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European defence and the war in Ukraine

Actions speak louder than words



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Europe is on fire and the European security architecture as we know it today is in danger. The cause: the Russian leader in the Kremlin has invaded Ukraine, bringing war back to the European continent, a real game changer that significantly disrupts the international rules-based order. Hence, now is the time for Europe to show that it is ready to take on more responsibility, both within the EU as well as with respect to the European share within NATO. This will help Europe to better safeguard its own security interests and

to bear a greater share of the transatlantic burden – something that has been longed for on both sides of the Atlantic.

Seizing the momentum for European security and defence

People rightly point out that actions speak louder than words. With the invasion of Ukraine, Putin has demonstrated that he

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follows up on his rhetoric with concrete actions, yet Europe has always struggled to do so. Hence, one of the main obstacles to European security and defence is this [gap between rhetoric and action](#).

Europe has repeatedly stated that it wants to become a more active player in the realm of security and defence. The initiation of [multiple EU missions and operations](#), and the emergence of various defence initiatives, is proof that efforts are being made in this area. Nevertheless, Europe has still not been able to emerge as a serious defence actor and does not bear a fair share of the burden within NATO.

“ Europe’s backyard in on fire and there is a risk that this fire will spread from the backyard to the main house”

The war in Ukraine shows that Europe simply cannot choose to be reticent. Its immediate backyard is on fire and if it does not step up its game now, there is a risk that this fire will spread from the backyard to the main house, i.e. EU and European NATO member states. Hence, European security and the European way of life, including important norms and values, are at stake here. This should not be taken lightly.

Therefore, Europe should seize this momentum to become the valuable actor in security and defence that it desires to be. In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, European Commission president [Von der Leyen announced](#) that “for the first time ever, the EU will finance the purchase and delivery of weapons and other equipment to a country that is under attack”. Moreover, High Representative [Josep Borrell stated](#) that “another taboo has fallen”: so far, the EU was never willing to provide arms in a war, but the war in Ukraine made the EU agree “to provide lethal arms to the Ukrainian army for a value of [a] €450 million support package and €50 million more for the non-lethal supplies”. These are clearly signs of Europe stepping up its game and taking responsibility for the security in its neighbourhood, a very welcome development that should be applauded.

But Europe should not only increase its short-term efforts in providing Ukraine with the necessary (military) assistance. It also needs to step up its game with respect to its longer-term ambitions and finally put its money where its mouth is. This will help Europe to take on more responsibility in safeguarding its own security interests, while also increasing Europe’s share of the transatlantic burden.

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In this respect, the adoption of the [EU’s Strategic Compass](#) and [NATO’s Strategic Concept](#) will be crucial. Both the Compass and the Concept will form the stepping stones for the EU’s and NATO’s responses to a changing and increasingly complex security environment. They will have to provide answers on how to deal with the challenges of the present and the future, including Russian aggression and the risk it poses to the European security architecture. The EU’s Strategic Compass is set to be adopted at the European Council of 24-25 March, after which its implementation phase will start. The Compass will lay down concrete proposals on how to advance a European security and defence framework, something that is much needed in a world that increasingly challenges European interests and values. In turn, NATO will adopt a new Strategic Concept at the Summit in Madrid on 29-30 June. The Concept assesses the strategic environment of the Alliance and will guide its future political and military development.

Governments should live up to previous defence agreements

The EU’s Strategic Compass and NATO’s Strategic Concept will be a success when they are able to deliver concrete actions to deal with the changing, complex security challenges of the present and future. The key to ensuring this will be successful

implementation, which will have to be done effectively and in a coordinated manner. What is crucial to achieve this is the political willingness of the individual member states of both the EU and NATO. Subsequently, these member states will have to turn words into deeds with substantial financial investments in defence.

Another firm prerequisite for the success of the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept is that these processes do not conflict with each other. As these processes are partially conducted in parallel, this provides a unique opportunity for the EU and NATO to jointly address the new (geopolitical) reality of the present. The 21 countries that are members of both organisations have a valuable role to play here: ensuring the complementarity between the Compass and the Concept. In addition, frequent consultations between the highest political levels will also benefit close alignment between both processes.

Subsequently, when the Compass and the Concept see the light of day, the investments made within the EU and NATO in order to invigorate their implementation must also complement each other. This means that, for example, investing in defence within the EU should also benefit the European share within NATO. Only in this way can Europe become a more valuable and sustainable actor in the realm of security and defence in the long term.

The overwhelming share of defence investment is, however, carried out at the national level. Governments of the EU and NATO member states should therefore continue to increase their defence budgets. The war in Ukraine is an important reminder that keeping up defence spending remains essential and that further defence investments are much needed. Russia still poses an eminent threat to European security, in both a traditional way (through military deployment) and a non-traditional way (through cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns). Luckily, the past few years have seen a gradual rise in defence budgets across Europe, but we are clearly not there yet.

Germany's chancellor Olaf [Scholz announced a historically momentous investment of €100 billion](#) to beef up Germany's Bundeswehr and the [provision of lethal arms to Ukraine](#). This is remarkable given Germany's reluctance to invest in defence and provide lethal arms to conflict zones following the experience of World War II. Not only will there be an investment of €100 billion, but Scholz also repeated his promise that Germany will spend at least 2% of its GDP on defence, thereby complying with the [NATO target](#). Other European countries must follow Germany's example. Despite the continuous efforts of various American presidents, there are still plenty of European countries that do not live up to the 2% norm. This should be put at the top of their priority list. Doing so would benefit Europe's role in security and defence and increase its share within NATO.





“ If greater defence expenditures materialise, Putin will have accomplished what various US presidents failed to achieve”

So, ironically, if greater defence expenditures materialise in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, Putin will have accomplished what various US presidents, including Bush Jr., Obama, Trump and Biden, failed to achieve in the past two decades: an increase in defence expenditure across Europe, thereby bearing a greater share of the burden.

About the Clingendael Institute

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