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# Strengthening Europe's Capacity to Act in Foreign and Security Policy

**Securitisation Cannot Solve the EU's Decision-making Trap**

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**Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a process of securitisation of the European Union's (EU) external action can be observed. From an institutional perspective, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) increasingly overlaps with the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). However, this does not solve the problem of a lack of capacity to act in foreign and security policy. On the contrary, the trend towards the securitisation of EU foreign policy is a distraction from the long overdue reform of Europe's capacity to act in foreign and security policy. There are two options to finally improve this: a) a Europeanisation of the European pillar in NATO, and b) a communitarisation of the CFSP and CSDP.**

In the aftermath of the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 and the subsequent public humiliation of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by Donald Trump and J.D. Vance, it is evident that the United States has relinquished its role as Europe's security guarantor. Furthermore, the US reluctance to admit Ukraine into NATO has been reaffirmed, and the prospect of securing a ceasefire along the Russian-Ukrainian border with US troops or through security guarantees for deployed soldiers is not being pursued. The responsibility for this task now falls upon the European nations, who must do so without the support of NATO and without the security guarantees provided by the United States in the event of conflict with Moscow.

This new reality is proving to be a significant challenge for European states, as they, along with the EU, find themselves reliant on the United States to a considerable extent in terms of military and security policy. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, has led to a decline in the number of non-aligned member states within the EU. The United States has concluded bilateral defence agreements with numerous NATO states — including Sweden, Norway and, most recently, Finland — with the aim of enabling or expanding access for American armed forces to military bases in these countries. In addition, the EU and NATO have strengthened their strategic partnership in recent years, having signed their third joint declaration on cooperation in January 2023.

Simultaneously, economic relations between Europe and the United States are characterised by intense competition. The Inflation Reduction Act was enacted in 2022, establishing the foundation for a strengthened national industrial policy in the United States. In contrast, the EU's Green Deal Industrial Plan, although well-intentioned, lacked the financial resources to match these actions. Additionally, President Trump is actively pursuing the enforcement of US interests over those of the EU, thereby weakening the EU's regulatory capacity. It is evident that the primary objective of the United States is to create discord among EU member states and to divide the Union politically.

In the context of the United States' strategic shift in its foreign policy focus away from Europe, the special summit of the European Council on 6 March 2025 achieved a consensus on the imperative to allocate substantial resources towards future investments in national armed forces. Additionally, a growing readiness to establish coalitions of the willing has emerged to address the issue of securing a possible "peace" in Ukraine — including through the provision of European security guarantees — with the aim of removing the blockade option from veto players such as the Hungarian prime minister. However, the ReArm Europe initiative, including the potential exceptions to the debt rules have proven to be contentious. Furthermore, there has been no progress on the institutional reform of the CFSP and CSDP, including the increased use of qualified majority voting, the introduction of a European Security Council and the communitarisation of the CFSP/CSDP (see SWP Comment 19/2024). Instead, it is reasonable to predict that the conflicting interests of member states will continue to make this impossible. Even before Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine, attempts to introduce qualified majority voting in the CFSP or to establish a European Security Council were unsuccessful. Reservations about national sovereignty and diverging economic interests are also partly responsible for the fact that EU enlargement has come to a standstill and that EU sanctions against Russia have not been effectively implemented.

## Securitisation of EU external action

In order to contain the problem of incompatible interests between member states, a process of securitisation has developed in the EU's external action (Title V, Treaty on European Union) since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, wherein the solution to structural problems in this policy area is simultaneously excluded.

The term "securitisation" was coined in the 1990s by academics from the so-called Copenhagen School. According to this theoretical framework, the primary objective of state action is to legitimise military policy measures that, under normal circumstances, would not be enforceable. The success of this endeavour, as postulated by this theory, depends on the effective presentation or "framing" of issues as potential threats to the state's own population.

Applying this approach to current EU policy, it is evident that the CFSP — along with the other areas of external action (trade, association and development policy), which are the exclusive or shared competence both of the EU and its member states — is being orientated towards armaments and defence policy through the introduction of new financial instruments. Consequently, the CFSP is to a certain extent permeated by its security and defence policy component, the CSDP. Additionally, matters such as partnership and sectoral agreements, which were formerly regarded as rather technocratic and apolitical, are now becoming a focal point of Europe's assertive security and defence policy. This process of securitising foreign policy enables EU institutions, particularly the European Commission, to gain access to new policy areas (defence industry) and to stimulate other policy areas (enlargement, sanctions). In the domain of migration, EU institutions are adapting their policies so that they align with those of the member states through a process of policy framing, in the hopes of aligning existing rules with the protection of EU territory. Finally, the foreign economic policy dimension of the EU's external action is undergoing a recalibration towards the goals of de-risking, friend-shoring and de-coupling. In the context of power politics, the Commission appears to be particularly well-positioned to benefit from these trends, given the extension of internal market rules to the procurement of defence equipment. The Commission's potential expansion of its role in defence policy by involving private companies and security actors in the political process at the EU level could also serve to strengthen its negotiating position vis-à-vis member states in the context of joint armaments cooperation.

At the same time, the overarching integration trend of securitisation is reaching its limits in areas where the EU-27 is politically divided and not in a position to act coherently towards third countries in terms of strategy and foreign trade.

## Sanctions of a new quality

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the EU has implemented an unparalleled sanctions regime against Moscow. Expanding on the restrictions initiated in 2014 as part of the annexation of Crimea, the EU has adopted 16 sanctions packages to date, targeting over 1,800 individuals and more than 500 organisations. The measures encompass travel bans, the freezing of assets, and the denial of access to financial and economic resources. In response to the death of Aleksei Navalnyi, the heads of Russian prison facilities and high-ranking Ministry of Justice officials have also been targeted.

However, the expansion of the European sanctions regime has not been limited to Russia. In January 2024, the Council of the EU (Council) adopted a decision to impose sanctions against all supporters of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, thus supplementing the direct measures taken against both terrorist organisations from the previous year. After months of negotiations, which were initially blocked by Germany and others, the EU foreign ministers also agreed on sanctions against radical Israeli settlers in the West Bank in March 2024. Further sanctions were imposed on Iran, particularly in the context of the attack on Israel in April 2024 and the ongoing supply of weapons to Russia, as well as against Syria. Existing restrictions were extended and expanded against Venezuela, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Belarus and Myanmar.

Alongside the increase in the number of sanctions, the EU is also improving the effectiveness of its sanctions. With regard to Russia, this was particularly evident in the Council's decision in May 2024 to use the interest income from the frozen assets of the Russian central bank for military equipment and the reconstruction of Ukraine. In the same month, the EU expanded the scope of its sanctions. They now also cover military support for Russia's war of aggression through drones and missiles as well as the export of the necessary components. These decisions are primarily aimed at Iran, which was subject to further restrictions at the same time. In April 2024, the Council and Parliament also agreed on the introduction of criminal offences for corresponding violations against the continued circumvention of sanctions imposed on Russia. In future, not only individuals but also companies can be penalised for circumventing sanctions. This reinforces the impression of a trend towards the strengthening of European sanctions instruments in terms of security policy. This is characterised in particular by the replacement of traditional sanctions against human rights violations with coercive measures against state actors.

## Securitisation of third country agreements

For several years, the EU has been using agreements with third countries not only to manage migration and security, but also to increase the security of its resources.

In the area of migration and security, the EU signed a partnership agreement with Albania in September 2023, providing for enhanced operational cooperation in the fight against cross-border crime and irregular migration. Similar agreements had previously been signed with Serbia (renewed in June 2024), the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The seventh and eighth donor conferences on the future of Syria and the region in June 2023 and May 2024 were strongly influenced by migration policy objectives, with Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq receiving financial support for their willingness to host refugees.

In addition to the Middle East, Africa has been the focus of Europe's migration and security efforts. In July 2023, the EU signed an economic and migration agreement with Tunisia. Similar agreements with Egypt and Mauritania followed in March 2024. Migration management is also included in the mandates of EU missions and operations. Agreements to this effect have been concluded with the respective partner states. The EU has provided several million euros through the European Peace Facility (EPF) for military training in Benin, Ghana, Cameroon, Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire and the African Union. At the same time, the Council extended the mandates of several EU training missions, including in Mozambique and Libya. Memoranda of understanding will be concluded with the third countries concerned to implement these mandates, all of which have a security focus. The EU Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea focuses on training soldiers and police officers from the four littoral states to counter terrorist threats. The initial decision of August 2023 only covered Ghana and Benin. However, in September 2023, the mission was extended to Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.

## Prioritising resource security

The growing importance of resource security is further evidence of the securitisation of the EU's external trade. In May 2024, the Critical Raw Materials Act entered into force — accompanied by bilateral agreements — setting parameters for the extraction, processing and recycling of critical raw materials in the EU. In July 2023, the Council authorised the Commission to open negotiations with the United States on an agreement regarding critical minerals supply chains. In February 2024, the EU and Rwanda signed an agreement on securing such supply chains. This was followed a month later by an agreement with Angola to promote sustainable investment. Also in March 2024, the Council approved a bilateral trade agreement with Chile, which should give the EU better access to raw materials such as lithium, copper and hydrogen. Finally, in May 2024, the EU and Australia signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate on critical and strategic materials. A similar partnership with Uzbekistan was signed shortly afterwards. These country-specific agreements were framed by a November 2023 regulation to protect the EU from economic coercion by third countries. The numerous partnership, trade and raw materials agreements as well as the de-risking and friend-shoring efforts show that the lowest common denominator of a primarily norm-orientated European foreign policy is the preservation of the EU's own economic and security interests.

## De-risking vis-à-vis China?

The EU's trade dependence on China is particularly pronounced in the area of green technologies. The EU-Central Asia ministerial meeting in October 2023 and the conclusion of a strategic partnership with Japan in April 2024 reflect diversification efforts, but they are overshadowed by the geopolitical importance of the EU's China policy. The de-risking strategy for China, adopted in June 2023, has remained largely without substance. This is also evident from a list published in October 2023 that details critical technologies which are not to be transferred to Beijing: the brevity of the list suggests that it is a lowest common denominator, leaving the EU incapable of pursuing strategic risk minimisation. The complete absence of transformational technologies from the list shows that Europe will not be able to realistically reduce its import dependence in this sector.

The consequences of this restriction on the EU's external trade are coming to a head. The EU is caught between a United States that increasingly insists on autonomy in the area of green transformation and a China on which it is highly dependent economically. Whereas Washington has imposed massive punitive tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, solar cells and semiconductors, the European Commission has decided on moderate provisional tariff increases, despite an investigation that found significant market distortions due to Chinese subsidies. Where the de-risking reaches its limits is in the disagreements between member states: Whereas France was in favour of punitive tariffs, increasingly critical voices were heard in Germany that expressed fears of a trade war. The EU is divided on a strategic approach to China (partner, competitor, rival).

## Global Gateway

Beyond bilateral initiatives, the EU is deepening regional economic cooperation. Given the ongoing war in Ukraine — but especially the conflict between the United States and China — the Council repeatedly stresses the need to strengthen international partnerships, notably through the Global Gateway Strategy (GGS) and the "Team Europe" approach. The GGS is widely seen as Europe's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. In the period 2021—2027, the initiative aims to finance infrastructure and sustainability projects in partner countries with a total volume of up to €300 billion. The first Global Gateway Forum took place in October 2023, in which financing commitments of more than €3 billion were made. At the same time, the EU signed commodity agreements with the DRC and Zambia, as well as a joint agreement with the United States, Angola, the DRC and Zambia to revive the Lobito Corridor, which will transport critical commodities from the DRC to Africa's west coast. Also in the context of the GGS, the EU and the African Development Bank signed a cooperation agreement in January 2024.

Thus, two conclusions can be drawn from the EU's partnership, trade and raw materials agreements. Firstly, it is evident that, in relation to Africa, the Middle East and also Ukraine, a securitisation of the agreements can be observed. Secondly, numerous aspects of the agreements relate to the security of the EU and its member states. In contrast, it is evident that the European Commission's de-risking approach towards China is being undermined by the diverging interests of member states.

## New financial instruments for rearming the member states…

The number of financial instruments in the EU's security and defence policy has also increased since Donald Trump's first term in office. Probably the most important pillar of this development so far is the European Defence Fund (EDF), which was introduced in 2021 and has a budget of around €8 billion (the Commission initially proposed €13 billion). The EDF funds collaborative research on defence equipment and co-finances its development. Prior to this, the EU had launched the Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR) and the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP). PADR was launched for the period 2017—2019, while the EDIDP was launched for the period 2019—2020. Although the EDF and its predecessors only funded activities related to the research and development phase of defence equipment, Russia's full-scale invasion immediately changed the focus of the EU's defence funding instruments. The European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), created in 2023, aims to promote the joint procurement of equipment by member states through targeted incentives. As such, it is intended to complement the EDF. EDIRPA has a budget of €310 million for its tasks — taken from 2023 and 2024 budget surpluses — which is well below the €500 million envisaged by the Commission. This is due to the increased funding requirements for the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), which aims to increase ammunition production capacity in the EU-27. ASAP focuses on rebuilding member states' stockpiles, which have been depleted as a result of supplying Ukraine with large calibre ammunition and missiles. ASAP currently has €500 million available from these budget surpluses for this purpose.

Finally, at the special summit of the European Council in March 2025, it was agreed to adapt the European Investment Bank's (EIB) lending criteria for previously excluded activities in the defence sector and to increase the volume of financing available. This is intended to facilitate close cooperation between the Bank and the European Defence Agency (EDA). The financial commitments will be accompanied by the EDIRPA Regulation from October 2023 and the extension in May 2024 of the EDA's powers in the area of defence procurement. In March 2024, the Commission also presented a proposal for a regulation on the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP). The initiative is linked to a fund of €1.5 billion for the remainder of the current multiannual financial framework, which should help to consolidate the short-term instruments EDIRPA and ASAP until 2027. The EDIP is still under negotiation between the Commission and the member states, and it remains to be seen to what extent these fundamental shifts in the European security order can accelerate this process.

## … and for the military training of third countries

The extra-budgetary EPF has become another cornerstone in the financing of European security. The EPF was set up to finance the joint costs of EU military operations (replacing the Athena mechanism); to support the military capabilities of third countries or international and regional organisations; or to cover the costs of explicitly military aspects of peace support operations conducted by a third country or a regional or international organisation.

The funds available to the EPF for the period 2021—2027 were initially capped at €5.69 billion, but were increased in several steps to €17 billion as a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In March 2024, the Council decided to further increase the EPF by a total of €5 billion in support of Kyiv.

Beyond military assistance, the EU has set up a separate Ukraine facility under the EPF that came into force in March 2024 and will provide the country on the banks of the Dnieper with up to €50 billion for reconstruction and modernisation over the next four years. In November 2023, member states had already agreed to provide €194 million for the European Union Assistance Mission to Ukraine (EUMAM). Finally, the EU also extended its mission to reform Ukraine's security sector until 2027. In this way, Brussels is increasingly building a second pillar of support for Ukraine that goes beyond direct military assistance and supports the country's EU membership prospect after a possible end to the war. In June 2024, the member states opened accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

These various activities clearly show that the member states and the Commission are quite willing to create instruments for the direct and indirect financing of armaments and defence projects.

Despite this progress, there is still a lack of serious and effective initiatives to address the structural shortcomings of European foreign, security and defence policy. The European defence sector remains highly fragmented, with duplicated military capabilities of larger member states and a lack of effective central coordination. The Commission's ReArm Europe initiative of March 2025, which includes a €150 billion loan to mobilise additional defence spending, is also unlikely to help overcome the fragmentation of the defence sector. It remains to be seen to what extent the announced adjustment of the Stability and Growth Pact's national escape clause — or a fundamental revision of the pact — can mobilise the targeted €650 billion in additional national defence spending.

## Outcomes and options for Europeanisation

A closer look at the process of securitisation the EU's external action provides several insights into Europe's capacity to act in foreign and security policy. First, securitisation is a deliberate "policy" of EU institutions, which identify areas where they are increasingly re-orientating or refocusing their external action according to strategic security interests. One example is the GGS, which can be seen as an EU infrastructure policy counteroffensive to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Second, in its external relations, the EU is consciously seeking to transfer integration in one area (e.g. the single market) to other areas (e.g. raw materials and environmental policy). One example is the agreement with Serbia on lithium mining, which is intended to serve as a building block for the technological and environmental transformation of the internal market.

Third, private and public actors are working closely with the European Commission to align projects, funding or investment programmes in third countries with secure supply chains and the EU's resource security (e.g. the GGS).

The process of securitisation may be justified in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Yet, it has not solved the core problem of the EU's (in)ability to act in foreign and security policy. On the contrary, the EU's room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policy vis-à-vis the United States has been further reduced. The bottom line is that the securitisation of the transatlantic relationship, as outlined above, will favour transactionalism in foreign and security policy. The securitisation — and thus the narrowing of the EU's foreign policy framework — will not contribute towards strengthening Europe's ability to act.

The EU's only remaining opportunity to assert itself in the new geopolitical era of the Trump administration is through institutional reform. To this end, it has two options (see SWP Comment 2/2019): 1) a fundamental structural reform of European foreign and security policy, including the introduction of qualified majority voting and the provision of massive financial resources from diversified sources (EU budget, joint borrowing, changes to the EIB framework). This is because "strategic dependency management" in foreign and security policy and greater resilience for the EU in the sense of de-risking can only be achieved through a communitised foreign policy. If the EU also wants to counter the US challenge to multilateralism, the Europeans would be well advised to choose the path of hard balancing vis-à-vis the United States. The EU is seen as a multilateral or supranational project that must prove itself in times of crisis if it is to serve as a model for other regions. If it fails to do so, 2) a European Security Council must be created outside the EU treaties — comprising at least Germany, France, Poland and the United Kingdom — and invite other states on an ad hoc basis according to regional and thematic priorities. Its main task will be to form international coalitions of the willing prepared to seek multilateral solutions based on shared values.

The EU will not be able to postpone the Europeanisation of the CFSP/CSDP for much longer, as it has done in recent years (see SWP Comment 19/2024). The discord that characterises the EU internally is likely to continue to manifest itself in fragmented external action, which Europe can no longer afford. For this reason, communitarisation and/or the creation of a European Security Council are important political solutions.

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