



The State of the European Security Order and the Role of Institutions – A European View

Jana Puglierin
**German Council on Foreign Relations
(DGAP), Berlin**

The European security order and its institutions (NATO, EU, OSCE) have come under massive attack in recent years. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing political, economic and military support of the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine have led to a profound rift between Russia and the states of the European Union, as well as the United States of America. The ongoing conflict illustrates how the Kremlin no longer accepts the basic principles of the European security order. Established after 1990, these principles were recognized in the Charter of Paris and subsequent treaties by both sides. While Russia no longer feels bound by these rules and wants to renegotiate the European security order, the Europeans do not want to accept or legitimize Moscow's geopolitical claims and adhere to the existing basic principles.

Surrounded by conflicts – instead of friends

However, Vladimir Putin's revisionist foreign policy is not the only challenge there is to the European security order today. Within just a few years, the European security landscape has changed radically. Back in 2003, when the EU published its first European Security Strategy, its authors still assumed a "secure Europe in a better world". "Never before," they said, "has Europe been so prosperous, so secure and so free." Back then, the Europeans saw themselves as being

surrounded by friends and thought that the EU was an export model. The wars in the former Yugoslavia were over and NATO had peacefully expanded eastwards. In the shadow of the peace dividend and the American security guarantee for Europe, many European states generously cut their defence budgets, outsourced their defence to the United States and adapted to a world where conflicts were peacefully solved through negotiations and diplomacy.

Sixteen years later and not much remains from this supposed "end of history". Instead, the EU now must adapt to things it thought would never happen. Today, Europeans find themselves in a world dominated by the return of nationalism and power politics, with a revisionist Russia, a rising and ever-more vigorous China, and a United States that promotes a policy of "America First". For the first time in post-war history, an American president is not only calling into question the unconditional security guarantee for the European continent but also being openly sceptical of, if not hostile to, the EU as an institution.

This puts the EU's foreign policy model, based on international institutions, multilateralism and the rules-based international order, increasingly under pressure. Over the past decade, the EU's efforts to project stability and democracy outward has collapsed, as its immediate neighbourhood has transformed from a circle of potential friends and partners into a ring of fire, exporting instability to the EU. Twenty years after the end of the Yugoslavian wars, the Western Balkans are still politically fragile, while wars, conflicts and the collapse of state structures are shaking large parts of Africa and the Middle East.



Not modifying but forcefully defending the existing order

In this context, marked by an eroding security landscape and the questioning of such fundamental principles as the territorial integrity or inviolability of borders, Europeans see the preservation of the status quo and the maintenance of existing rules, principles and institutions as being existential to their security – if not to their very existence. Further erosion of the European security order is therefore not to be answered by revising ordering structures, but by forcefully defending the existing ones. An attack on the multi-lateral world order cannot be averted by weakening or abolishing the institutions that support it. Europeans simply do not want to fall back into those dark times when European security was determined by zones of influence and the balance of power politics.

Although the Kremlin claims that the existing security order has forced Russia to live under a Western dictate, it was exactly this order that allowed the EU to prosper and live in unprecedented peace and prosperity. While Vladimir Putin perceives European security institutions, mostly NATO, as being instruments to oppress Russia, Europeans considered them to be linchpins of the European security order. From their perspective, NATO and the EU have proved extremely useful for guaranteeing stability and lasting peace in Europe and have also helped tremendously to facilitate the peaceful transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Enlarging both institutions and including former members of the Warsaw Pact has prevented a zone of instability and insecurity from developing in the heart of Europe. It has also massively increased the security of former frontline states like Germany.

Furthermore, the enlargement of NATO and the EU is seen as legitimate because it has satisfied the security needs of states that suffered decades of Soviet domination. For those states, Russia's ever-more aggressive foreign policy represents the greatest threat to their national security. Consequently, while NATO focused on out of area missions for the decade after 9/11, the annexation of Crimea has put the territorial defence of Europe back on top of NATO's agenda.

NATO remains fundamental – despite the odds

To this day, NATO remains the key pillar of European defence and the European security order, President Trump's repeated criticism of European Allies and the Alliance's value to US security notwithstanding. For Europeans, NATO provides the framework for a continued

US presence in Europe, which is considered to be vital for European security and stability. Militarily, the US remains the EU's most important ally. The Europeans would be unable to replace the US's military capabilities, even in the medium term. Any attempt to cut loose would immediately undermine European security – and split the Europeans, because cracks in transatlantic relations are also always intra-European cracks.

On the other hand, many Europeans have realized that they can no longer expect the US to take the lion's share of the defence burden in Europe and its periphery. Instead, Europeans need to contribute more to protect the European security order and take more responsibility. Donald Trump is not the first president to convey the message that Europeans need to increase their defence spending, but he is by far the most vigorous. He makes the Europeans feel the negative consequences of their dependence on America.

With America pulling back and expecting more from its allies, a more capable, active, and sovereign EU in security, trade, and global diplomacy is no longer a “nice to have,” but a question of survival. Many EU member states are increasingly realizing that if they want to assert themselves in the face of new geopolitical realities, the EU must become a stronger and more capable defence actor that is no longer primarily a civilian power. With the introduction of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund, Paris and Berlin have succeeded in laying the foundations for a stronger role of the EU within the European security order. However, these structures have still to be filled with life and nobody in the EU considers them as an alternative to NATO, but rather as a means to expand the EU's footprint in the alliance with the Americans in the long term.

The goal of EU defence initiatives is not the territorial defence of the Union. Their aim instead is crisis management in Europe's periphery. Many EU member states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, want to avoid even the slightest suspicion that the EU wants to duplicate NATO. They continue to see the USA as the most important and irreplaceable guarantor of their security, which they do not want to alienate under any circumstances. Consequently, the EU aims to further improve the inter-institutional relationship with NATO. Both institutions already work successfully together to create the legal, logistical and infrastructure conditions to enable rapid military movement to, across and from Europe.

Europeans have no intention of turning away from the US in order to gain “strategic autonomy” vis-a-vis their closest ally. In fact, even if the EU was to move much faster and more vigorously with the creation of a Euro-



pean "defence union", it would not become independent from the US in the foreseeable future. Instead, Europeans gradually want to put themselves in a position to protect the EU and stabilize its own neighbourhood in case of a crisis, especially if the US is unwilling to become engaged. At the same time, the existence of a more capable EU is considered to enhance the attractiveness of Europeans as American allies.

Erosion of arms control

Given the fundamental differences that exist between Russia and the West, it is clear that NATO will remain at the heart of the conflict. There is little hope that the NATO-Russia Council can significantly contribute to easing the tensions. Nevertheless, channels of communication must be maintained. At the moment, the Normandy format and the OSCE are best suited to serve as platforms for continued dialogue. However, the parties to the conflict are too far apart, and there is insufficient consensus for an inclusive pan-European security order. Since it will not be possible to bridge the existing conflict in the foreseeable future, it can only be a matter of limiting the resulting damage. Here, the Normandy format and the OSCE can provide valuable support, as they are the only platforms where dialogue with Russia is still possible.

In light of the collapse of the existing U.S.-Russia strategic stability framework in Europe, this dialogue is crucial. While great power competition is intensifying and the Russian and American military are undergoing major strategic modernization programs, strategic arms control is at a dead end. After the US's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty, a new arms race in Europe is already on the horizon. The "New Start Arms Reduction Treaty" (NEW START) of 2010 is the only remaining limitation treaty between the two nuclear superpowers. However, this agreement expires in 2021. If Russia and the US cannot agree on an extension, no arms control agreement would be in force for the first time since 1972, with tremendous consequences for European security and the future of global disarmament. Europeans must do everything they can to ensure that this does not happen, even if their role in this can only be very limited from the outset.

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