

Trans European Policy Studies Association

TEPSA BRIEFS

JUNE 2022

In the shadow of the “Black Swan”

Dimitrios Tsaknis*

Abstract

The Russian – Ukrainian dispute has confirmed that the European security system remains fragile. It has also proved that peace and prosperity are at stake. The adoption of the Strategic Compass is an effort of a collective response. The timing is favourable for the EU to deepen its strategic vision. It is the time for the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ to wake up.

Introduction

Only a few remember that the text of the European Global Strategy (EUGS) was published and adopted on June 28, 2016, four days after the earthquake that Brexit¹ caused in the European Union (EU). The same happened this March, as the text of the Strategic Compass was published once more in the midst of an even greater turmoil and uncertainty. The document has been adopted

on March 21, 2022, while the Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine was still in progress².

The appearance of a “black swan”

Inevitably, the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine are equivalent to the appearance of a “black swan” in the European continent. “Black swans” are defined as: events whose consequences have yet to be realised to their full extent³. When the discussion comes to the visible consequences of the war, the massive displacement of Ukrainian refugees to the interior of Europe poses a characteristic example of such a consequence. However, that is surely not the only example. A cornerstone to the European agenda is the issue of energy efficiency, which tends to become a “Gordian knot”, as the Europeans are already facing increasing energy and fuel supply costs a trend which is expected to exacerbate in the following months. According to the most recent data (2020) it is estimated that the energy needs of the EU are covered to a percentage that amounts to 26.9% from the Russian oil imports, to 41% from the Russian (natural) gas imports and to 47.7% from Russian coal imports⁴. In that way, it becomes apparent that the extent of the European

¹ Tocci N. (2016), “The Making of the EU Global Strategy”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol 37, No. 3, p. 470.

² EC (2022), “A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade”, 21 March 2022.

³ Taleb N. (2007), “The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable”, *Penguin Books Ltd*.

⁴ Lu M. (2022), “Visualizing the EU’s Energy Dependency”, *Visual Capitalist*, 22 March 2022.

dependence to Russian fossil fuels is significantly high. It is also becoming clearer that despite the decision made to find alternative providers and supply markets, the transition is expected to be quite problematic.

Further to the above, the situation is equally bleak in terms of the supply of grain, oil products and minerals useful to the European industry due to the disengagement of the Russian market from the EU (due to Western sanctions), but also due to the Ukraine’s inability to export its goods and products⁵. Amongst the various challenges, one that stands out is the acquiring of resources for the reconstruction of the devastated Ukraine. Costs that are growing exponentially every day of the war. At the same time, any prediction about the end of the war seems too risky.

Undeniably, the EU is at the forefront of a multilevel crisis, as the interdependence with Moscow over the past two decades has strengthened Russia’s economic position and its ability to play an active role in influencing and shaping the continent’s energy policy through the “pipeline diplomacy”. The above-mentioned conditions favoured the emergence of Russia with the characteristics of an “Eurasian power”, with the projection of revisionist aspirations in areas whose fate was directly or indirectly determined by the U.S.S.R. during the 20th century⁶.

The adoption of the Strategic Compass as a response to the Crisis

Under these circumstances, Europe’s vulnerability questions the effectiveness of sanctions, while secondarily the European’s bloc cohesion is undermined by several national governments, that are appearing ambiguous in the scenario of adopting additional measures. An illustrative example is

the differentiation of Hungary, which refuses to offer consent to the European embargo on Russian oil imports⁷. Moreover, the shadowy role of the former German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, who is lobbying on behalf of the Kremlin, is causing feelings of concern and suspicion, in contrast to the official and reasoned German stance in favour of Ukraine – thus fuelling German and consequently European bilingualism.

The document of the Strategic Compass prioritises the risks and the security threats that the continent and especially the EU has to address in light of the 2030 milestone. The Strategic Compass⁸ is a comprehensive high strategy text which requires a practical commitment to its principles from the Member States that will ratify it. Despite the fact that there is no unity on the issue of imposing additional sanctions (an indication that the discussions on a common European foreign policy are still at an early stage) there is a unique opportunity for consensus on the issue of institutionalising a common defence and security policy, with the implementation of some (not-so-new) provisions, such as the possibility of developing a rapid response team⁹, operationally ready and prepared to undertake action in times of crisis (mostly within Europe).

At the same time, coordination and cooperation will have to penetrate other fields, such as the provision of “means” to meet the (pan)European objective of security. Also, the strengthening of operational capabilities and closer cooperation in the field of intelligence. Furthermore, the establishment of operational exercises and the institutionalisation of a defence cooperation in the RescEU standards along with the creation of a common European aeronautical directorate, are objectives absolutely achievable. The development of a

⁵ UN News (2022), “Ukraine: ‘We need peace now’ declares Guterres, warning of global hunger meltdown”, 14 March 2022.

⁶ Bonoras D. (2022), “War: Whoever wins Europe, wins the World”, *Army Voice*, 23 March 2022.

⁷ Brzozowski A. (2022), “EU reputation at stake as Hungary continues to block Russia sanctions”, *EURACTIV*, 17 May 2022

⁸ EC (2022), Op. Cit.

⁹ DW (2022), “EU approves security policy for rapid reaction force”, *Deutsche Welle*, 21 March 2022

strong European defensive industry has to move forward as it will largely guarantee the self – help of Europe and its Members individually.

Conclusion: Enhancing EU’s strategic vision

Finally, it has but to be stressed that the EU is a normative power and particularly effective if one considers the power of attraction the EU exerts on the other major actors of the international system. Nevertheless, the exercise of soft power, based on the economic power presupposes the existence of a peaceful and stable international environment which at the moment simply does not exist. An alternative view wants European soft power to no longer be attractive to Russia, or at least, to the extent it used to be in the past. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the implementation of a long-term European strategy by undertaking swift and robust action (where and when is required) will grant the EU the status of a “smart power”. Europe’s strategic vision must move forward even if only a few decide to capitalise the opportunities offered by the Strategic Compass. Initially, the aim is to deepen the cooperation between the “group of the willing”. According to the recent experience of Scandinavian countries as regards their planned accession to NATO, it is only a matter of time and international – regional development(s) for others to follow the path of the Compass.

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Trans European Policy Studies Association

European Law & Governance School

Rue d’Egmont 11, B-1000
Brussels, Belgium

2-4 Polygotou st., 10555
Athens.Greece

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Co-funded by
the European Union

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