

# NATO AND EU STRATEGIC REVISION. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS BEFORE AND AFTER THE RUSSIAN – UKRAINIAN WAR

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**Abstract:** *The present paper approaches the significant contextual aspects in which 2022 NATO and EU strategic revision process is taking place. The study premises that Russian unjustified military aggression on Ukraine and the subsequent security challenges for the European security environment are only the most recent, visible, and implicitly, attention catching ones, and that the background of the current strategic revision of both NATO and the EU is wider and marked by the succession of internal and external crises in the last decade. However, despite the need to approach all these challenges, Russian invasion of Ukraine has a key role in these organizations’ strategic revision, as it can be considered a wake-up call, an undeniable proof that both NATO and EU have to adapt their role in the regional and international security context. Through this rather descriptive approach, this paper is meant to bring to attention the complexity of the current international and regional context, shaping NATO and EU strategic revision. Also, we will argue that one of the main challenges that are to come after this revision will consist in dealing with NATO-EU relation in the best possible manner. In order to do so, the argumentation will be built departing from the general regional context, taking in consideration both internal and external trends, continuing with the origins and signification of NATO and EU strategic revision. This will be the basis on which we intend to reveal some of the challenges of NATO-EU relation and how this relation was impacted by the unjustified Russian military aggression on Ukraine. The argumentation capitalizes recent events with relevance for NATO and EU approach to security and is built on inputs from the level of population perception on NATO and EU, as well as from national foreign politics and trends specific to the organizations themselves. Given that this paper was written before NATO actually published its 2022 Strategic Concept, the author will mostly capitalize on EU’s official documents and, implicitly, on EU’s perspective. The study concludes that despite the highly conflict-prone context, there is also a favourable ground not only for the EU to progress in its military dimension, but also for doing this in full coordination with NATO, avoiding duplications.*

**Keywords:** *cohesion crisis; liberal democracy crisis; Strategic Compass; Strategic Concept; strategic autonomy; Russian-Ukrainian war.*

From the very first days of the Russian unjustified military aggression on Ukraine, the Euro-Atlantic community showed solidarity with Ukraine. Despite not involving in a direct military manner in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Western actors constantly and strongly supported Ukrainian part in its fight for freedom, sovereignty and independence through a long range of political, economic, military, humanitarian actions. Although all these actions bear a high importance for the Ukrainian resistance, this paper will focus more on the implications of the Russian aggression on Ukraine for NATO and EU from the perspective of their effort to adapt to an increasingly unstable, insecure, and conflict prone international security environment. Also, as the military crisis at NATO’s and EU’s border is only the most recent one in a large succession of crises, we set ourselves to approach as many and as much as possible the long term trends of relevance for this process of strategic adaptation.

## **1. Elements of context with relevance for NATO and EU strategic revision**

In the last decade, world has passed through a range of deep and extended challenges and transformation determining the need for an adapted approach. For the Euro-Atlantic community

these challenges originated not only externally, but also internally, thus creating the need to address security risks and threats while dealing with serious internal vulnerabilities<sup>1</sup>.

On the external challenges side, one could easily think about the building-up of the international competitiveness (political, economic, military, energy), the increasingly tensed relations between major international actors once the Russian Federation and China embraced a revisionist behaviour on the international arena, the preservation and even escalation of regional crises, the multiple forms took by hybrid aggression, the deep impact of Covid-19 pandemic on all security dimensions.

At the same time, the Euro-Atlantic security community as a whole has been facing a range of serious internal challenges, among which the decline of liberal democracy and the subsequent erosion of cohesion have the deepest and most extended consequences. The decline of liberal democracy worldwide, including Europe and North America, has been acknowledged by research institutions specialized in this area for at least a decade. Their analyses on 2021 democracy evolutions reflect that this trend not only maintained, but it is also paralleled by the development of autocracies, at such an extent that democracy level worldwide reached the level of 1989 (V-DEM Institute 2022, 6). Indeed, Europe remained the region where democracies were best evaluated, but even in this case the decline is unquestionable (Bauhaus n.d., 38). The trend of autocratization as a result of liberal democracy decline, especially in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, is one of the common conclusions of all the studies on this phenomenon (IDEA 2021, 1) (V-DEM Institute 2022, 5). Therefore, as we are dealing with a long term trend, approaching the decline of liberal democracy as a security threat has become a common thing in security studies, but without laying too much emphasis on its effects on NATO and EU. So, why does liberal democracy decline matter for these organizations?

Since NATO and the EU are based on Member States' common commitment to democracy values and principles, there is a causal link between the declining quality of democracy and the tendency of European and Euro-Atlantic loss of cohesion. In order to be functional, democracy needs to be accompanied by liberalism, namely by commitment to civil liberties and rule of law, which are liberal principles. Also, recent history shows that it is possible for democratic elected regimes to elude or discard those liberal premises. Hungary and Poland are some of the most well documented examples in this respect, especially because they are also subjected to infringement procedure by the EU because of not complying to these standards. This phenomenon entered security studies under the name of illiberal democracy, thus making it necessary to discern it from liberal democracy. Therefore, liberal democracy decline gives the measure of the vulnerability of the two organizations. In addition, in the context of the hybrid conflict between Western actors, on the one hand, and the Russian Federation, on the other, the weakening of the cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic community and the decline of liberal democracy are one of the key vulnerabilities actions targeted by hybrid aggression. The role of liberal democracy in the context of current security challenges was also highlighted at the 2022 Munich Security Conference. Thus, referring to the multiple security challenges, the Conference report mentions that "from a transatlantic point of view, the trends described above would have been less worrying had it not been for the crisis of liberal democracy" (Bunde, et al. 2022, 25).

For NATO and EU, all this context, together with the successive security crises, came with the pressure for each organization to extend and develop their rather adjacent dimensions and the coordinates of the relations between them. In this line of thought, NATO needed to focus more on strengthening its civilian instruments needed for responding to terrorism and disinformation. For the European Union, this context came with the need to identify a position, depending on its hard and soft capabilities, as well as on the dynamics of relations

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based, among others, on previous research results on this subject, disseminated in "Evaluare strategică 2022" (in translation, *2022 Strategic Evaluation* - in process of publication), and "Colocviu Strategic" (in translation, *Strategic Colloquium*) no. 1, 3, 5, 9/2022.

with the main actors in this competition. In these circumstances, in parallel with the effort to define and develop a European strategic autonomy, there is also the fundamental role of the transatlantic partnership is maintained, but with multiple internal challenges.

This is the background specific to NATO and EU on which the Russian Federation launched an unjustified military aggression on Ukraine, starting with February, 24<sup>th</sup> 2022, shattering not only the security and stability of the Ukrainian state, but of the entire Euro-Atlantic security. This all the more as the declaration of February, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2022, by which V. Putin argued the initiation of a so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, mentioned as a first argument in the respect Moscow’s “biggest concerns and worries, and (...) the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year”, explicitly referring to “eastward expansion of NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border” (Aljazeera 2022). Furthermore, Russian president argued the connection between Western actors and Ukraine, stating that “the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, those who will never forgive the people of Crimea and Sevastopol for freely making a choice to reunite with Russia” (Aljazeera 2022).

The idea that among the reasons for which V. Putin decided to launch a full-fledged war on Ukraine is the connection between Kiev and Western actors is infused throughout the entire speech of February, 23<sup>rd</sup>, even though it is surrounded by untruths and misinterpretations of facts. Western actors’ efforts in late 2021 to deescalate the crisis and determine Moscow to withdraw the troops massed at Belarus-Ukraine border were capitalized in the same idea. Then, Russia required guarantees that neither Ukraine nor any other Eastern European state shall get NATO membership, as well as NATO’s withdrawing its military infrastructure to 1997 level (The Guardian 2021), all unacceptable for Euro-Atlantic actors.

Thus, as far as Russia is concerned, war narratives are built around the idea of the fight against morally corrupted Western actors, controlling the “Nazi” government in Kiev, putting at risk the lives of the population. Despite not being directly involved in the war taking place on Ukrainian territory, Ukraine relations with NATO and EU, Russia’s relation with NATO (especially, from the perspective of Moscow-Washington relations) and EU are an important dimension of the current state of facts. Furthermore, Russia’s war against Ukraine has led to the most significant change in the European security context in multiple ways. Firstly, it increased the risk of a military threat to unprecedented levels in the post-Cold War period. Secondly, despite of some exceptions, it determined an unexpected level of cohesion in the Euro-Atlantic community, NATO and EU member states capitalizing all their available to support Kiev, while enhancing their own security. However, this strong incentive of closing the ranks not only between Euro-Atlantic states, but also between them and Ukraine has had exceptions. In this line of thought, Hungary’s position is indicative. Overall, Budapest rallied to the measures decided by its partners and allies within EU and NATO. Nevertheless, the relatively close relations between Hungary and the Russian Federation especially in the energy area as well as the previous tensions between Budapest and EU in the area of the rule of law, migration or civil liberties may have laid at the basis of a rather wary position of this state in the context of the Russian military aggression on Ukraine. We consider explanatory in this respect the temporary decision of Budapest to condition Ukrainian refugees entering Hungary by biometric passport and, after giving up this condition, by subjecting those without such a passport to additional controls. Also, other examples in this respect are the refusal to allow lethal weapons transportation to Ukraine on the Hungarian territory or the acceptance of paying for natural gas in Russian roubles.

This particular example shows that Western actors have showed indeed cohesion, both between themselves and with the Ukrainian cause, but the pace and the degree of this solidarity have varied, especially under the force of trends established before the military

crisis. In this context one shall underestimate neither the fact that cohesion has been reached, nor the difficulties in reaching it.

Under these conditions, there are several inputs of the Russian aggression on the Euro-Atlantic community and security organizations. Firstly, there is clearly a trend of enhancing solidarity and reconsidering NATO and EU's *raison d'être*, which are manifested not only through their unity in sanctioning Russia's actions and supporting Kiev resistance, but also in the emergence of an attraction force towards both member and non-member states as NATO and EU membership are seen as an increase in terms of security. A relevant indicator in this respect is the dynamic of public support for these organizations. Concerning the Alliance, 71% of the interviewed citizens of NATO member states consider that NATO is important for the future security of their country as compared to 9% who considering it "not important". Also, despite there is a high concern for a war happening in NATO countries (84%), 67% think that their country should defend another in case of attack and 62% that NATO membership make an attack less likely (NATO 2022, 3). The EU also benefits of a high support from its population concerning the actions undertaken in the context of the Ukrainian war: eight in ten respondents show support for EU economic sanctions against Russia, two thirds agree to purchasing more military equipment for Ukrainian military forces, 93% agree to the humanitarian actions and, with high relevance for our study, 76% agree that Ukrainian war proves that greater military cooperation is needed in the EU (European Commission 2022, 3).

As far as the EU is concerned, Ukraine, the Republic and Moldova and Georgia have long aspired to becoming members of the organizations and the first two were granted the candidate status in June 2022<sup>2</sup>. Also, of significant importance is Denmark referendum in June 2022 for resigning to the opt-out clause in relation to Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU. The results of the referendum showed an unprecedented level of support of the Danish for EU and CSDP, as the population decided with a 65% majority to join EU CSDP, after 30 years of opt-out clause in this respect and after constantly opposing to further EU integration (Euronews 2022). Giving up CSDP opt-out clause will allow Denmark to contribute to EU military operations and cooperate in military capabilities development and acquisition. Also, Finland and Sweden decision to give up military neutrality and join NATO come under the same trend. However, in this particular case, NATO allies and partners will have to deal with Turkish opposition.

Secondly, Russian military aggression on Ukraine determined strong incentive for focusing on military security after a long time of approaching security mostly in its non-military dimensions. Actually, the emergence of this attraction force of NATO and EU is based on this turn taken by Western actors in terms of security. One of the most significant examples in this respect is Germany's decision to invest 2% of GDP in defence annually, thus marking a significant change in this country's approach on security and defence, well-known for its reticence for defence investment (Marksteiner 2022). Even more, this decision was supported, according to an opinion poll, by 69% of the population, a significant increase from the 39% reached in 2018 (Marksteiner 2022). Other countries deciding to increase their defence budgets are Romania (from 2% to 2.5% of GDP from 2023), Italy (gradual increase from 1.4% to 2% until 2028), Sweden (from 1.3% to 2% in a decade), Austria (from 0.74% to 1%), Poland (from 2.2% to 3% from 2023), Netherlands (meets 2% GDP threshold in 2024 and 2025) (Claverie, Bernard; du Cluzel, François 2022, 6-7).

Thus, the emergence of a military conflict carried out with conventional weapons on the European continent determined a refocus of NATO and EU member states on defence

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended analysis on Ukraine candidacy to the EU, please see: C. Bogzeanu, "Ucraina – de la cererea de aderare rapidă la Uniunea Europeană la perspectiva comunității politice europene", Colocviu strategic, no. 9/2022, pp. 9-13, URL: [https://cssas.unap.ro/ro/pdf\\_publicatii/cs09-22.pdf](https://cssas.unap.ro/ro/pdf_publicatii/cs09-22.pdf)

issues, increasing their willingness to increase their defence budgets. Also, it is significant that this willingness was built up gradually, as the relations between the resurgent Russia and Western actors have become tenser ever since 2014 and as the successive crises (2014 Ukrainian crisis, 2015 European refugee crisis, 2016 Brexit, 2020 pandemic, liberal democracy crisis etc.) became just as much warnings that international and regional security needed an adapted approach on behalf of NATO and EU.

## **2. NATO and EU Strategic revision: beyond the process**

Russian military aggression on Ukraine determined, beyond any doubt, a strong re-focus on defence matters both in terms of investment and of strengthening the cooperation formats, but the need of NATO and EU strategic revision preceded all these events. This process has begun a couple of years ago, under the pressure of the challenges emerging from the growing competition at international level.

In December 2019, NATO Secretary General was asked to launch a Forward-Looking Reflection Process to identify solutions for strengthening NATO's political dimension (NATO 2019). By the end of 2020, the Reflection Group published "NATO 2030. United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General". The document included recommendations in three main areas: a) reinforcing Allied unity, solidarity, and cohesion, including to cement the centrality of the transatlantic bond; 2) increasing political consultation and coordination between Allies in NATO; and 3) strengthening NATO's political role and relevant instruments to address current and future threats and challenges to Alliance security emanating from all strategic directions (NATO 2020, 3).

The EU also begun its strategic review process in mid-2020 and was thought as a three-step process. Firstly, undertake a security threats analysis, in order to grant a common understanding among EU Member States in this regard and to provide a sound basis for building a European strategic culture. For providing favourable conditions for this phase, the result was and remained classified. Secondly, Member States were supposed to agree on strategic objectives achievable for the EU in order to become stronger as international security actors. Thirdly, offering political guidance for military planning process in the future. There were also established four main "baskets" in which the EU shall take further steps in order to achieve its level of ambition in terms of security and defence – crisis management, resilience, capability development, and partnerships.

EU Strategic Compass is a complex document not only in terms of classification (strategy and action plan) (Paul, et al. 2022), but also contextually and symbolically, as it is meant to provide the common solid ground for EU member states to build up a common approach in security and defence under the circumstances in which they excel neither in cohesion, nor in military capabilities. Thus, the strategy valence of EU Strategic Compass is meant as a sound basis for building a common understanding among EU member states on the current security environment in terms of challenges and what is to be done to approach these challenges. The action plan value of the same document offers a clear organization and timing of the process.

The document has even more value as it was preceded by a long range of initiatives verged towards developing EU's weight as security provider. A turning point in this line of thought can be found in 2016, once the British decided to leave EU's institutional framework. This meant that EU was to lose one of its main economic and military powers, as well as the main opponent to the idea that EU member states should deepen their defence integration and that the EU should develop its military dimension. All the more, as regional security environment seemed turning more unstable with the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the emergence of

hybrid threats, and the economic challenges of China's rise, all together with an internal crisis in transatlantic relations during D. Trump's presidency (BBC 2017) (Atlantic Council 2019) (The Economist 2019).

The launch of Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), the operationalization of PESCO, the European Defence Fund, and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence were all meant to provide both the strategic vision and the tools for reaching the level of ambition. To all these, one shall also add the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, a permanent command and control structure at strategic level, for non-executive missions (2017), European Peace Facility, allowing financing operational actions under CFSP with military or defence implications (2021) came under the same trend. Therefore, it becomes clear that EU has accumulated a series of progresses in this line before the Russian attack on Ukraine, as a result of increasing security challenges and transatlantic relations crisis.

As far as NATO is concerned, the document which will be issued during Madrid Summit in late June 2022<sup>3</sup>, would be the fourth Strategic Concept of the post-Cold War Alliance, expected to reflect the changes in the characteristics and dynamic of the international security environment, the main security risks and threats and the manner in which these challenges would be approached by NATO. Similarly to the EU, NATO has been involved in a process of adaptation before the launch of 2022 Strategic Concept. The rise of China as economic power and of Russia as a regional resurgent one are most probably to be included and change the coordinates of the security environment assessment. Also, most probably, Russia will not be approached as partner. Also notable is the fact that NATO undertook a series of transformations before the launch of the new Strategic Concept. For instance, the emergence of hybrid and cyber threats determined the Alliance to include cyberspace as a domain of operations, thus, "cyber defence is a part of NATO's core task of collective defence" (NATO 2016). Also, referring to hybrid threats, 2016 Warsaw Summit decided that the "Council could decide to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty" (NATO 2016).

Coming back to the emergence of a conventional military conflict at NATO's border immediately determined the activation of defence plans and increased its military presence in the East of the Alliance (NATO 2022). Also, there are preoccupations with increasing resilience of societies and infrastructure to Russia's malign influence (cyber, situational awareness, civil preparedness). In this respect, one could observe a significant change from a trend characterizing some of Euro-Atlantic leaders just a few years ago. In 2017, the Allies were worried about D. Trump's statement that NATO was obsolete (BBC 2017) and two years later E. Macron's interview for the Economist saying that NATO was becoming brain-dead had a similar effect (The Economist 2019). References to the Alliance in these terms pointed out the need of an adaptation not only of the Alliance, but also of its relation to the EU<sup>4</sup>, which was showing a higher willingness to invest in its defence dimension. However, the security dynamics at their Eastern border determined NATO to refocus on its fundamental purpose – collective defence. At the same time, the same course of events also revealed EU's added value in regional security, by capitalizing not only on its soft power tools (diplomacy, humanitarian and financial aid), but also on its hard power tools some of them previously used (economic sanctions) and others recently created (financing the purchase of weapons by Kiev through European Peace Facility, instrument created in 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> This paper was written before NATO published its new Strategic Concept.

<sup>4</sup> Actually, NATO and EU signed joint declarations of their relations in 2016 and 2018, agreeing to enhance cooperation in 7 areas: hybrid threats, operational cooperation, cyber security, defence capabilities, industry and research, exercises, capacity building.

For NATO, Russian military aggression on Ukraine created one of the most dangerous situations after the end of the Cold War. It is not just the conflict in itself creating this situation, but also the fact that Russian war narrative is built on the basis of NATO's interests in Ukraine, especially as a vector of US, and the threat it thus raises for Russia. Therefore, at this level, reaction was severely complicated as the Allies had to find the balance between clearly asserting their defence posture, need to enhance their own security, and the need to support Kiev in such a manner it would not be capitalized by Russian propaganda as an offensive measure against Russia, but, at the same time, to contribute effectively to the de-escalation of the conflict and to be a real assistance to the Ukrainian part.

Additionally, in this context, in Russian narrative on Western actors, the EU could also be given a similar value to the one of NATO. Actually, in a speech on Ukraine's intention to join the EU, Lavrov said "there are doubts about how harmless such a desire is for Kiev", adding that the EU is turning from a "constructive economic platform" into an "aggressive, militant player who declares his ambitions far beyond the European continent" (Euractiv 2022). Therefore, we can identify the beginning of an aggressive rhetoric not only about NATO's eastward expansion (motivated by US membership), but also about the EU, probably determined by the magnitude of sanctions imposed on Russia and Ukraine's financial, humanitarian, political and military support. Moreover, the context in which the Ukrainian crisis broke out at the end of 2013 is significant. At that time, President V. Yanukovich renounced signing the Association Agreement with the EU, which led to widespread mass protests, marking thus the first stage of the crisis that escalated at the beginning of 2014. This whole context can be interpreted as a demonstration of the EU's power at regional level.

Thus, NATO and EU strategic revision has been incentivized not only by the changes in international security environment which brought more uncertainty and instability, but also by internal crises. Under these conditions, for NATO and EU, the major challenge was to keep their ability to properly approach the current security challenges, while keeping their cohesion at a level allowing them to act efficiently. Under these circumstances, the terms of EU-NATO cooperation and their organizational evolution so as to comply with the complementarity principle turned into a key challenge.

### **3. NATO-EU relation between strategic autonomy and no duplication principle**

EU's *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* sets a series of actions the EU is to undertake in order to become more capable of acting as a security provider and, implicitly, to make progresses in the area of defence, including the creation and operationalization until 2025 of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, a reaction force the EU could capitalize in crisis management. Regarding EU's relation with NATO, the document states repeatedly the commitment to the complementarity principle. The Alliance is presented as "the foundation of collective defence for its Member States" (European Union 2022, 9) and that a "stronger and more capable EU" will be complementary to NATO (European Union 2022, 13) and will contribute to strengthening the Alliance as it will be more capable of sharing the burden of maintaining peace and security (European Union 2022, 5). Thus, the Strategic Compass clearly sets at the basis of EU's defence development the strategic partnership with NATO, the principle of avoiding duplication between the organizations. This is important because the previous dynamic of the relations within the transatlantic partnership contained several reasons to question its viability.

EU's efforts to develop its military dimension came with the risk of duplicating NATO's security and defence tasks and functions, thus trespassing one of the key principle of NATO-EU relation. Actually, the long debate on *strategic autonomy* implication is of high

relevance for this state of facts. Strategic autonomy is one of the main concepts coined by the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS). Strategic autonomy has been the concept that has guided Europeans' efforts in this direction in recent years. But, in this case too, we can talk about a fragmentation in the views of the Member States, especially as regards the level of independence in the field of defence that Europeans should develop in relation to the USA. Thus, there is, on the one hand, a vision that strategic autonomy supposes independence in action in the field of security and defence in relation to the USA (promoted by France) and another vision in which EU strategic autonomy supposes the development of the EU's capacity for action, but in close cooperation with NATO, which retains its key role in European security (vision promoted by Germany) (CSSAS 2020, 85-87) (CSSAS 2021, 43-44).

After a period of growing distrust, the beginning of 2021 was marked by European actors' optimism against the background of winning the US presidential election by Joe Biden, after the almost mercantilist US approach to European allies under D. Trump was a test of the strength of the partnership transatlantic. All this at a time when the level of instability in Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhood was already rising. The new US president's public speech illustrated a distinct approach to the transatlantic partnership compared to that of his predecessor, referring to a US return to multilateralism, a return to international leadership "alongside nations that share values" (The White House 2021a). However, two events of 2021 challenged the transatlantic cohesion again. Firstly, there was Washington's decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, resulted in a chaotic retreat, with the Taliban taking power from Kabul and, probably, massive losses in terms of both the prestige of the Washington government and the level of confidence at the transatlantic level. For European allies, the course of events was a new occasion in which the strength of the Euro-Atlantic partnership was called into question (Hoff 2021), and was also used in public discourse to support the need to develop strategic autonomy (European Council 2021a), considered a proof of the need for the EU to develop the necessary capabilities to carry out missions in the event that action with NATO aegis cannot be undertaken or is not appropriate.

Shortly afterwards, a crisis in relations between France and Washington followed amid the unexpected announcement of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to sign a defence pact (AUKUS) and to terminate a previous contract between France and Australia. AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, through which they aim to ensure peace in the Indo-Pacific region (The White House 2021b). The agreement also stipulates that the first two will support Canberra in the purchase of nuclear submarines. This led Australia to cancel a contract with France in 2016 for the purchase of conventionally powered submarines. AUKUS has been described by the French Minister of Defence as "unacceptable behaviour between allies and partners, the consequences of which affect the vision of alliances and partnerships" (Le Ministère de l'Europe et d'Affaires Étrangères 2021a). Also, similar to the crisis generated by the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the situation was capitalized to justify the need to develop strategic autonomy, the termination of the contract between Canberra and Paris being considered an event that "increases the need to raise the issue of strategic autonomy. There is no other credible way for us to defend our interests and values in the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region" (Le Ministère de l'Europe et d'Affaires Étrangères 2021b).

These two situations of crisis have reduced confidence that the strength of the transatlantic partnership could be restored (Williams and Lunn 2021). The reporting of European officials to the way in which the withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS was carried out in parallel with the reiteration of the commitment to the development of strategic autonomy is illustrative in this respect. These situations determined expectations for NATO and EU to evolve rather separately in the future as this course of events showed that they had

different priorities, underlining US refocus on Asia Pacific (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2022, 66).

However, despite the fact that the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan has generated not only a transatlantic crisis but also a stimulus to the orientation towards European strategic autonomy, NATO-EU defence cooperation remained constant in the official discourse. The President of the European Commission emphasized this in the 2021 State of the Union Address, starting from the idea that, in terms of security and defence, reducing cooperation is not a solution to any of the specific problems. At the same time, if relations with NATO are an essential part of this area, it is equally important that “Europe can (...) be able and willing to do more on its own” (von der Leyen 2021, 13). Ursula von der Leyen further points out that previous attempts to develop the Union’s military capability have failed due to a lack of political will at Member State level (von der Leyen 2021, 14), thus resuming the theme of divisions in the way Member States Europeans relate to the role of the EU in European defence.

Under these circumstances, we consider relevant the results of a recent study issued by RAND Corporation examining three scenarios for the evolution of strategic autonomy (Retter, et al. 2021). The study concludes that the scenario in which European strategic autonomy is directed towards the development of the European pillar within NATO is the one that involves, according to most experts involved, most advantages. The other two scenarios – the failure of European defence integration and the development of EU military power in parallel and independently with NATO – although can be considered antagonistic, pose similar levels of risk to European security (Retter, et al. 2021, v).

Moreover, NATO’s official discourse seems to confirm the conclusion of RAND study. In a speech at the College of Europe (Bruges), NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg argued that EU defence initiatives are beneficial as long as the Union does not duplicate or replace NATO functions, highlighting the risks involved by decoupling Europe from North America: “A European Union that spends more on defence, invests in new capabilities, and reduces the fragmentation of the European defence industry, is not only good for European security. It is also good for transatlantic security”, “the EU cannot defend Europe alone”, “Any attempt to divide Europe from North America, will not only weaken NATO, it will also divide Europe” (NATO 2021a). Furthermore, the US joining the military mobility project is capitalized on to exemplify the advantages of NATO-EU cooperation, the project being considered representative from this point of view (NATO 2021a).

Thus, the debate on the signification of strategic autonomy is a clear indicator of fragmentation both within the EU and between transatlantic allies. The main stake was how to develop EU’s military dimension so as to avoid duplication with NATO tasks and function, not to weaken NATO, while US priorities seemed to be directed towards Asia-Pacific. The latter also functioned as a main incentive for EU’s defence initiatives. Russian invasion of Ukraine and the destabilization it brought for European security could have functioned as a stimulus for finding the middle way in NATO and EU roles for European security. This, all the more as the debates on strategic autonomy finality has been constantly accompanied by warnings on the negative effects of an eventual parallel EU defence development.

## **Conclusion**

NATO and EU carried out in parallel their strategic revision, which can be considered not only opportune, but also necessary, especially we take into account the following: a) common security challenges; b) cohesion erosion; c) hybrid threats aiming the cohesion itself; d) rapid succession of internal and external crises, testing their capacity to act or to adapt in order to act efficiently.

For EU defence, the current context is one of the most favourable grounds to be turned to advantage. Firstly, there is a high public support not only for EU and NATO contribution to Ukraine's resistance, but also from the perspective of their role in keeping peace and stability for their member states. Additionally, there is a higher willingness among member states to invest more in defence. Secondly, the multitude and depth of security threats, especially the military crisis at EU's and NATO's borders revealed that they can assume complementary roles in such situations with a positive impact both on the evolution of crisis situation and on their member states' security. At the same time, for NATO, Russian invasion on Ukraine also determined a strong refocus on its basic mission – collective defence –, proof that its *raison d'être* has never been obsolete.

From this perspective, one could say that Russian military aggression on Ukraine had negative effect from Moscow's point of view as it determined a cohesive reaction of the Euro-Atlantic actors, thus reversing the trend of solidarity fragmentation characteristic to the last years. Nevertheless, this crisis has been preceded by a long series of crises, trends, and events whose effect has been the erosion of Euro-Atlantic solidarity. The constant decline of liberal democracy, the frequent disagreements between Euro-Atlantic actors, hybrid aggression coordinated by third parties targeting Euro-Atlantic cohesion were not ended by the 2022 military crisis, but just put into the shadow. Therefore, scepticism regarding the duration of this solidarity between Western actors shall be maintained and shall determine carrying further the analysis of the causes and effects of the cohesion erosion at Euro-Atlantic level.

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