

# European Defense Policy: Zeitenwende, Ltd.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February shocked Europe into unity, revitalized NATO, and led several European countries to re-evaluate their defense policies and strategic dependence on Russian energy. However, major changes in the European political and security architecture will take time to materialize, as the old fault lines persist.

By Dominika Kunertova

The Russian large-scale war in Ukraine has changed the parameters for thinking about security in Europe. Vladimir Putin's war galvanized both European political elites and populations in their support for Kyiv. European countries, together with the US, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have coordinated their robust responses short of direct military involvement, as they want to raise the costs of Russia's military aggression against a sovereign nation to an untenable level.

The war united both NATO and the EU in prioritizing the Russian security threat. Not only NATO is alive and well, enhancing the defense of its members, but the question of NATO's enlargement is on the table again. The EU, which was probably not even on Putin's chess board, has become a geopolitical player in countering the Russian threat, albeit without military power.

However, Europe's room for collective action is limited when national interests diverge and countries' energy security is threatened. Three noticeable issues stand out in the adaptation of European security architecture to Putin's war in Ukraine. First, neutrality and penny-pinching on defense are no longer attractive policies for countries in the geographical proximity of the Russian threat. Second, the main drivers of the European responses to the war in Ukraine are the US and the United King-



Pipes at the landfall facilities of the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline in Lubmin, Germany, March 8, 2022.  
*Hannibal Hanschke / Reuters*

dom in tandem with Central European and Baltic countries. The Franco-German leadership in Europe's response to the war has been absent. Third, the transatlantic partnership has proved vital for European security and defense, while most European countries struggle to significantly reduce their dependence on Russian gas imports.

The European *Zeitenwende* is spread out on a timescale since the European autonomy of action has been hampered due to political divisions and Europe's strategic de-

pendence on Russian energy commodities. After quickly reinforcing Europe's own defenses and rolling out military aid to Ukraine, European states are increasing the scope of sanctions with a progressive impact on the Russian economy. Yet the war in Ukraine made it clear that Europe's major challenge is of a structural and long-term nature in the realm of energy security. The more the war in Ukraine drags on, the more efforts European leaders will need to make to maintain the resolve and to substantiate the *Zeitenwende*.

### European Military Responses

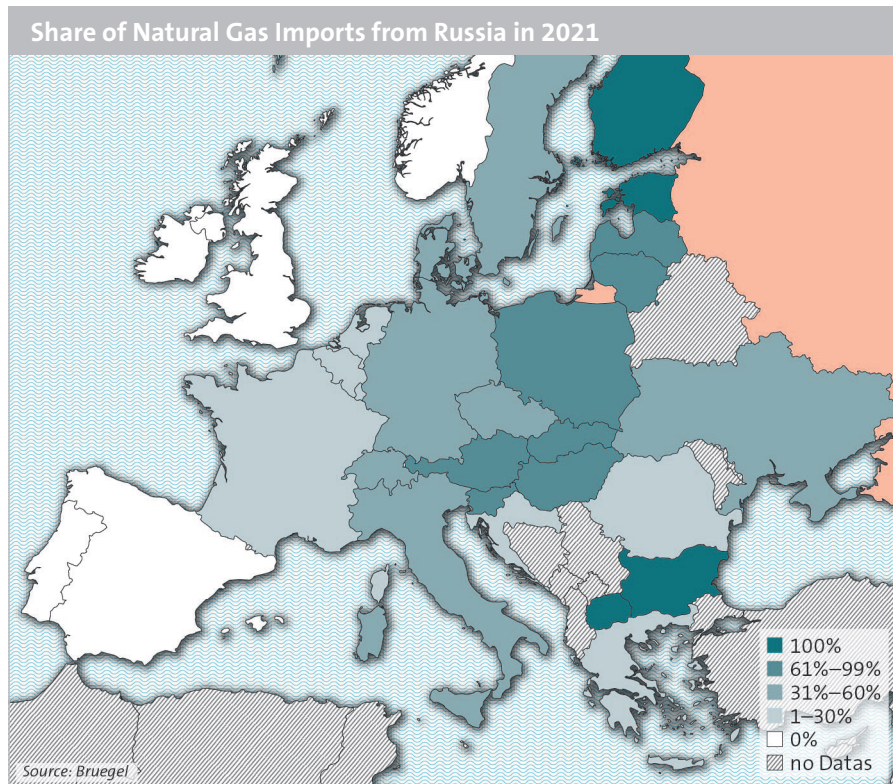
European countries are supporting Ukraine’s right to self-defense, without becoming co-belligerents, by supplying defensive military hardware, intelligence, protective material, and training. According to official numbers, the largest European donors of financial, military, and humanitarian aid in absolute terms are Poland, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France; yet Estonia, Lithuania, and Slovakia top the ranking in relation to their GDP. The Franco-German leadership has been struggling with domestic politics, though. France was immersed in its presidential elections held in April, and Germany has been wrestling to redefine its defense policy. This has caused first cracks in the European response to the war. While Germany is one of the biggest financial donors to Ukraine, Berlin has delayed sending heavy weaponry to Ukraine. In contrast, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Czechia have decided to send Ukraine armored vehicles, and the US shipped spare parts to improve Ukraine’s air combat capability.

The EU has used the European Peace Facility to send Ukraine 1.4 billion EUR. For the very first time in its history, the EU also funds lethal equipment. In addition, the European Investment Bank contributed 2 billion EUR so far. In comparison, Washington has already sent to Ukraine military aid worth over 3 billion USD, or 7.6 billion USD when humanitarian assistance is included.

Putin has inadvertently strengthened the US commitment to European security and NATO’s leadership. In line with its main objective of collective defense, NATO activated its defense plans and strengthened its eastern presence by deploying four additional battalions. The US has also increased its troops in eastern and south-eastern Europe as part of reassurance measures to its European allies. NATO has also been coordinating the bilateral military aid to Ukraine, including older, Soviet-made gear to Ukraine thanks to intra-alliance capability transfers. This, for instance, allowed Slovakia to donate Ukraine an S-300 anti-aircraft

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system, as it could be replaced by several Patriot batteries repositioned from the US, the Netherlands, and Germany. At the same time, NATO countries made its red lines



clear: no boots on the ground and no establishing of a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

### Mood Swings

The war in Ukraine has caused many firsts and U-turns in defense and security attitudes among European countries. Already on 27 February, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced sweeping changes to Germany’s security and defense policy to mark what he called a *Zeitenwende*, a new era in the history of the European continent. This idea was already mentioned in the 2020 Munich Security Report “*Zeitenwende | Wendezeiten*”, which called for Germany’s greater engagement to meet the expectations of its allies and the demands of strategic environment.

Germany, traditionally defying the NATO defense spending pledge, will spend more than 2 per cent of its GDP on defense, which would make it the third largest defense spender in the world. A special 100 billion EUR Defense Fund is meant to boost German military capabilities. Other countries such as Italy, Denmark, Romania, Latvia, and Poland are hastening to achieve new benchmarks in their defense spending. Moreover, Denmark is going to hold a referendum in

July on a potential opt-in to the EU’s security and defense policy, which was a politically controversial issue for a long time.

Other countries are hedging to have it both ways. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán’s fourth premiership, for instance, refused the shipment of weapons to Ukraine across its own border, but it did not block the first EU sanctions. Turkey, for its part did not impose sanctions on Russia, but closed the access to the Black Sea to all military vessels and sold armed drones to Ukraine.

Militarily neutral countries are adjusting their decades-long security and defense policies overnight. For the first time, Sweden is sending weapons to a party in an armed conflict. Switzerland has embraced most EU sanctions. This does not contradict its previous practice and neutral stance but marks its most expansive and noticeable sanctions policy to date.

Russia’s war undermines the belief in neutrality and military non-alignment as a guarantee for territorial integrity. The smaller-state pragmatism counsels that larger powers can have expansive security interest in them, which greatly increases the attractiveness of collective defense guarantees. Indeed, public opinion in both



Sweden and Finland about NATO's relevance has undergone major changes within just a few weeks.

### From Aligned to Allied

Sweden and Finland shifted from formal neutrality to military non-alignment when they joined the EU in 1995. Their status of military neutrality got murky after the EU adopted the Lisbon Treaty that includes a mutual defense clause. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, both countries became militarily aligned, but not allied, with NATO as Enhanced Opportunity Partners, which deepened their defense partnership and military interoperability with the alliance.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine changed their threat assessment significantly. Having launched an inclusive consultation process, Helsinki can be ready to apply for NATO membership as early as this spring. Were Finland to join NATO, its defense and deterrence potential would be considerably stronger due to the Alliance's combined capabilities. Consequently, NATO would be geographically better positioned to defend the Baltic states. However, Finland's membership in NATO could increase Russian attempts to exercise influence along the 1,300-kilometer Russo-Finish border.

Finland is expected to decide on its NATO membership within weeks, without holding a referendum. Sweden is quickly catching up, though the government's report is expected only by the end of May. The timeline is tight as the NATO summit takes place at the end of June 2022.

### Sanctions and sans action

The EU as a major trading power has been the central vehicle for European political, financial, and economic countermeasures. The economic and financial sanctions are targeting not only Russian commercial banks but also the Russian Central Bank and the Russian Direct Investment Fund. Russian oligarchs with ties to the Kremlin are having their assets frozen, and some major Russian banks lost access to SWIFT, the international payment system. European countries are also evicting Russian diplomats suspected of espionage and they closed their skies and ports to Russian airplanes and vessels.

The downside of sanctions is their punitive character, as well as appearing reactive and incremental. Their impact on the course and conduct of the war is difficult to dis-

cern, since the EU has not clearly communicated the political goals of the imposed sanctions, for instance incentivizing peace negotiations. Another issue is compliance and implementation. Even months after their adoption, some countries have only slowly set up agencies to monitor them and patch the loopholes.

European countries are yet to use their most powerful economic tool: oil and gas embargos. However, the dependence on these Russian energy commodities seriously affects energy security in many European countries. The EU has banned Russian coal in response to the evidence of mass executions in Ukraine, but this represents only a fraction of Russian energy exports to the EU, which moreover is to be phased out in four months. This will delay the desired crippling effect on Russia's state budget.

While sanctions on Russian oil are in preparation, gas represents the main fault line. Some 60 per cent of Russia's oil and

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75 per cent of gas exports currently go to Europe. The EU takes about 41 per cent of its gas from Russia and pays for it an estimated one billion EUR per day. Central European and Baltic countries push for a total embargo to deny the Russian government that revenue. Lithuania is the first EU country to stop importing Russian gas. The European Commission and European Parliament press hard for European leaders to ban Russian hydrocarbons. Yet a levy on gas may turn out to a more politically feasible middle ground between doing nothing and a radical embargo.

Germany is weighing against a comprehensive energy embargo as it is one of the most dependent economies on Russian gas at 55 per cent of its imports. About 27 per cent of the EU's largest economy relies on gas as far as final energy consumption is concerned. Berlin found itself in company with Hungary, another country vocally opposing the EU's gas embargo. Russia has long been viewed as an important market for the German industry and was profiting from imports of Russian gas, even after the Russian annexation of Crimea. In February, Germany did suspend the Nord Stream 2 project. Germany's *Wandel durch Handel* policy proved unsuccessful.

### Further reading

European Parliament, 2022, [Russia's war on Ukraine: Implications for EU energy supply](#).

Finnish Government, [Government Report on Changes in the Security Environment](#), 13 April 2022.

Oona A. Hathaway, Scott J. Shapiro, "International law and its transformation through the outlawry of war", *International Affairs* 95(1), 2019, 45–62.

Tobias Bunde / Laura Hartmann / Franziska Stärk et al., "Zeitenwende | Wendezeiten: Special Edition of the Munich Security Report," *Munich Security Conference*, October 2020.

### Reducing Strategic Dependencies

Europe's dependence on strategic energy supplies from Russia endangers its energy security and limits its autonomy of action. The debate about European strategic autonomy predominantly emphasizes on defense such as the lack of the right, European-made capabilities and ill-structured defense spending. However, the war in Ukraine highlights the fundamental problem of Europe's energy dependence on Russia. This has prevented key European policymakers from imposing an embargo and thus severely targeting the Russian state budget, leaving the continent in a difficult position.

That said, the EU has the potential to make a difference in reducing dependencies in energy supplies. What once started as a community of steel and coal now slowly moves towards a community of renewables. The EU is forced to accelerate the diversification of its energy supplies and the shift towards renewables. Although it is gradually increasing the share of renewables, natural gas represents a crucial energy source for the transition period towards EU's declared climate neutrality. Almost 84 per cent of the natural gas consumption in the EU has to be imported.

Should the EU stop all Russian supplies, it would need to enhance the infrastructure for liquefied natural gas first, as well as to temporarily increase imports from other countries. Coordinated purchases of energy supplies, shared reservoir, and financing infrastructure, including fuel for nuclear plants, on the EU level could help its members to share and pool the costs. This could foster the establishment of some sort of Common Energy Security Policy, an imple-

mentation of the European Energy Union. Unlike in the defense domain, the EU has real and concrete tools at its disposal to enhance European autonomy in strategic energy supplies, and ultimately improve its

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geopolitical standing on the global energy market. Such a step forward by the EU would significantly complement NATO's military role and have a straightforward consequence for European security.

### Days, Weeks, Months

Putin has triggered policy reactions that few observers of European security affairs would have anticipated. European countries are increasing defense spending, NATO has deployed troops on the territory of its Eastern members, the US has shown leadership and interest in keeping NATO united, and Europe will phase out purchases of Russian gas and oil. Putin's war also showcased some surprising limitations of the Russian army (see [CSS Analysis no. 301](#)).

Active European defense is happening through supporting Ukraine in its fight against the Russian aggressor. In a close partnership with the US and other Western countries, European leaders try to prevent the war from escalating both horizontally – from spilling across Ukraine's borders into Europe – and vertically, through the use of weapons of mass destruction. However, they are facing President Putin armed with nuclear weapons on the one hand, and their own domestic electorates and high inflation on the other hand. These dilemmas are causing disagreements about the nature of military assistance to Ukraine and the scope of Europe's energy sanctions on Russia. Germany has yet to show that its *Zeitenwende* is a serious long-term policy change for the sake of a future European defense policy and not just a symbolic expression of solidarity.

European countries are realizing the strategic importance of energy supplies, as Putin's war made their dependence on Russian gas exports highly undesirable. Reducing Europe's strategic dependencies on Russian energy commodities poses a major challenge, as it will require a lot of

time, resources, and political will. However, it also presents a prime opportunity for the EU to enhance its geopolitical standing.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine effectively marks the end of the 30-year long period of perceived peace in Europe, bar the Yugoslav wars. The main long-term geopolitical problem for the continent is yet to be solved. Essentially, Europe cannot enjoy sustainable stability and prosperity without Ukraine and Russia being organic parts of its security architecture.

For more on perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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