](#) will make clear. In this perspective, the massive support that the United States is providing, and has announced that it will [continue to provide](#), to Kyiv may still make strategic sense from Washington's standpoint, not only in terms of defending Ukraine's sovereignty but also if it results, as indicated by US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, in a 'weakened' Russia, less able to militarily threaten NATO countries. This, in turn, could reduce indeed how much Washington will eventually have to invest in Europe's defence in the

coming years, thereby limiting the extent to which NATO will represent a 'distraction' for the United States in its competition with China.

Adapting NATO's nuclear posture?

There is, finally, the question of nuclear deterrence. Little visibly changed on this front after 2014, apart from more frequent mentions of nuclear deterrence in NATO communiqués. Nonetheless, given the rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin since February,

What place for the EU's security and defence policy as collective defence regains its centrality?

While the return of collective defence means for NATO a renewed focus on its original *raison d'être*, this evolution is more difficult to navigate for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). CSDP was launched indeed in the post-Cold War era and, in consequence, has been mainly oriented thus far towards conducting crisis management operations,

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it is likely that NATO is now considering some adaptations, even if limited ones, to its nuclear posture. There have thus been indications that new sites may be upgraded in order to be prepared to host US nuclear bombs (not necessarily on a permanent basis), for instance in the United Kingdom, in addition to existing storage locations in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey – in order to increase the flexibility and thus survivability of NATO nuclear forces.

Looking further ahead, however, the question will inevitably arise as to whether NATO nuclear sharing arrangements remain fit for purpose from a military standpoint. It is true that the military hardware behind such arrangements is currently being enhanced: NATO allies are starting to field stealthy F-35A fighter jets – and even [Germany](#) recently announced that it will acquire them to carry out the nuclear mission – while the new version of the B-61 nuclear bombs (B61-12) will arrive in Europe next year. Yet, the B-61s, even if modernised, are still gravity bombs, whose fundamental design dates back to the middle of the Cold War. Therefore, if the political function of NATO nuclear sharing remains more than relevant in today's strategic landscape, its military value is becoming less and less clear – the question being at which point such a tension may become untenable.

to which the Union could contribute through an original combination of both military and civilian tools. In today's security environment, however, the low-intensity operations that have been at the heart of CSDP – the so-called 'Petersberg tasks' – will necessarily recede in terms of priority.

In this regard, the EU's Strategic Compass adopted last March does not fully carry out the necessary *aggiornamento*. To be sure, the document recognises that the EU's security environment has become 'more hostile' and, therefore, that its member states need to make 'a quantum leap forward and increase [their] capacity and willingness to act, strengthen [their] resilience and ensure solidarity and mutual assistance.' Nevertheless, most of the concrete measures flowing from the Strategic Compass, such as setting up an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of 5.000 troops, remain rooted in the crisis management paradigm that dominated the post-Cold War era. This is understandable given the serious limits that weigh on the role that the EU can aspire to play in the military field – not least the fact that NATO remains for a large majority of EU countries the cornerstone of their collective defence, while a few other member states remain attached to their traditional neutrality. But the Strategic Compass could have been clearer about how the EU

can contribute to collective defence, either indirectly or directly.

The EU's indirect role in collective defence

The EU's indirect contribution to collective defence consists in further developing the supporting role that the Union already plays in this area.

In more concrete terms, this means stepping up the EU's activities to counter hybrid threats, so as to provide resilience against hostile actions that would remain below the threshold of collective defence. It also means continuing EU efforts to enhance military mobility across Europe, as responding to a collective defence contingency on Europe's eastern flank would present a major logistical challenge, requiring the rapid transfer of large numbers of troops and military equipment from the western part of the continent.

Finally, and most importantly, it means ensuring that the EU initiatives launched in the field of defence industry, such as the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation, are now geared towards meeting the capability needs associated with collective defence. In this perspective, attention should be paid not only to the development of the weapons required for state-on-state, high-intensity warfare (such as long-range cruise missiles, air defence systems, armed drones or artillery), but also to the improvement of their methods of production. One of the main lessons – or rather reminders – of the war in Ukraine is indeed that it is essential not only to have technologically advanced weapons, but also to have enough of them in stock and the manufacturing base to be able to produce them quickly and cheaply – objectives that may compete with each other and will therefore require some trade-offs at the EU level.

The EU's direct role in collective defence

The EU could also have a direct hand, however, in the collective defence of its member states, according to Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which notably provides that '[i]f a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means

in their power.' Thus, a few days after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson wrote a letter [to their EU counterparts](#) to underline the role of the EU as a security community, on the basis notably of Article 42.7 TEU. The [communiqué](#) of the informal summit of the European Council in Versailles last March similarly referred to this provision as reflecting the solidarity between EU member states.

Yet the fact remains that Article 42.7 TEU, unlike NATO's Article 5, is still not sufficiently supported by practical arrangements for its implementation. It is true that the Strategic Compass makes explicit reference on several occasions to the EU collective defence clause, noting that in this regard the EU will continue to conduct regular exercises and pay particular attention to cyber, hybrid and space-related threats, while also highlighting the possibility of involving, upon member states' request, the EU Military Staff to contribute to the implementation of Article 42.7 TEU. Nevertheless, it is still unclear how the EU would practically respond in case of a particularly serious armed attack against one of its member states, in particular one that would not be also a member of NATO. This last point may, admittedly, lose some of its urgency in the near future, not least because Finland and Sweden are expected to formally apply to join NATO very soon. But even in this context, Article 42.7 TEU could still constitute part of the response as to how Helsinki and Stockholm would be protected during the interim period before their full accession to NATO, in addition to the political assurances provided by the United States and the [United Kingdom](#).

In any case, fundamental questions over the solidarity between EU member states in the field of collective defence are unlikely to go away. Uncertainties remain indeed as to the future policy direction of the United States towards NATO, especially if the Republican Party, and possibly Donal Trump, were to return to power in Washington. And more generally, Article 42.7 TEU supports the ambition of the EU to achieve greater strategic autonomy, while reflecting the *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* – the community of fate – that EU member states form in an increasingly tense and volatile world.



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