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The Transformation of European Security Architecture after 2022

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Summary

Europe is entering a period of profound transformation in its security environment. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, rising geopolitical tensions, and shifting transatlantic relations are challenging long-standing assumptions about stability. This paper examines how the roles of NATO and the European Union are evolving, identifies key drivers shaping Europe's security architecture, and outlines possible future scenarios. It argues that Europe's long-term stability will depend not only on its ability to respond to immediate threats, but also on strategic coordination, sustained political will, and a coherent long-term vision.

Key Takeaways

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine ended the assumption of a stable Europe free from large-scale interstate war. NATO strengthened collective defence, expanded with Finland and Sweden, and increased its focus on forward defence and higher defence spending. At the same time, the EU deepened defence cooperation and reinforced its role as a geopolitical actor.
- NATO remains the key guarantor of collective defence, while the EU complements the Alliance in resilience, defence industry, and countering hybrid threats. The debate on strategic autonomy has shifted toward a pragmatic approach—greater European responsibility within NATO, not outside it.
- The war in Ukraine has highlighted the need for credible deterrence, societal resilience, and a strong defence industrial base. The Czech Republic plays an active role in supporting Ukraine, strengthening NATO's eastern flank, and advancing European defence cooperation, while stable transatlantic ties remain essential.

Introduction

The European security architecture has undergone profound transformation since 2022, primarily as a consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This watershed moment marked the end of the post-Cold War assumption that large-scale interstate war in Europe was improbable. Simultaneously, Europe faces hybrid threats, cyberattacks, energy crisis, technological disruption, instability in the Middle East fuelled by the conflict between the US, Israel on one side and Iran on the other, and shifting global power balances. These developments have reshaped NATO's strategic posture, accelerated European Union (EU) defence cooperation, and intensified debates about nature of transatlantic relations and strategic autonomy.

This paper examines how Europe's security architecture has changed since 2022 and assesses the long-term implications for NATO-EU cooperation. It evaluates the strategic role of the Czech Republic in strengthening European collective defence, analyses the future of transatlantic relations amid evolving political dynamics, and discusses the scope and limits of EU strategic autonomy. Finally, it reflects on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine and the challenge of balancing increased defence spending with domestic economic pressures.

The Transformation of European Security Architecture Since 2022

Russia's invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered Europe's threat perception. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat" to Allied security (NATO, 2022: 4). This represents a stark departure from earlier formulations that framed Russia as a potential strategic partner.¹ The invasion catalysed unprecedented unity within NATO and the EU, reinforcing collective defence and accelerating military adaptation.

One of the most visible changes has been NATO enlargement. The gradual expansion of the alliance in south-eastern Europe² was complemented by the northern expansion. Finland joined the Alliance in April 2023, followed by Sweden in March 2024, significantly strengthening NATO's northern flank and transforming the Baltic Sea into what some analysts describe as a "NATO lake" (Wills, 2025). Enlargement has enhanced deterrence but also increased the Alliance's direct border with Russia, thereby heightening strategic complexity.

NATO has shifted from a deterrence-by-punishment posture toward enhanced forward defence. At the Madrid (2022) and Vilnius (2023) summits, Allies agreed to expand high-readiness forces to over 300,000 troops and strengthen multinational battlegroups in Central and Eastern Europe (NATO, 2022). Defence spending has increased substantially, with many member states committing to meet or exceed the 2% GDP benchmark (SIPRI, 2024).

Simultaneously, the EU has taken significant steps in defence integration. The European Peace Facility (EPF) has been used to finance military assistance to Ukraine, marking a shift in EU security policy (European Council, 2023). The Strategic Compass, adopted in 2022, provides a framework for enhancing EU crisis management, resilience, and defence capabilities (European External Action Service, 2022). The war has thus accelerated the EU's evolution from a primarily economic actor into a more geopolitical one.

¹ „NATO-Russia cooperation is of strategic importance as it contributes to creating a common space of peace, stability and security.“ (NATO, 2010: 30)

² Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and Nord Macedonia in 2020.

Long-Term Implications for NATO and EU Cooperation

The post-2022 environment has reinforced NATO's centrality as the cornerstone of European collective defence. Article 5 commitments remain the ultimate security guarantee for European states, particularly those on NATO's eastern flank. However, the EU has increasingly positioned itself as a complementary actor, focusing on military mobility, defence industrial capacity, sanctions policy, and resilience against hybrid threats.

NATO-EU cooperation has deepened, particularly in areas such as cyber defence, countering hybrid threats, and protecting critical infrastructure (NATO, 2023). Nevertheless, institutional duplication and political divergences persist. The debate over "strategic autonomy" reflects differing views among member states about the appropriate balance between European self-reliance and transatlantic dependence.

In the long term, European security is likely to become more layered: NATO providing hard deterrence and collective defence, while the EU enhances resilience, economic security, and defence industrial coordination. The success of this model will depend on political cohesion and sustained investment.

The Strategic Role of the Czech Republic

As a Central European state with historical experience of Russian domination, the Czech Republic has emerged as a strong supporter of Ukraine and NATO's eastern flank reinforcement. Prague has provided significant military assistance to Ukraine and advocated robust sanctions against Russia (Government of the Czech Republic, 2023).

The Czech Republic should continue to prioritize three strategic roles. First, for years 2026-2029, it is maintaining defence spending above 2% of GDP and modernizing its armed forces, including investments in air defence, heavy armour, and cyber capabilities. Second, it can serve as a diplomatic bridge-builder within the EU, supporting pragmatic defence cooperation while preserving NATO primacy lead by USA. Third, the Czech Republic can contribute to strengthening defence industrial cooperation, particularly in ammunition production and supply chain resilience.

Given its geographic position and historical memory, the Czech Republic has both moral and strategic incentives to advocate for sustained Western engagement in Eastern Europe. Its active participation enhances not only national security but also broader European stability.

Reinforcing Transatlantic Relations

Transatlantic relations remain indispensable for European security. The United States provides critical capabilities, including nuclear deterrence, strategic lift, intelligence, and advanced military technologies. However, shifting political dynamics in the United States—characterized by periodic debates about burden-sharing and strategic prioritization of the Indo-Pacific—create uncertainty regarding long-term American commitment (Brands, 2022).

Trump's message to European leaders was more than clear: To reinforce transatlantic relations, European states must assume greater responsibility for their own defence. Increased defence spending, capability development, and fair burden-sharing strengthen the credibility of the Alliance. At the same time, structured dialogue on emerging technologies, supply chain security, and China policy can deepen strategic alignment.

Institutionalized NATO-EU cooperation, alongside bilateral initiatives, can mitigate political fluctuations. A more capable Europe within NATO does not weaken the Alliance; rather, it enhances its sustainability.

EU Strategic Autonomy: Ambition and Constraints

The concept of EU strategic autonomy remains contested. France has traditionally advocated for greater European defence independence (it's nothing new, since the time of Charles de Gaulle), while Central and Eastern European states emphasize the irreplaceable role of NATO and the United States (Howorth, 2019).

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated both the necessity and limitations of strategic autonomy. On one hand, Europe has reduced its energy dependence on Russia and strengthened defence cooperation. On the other hand, military assistance to Ukraine has relied heavily on U.S. support.

A pragmatic approach would define strategic autonomy not as separation from NATO but as the capacity to act when necessary and to contribute meaningfully within the Alliance. Investment in joint procurement, defence industrial capacity, and rapid deployment forces can enhance European credibility without undermining transatlantic cohesion.

Balancing defence Spending and Domestic Priorities

Rising defence expenditures coincide with inflation, energy transitions, and social spending demands. Governments must justify increased military budgets to domestic audiences. Transparent communication about threat assessments and the economic benefits of defence industrial investment is crucial.

Defence spending should be framed not as a trade-off but as insurance against instability. However, efficiency and coordination are vital to avoid duplication. Joint procurement and EU-level funding mechanisms can reduce costs while enhancing effectiveness (European Council, 2023).

Ultimately, sustainable defence investment requires political consensus and societal support. Democratic legitimacy strengthens strategic resilience.

Conclusion

Since 2022, Europe's security architecture has shifted from cooperative security assumptions to renewed emphasis on deterrence and collective defence. NATO has reasserted its central role, while the EU has expanded its geopolitical and defence engagement. The Czech Republic, as a committed NATO and EU member, plays a meaningful role in reinforcing the eastern flank, supporting Ukraine, and strengthening European defence capabilities.

The long-term stability of European security will depend on effective NATO-EU complementarity, sustained transatlantic cooperation, pragmatic pursuit of strategic autonomy, and investment in resilience. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that peace cannot be taken for granted. In an increasingly multipolar and unstable world, European unity, credible deterrence, and democratic resilience remain the foundations of security.

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