

MITIGATING TRANSATLANTIC RISKS: ASAP OR THE SAME OLD TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE?

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TEPSA BRIEFS
11/2023



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Co-funded by
the European Union

Abstract

Despite the reinvigorating effect of the common effort to support Ukraine against Russia's aggression, the transatlantic alliance is challenged by volatility in American politics and increasing global instability. Europeans have to take greater responsibility for their own security, but it is a long process. At the same time, focusing attention and resources becomes increasingly challenging on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finland and Sweden are about to join the 24 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members who have signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States (US). The Danes are also in the negotiation process and the Czechs signed an agreement earlier this year. Defence Cooperation Agreements regulate the legal status of American forces and equipment, as well as US access to military bases in the host countries. The urgency to finalise negotiations on the agreements in the course of this year is obvious: US presidential elections looming in 2024. Institutionalising defence cooperation with the US while President Biden is in power is a wise contingency measure, as the political risk related to volatility in American domestic politics is and will likely stay high even beyond 2024.

Strategic autonomy has been subject to controversial debate in Europe since its introduction in the European Union's (EU) [2016 Global Strategy](#). Russia's war in Ukraine has once again confirmed that Europe lacks the capacity to defend itself in a sustained

war and heavily relies on American extended deterrence. Whatever the result of the US elections will be, that constellation will not essentially change. Europe will not miraculously reach strategic autonomy by next year. But that does not mean that greater European ability to take care of its own security should not be a goal to strive for. The word 'autonomy' has frequently triggered heated disagreements among European countries – especially if proposed and promoted by [French President Emmanuel Macron](#) – but, fundamentally, nobody on either side of the Atlantic disagrees that Europeans need to do more.

Is it un-European to buy American?

However, proceeding from words to deeds has proven difficult. In the almost two years since Russia tried to take Kyiv, European nations have found out that scaling down armed forces is easy, but scaling back up is hard, expensive, and takes time. After the Cold War, in the *Zeitgeist* of Francis Fukuyama's famous essay on "the end of history", territorial defence capability was considered to have become obsolete in Europe. On this, there was transatlantic agreement: after the terror attacks of 9/11, the US was focused on the War on Terror and expected its European allies to tag along with small, mobile expeditionary forces. The former Warsaw Pact nations that joined NATO in the late 1990s and early 2000s went through a professionalisation process of their Soviet-style forces.

A vast majority of European countries abolished conscription after the Cold War, but [some are now bringing it back](#) as a reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014. However, increasing force size inevitably takes years if not decades, as the number of personnel available for training purposes is initially limited. Sweden, having cashed in the peace dividend and reduced its troop size to a rather nominal 55 000 including reserve, concluded that voluntary service was no longer a sufficient model as

tensions were rising with Russia and [reintroduced partial conscription in 2017](#). However, Sweden is set to reach the capacity to train 10 000 conscripts yearly only by 2030. In comparison, Finland, which did not discontinue conscription after the Cold War, trains approximately 21 000 conscripts each year. Poland's previous government, albeit without bringing back conscription, announced its aim to be [doubling its current force size](#) of approximately 150 000 – by 2035. Whether Poland's lofty goals remain intact after the elections in October 2023 is currently unclear.

Path dependencies are in general hard to break. Germany reacted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine immediately by announcing a EUR 100 billion special fund for its armed forces, which have ["too little of everything"](#). However, spending such an amount of money is easier said than done, given Germany's slow procurement bureaucracy and overall low availability of off-the-shelf equipment. The European defence industry works based on contracts, which usually take years to deliver on. In addition to interoperability considerations, the US is therefore the address to turn to if equipment is needed fast – or, alternatively, [South Korea](#), with which Poland has signed a number of significant contracts. For France, always bearing in mind the interests of its own defence industry, buying non-European equipment decidedly goes against the goal of more European sovereignty. The repeated [clashes between France and Germany](#) over buying American as the faster option are symptomatic of the inherent paradox of achieving greater European strategic autonomy: either it takes too long, or it is not European.

Muddling through, but not fast enough

Over the course of the past decades, the EU has developed a remarkable ability to muddle through diverse crises. Despite not being a hard security actor and with still lacking geopolitical credentials, the EU nevertheless did not disappoint in the crisis of war either: it has issued 11 packages of sanctions (notwithstanding Hungary's best efforts to slow down the pace), banned Russian state-owned media *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* to curb rampant propaganda, and used the [European Peace Facility](#) to finance military support for Ukraine. The presidents of the European Parliament, Commission and Council have all visited Ukraine multiple times since the Russian full-scale invasion.

But the war has already taken much longer than hardly anyone would have credited Ukraine to be able to withstand in the beginning, and sustaining the necessary levels of aid is becoming a serious challenge. The Ukrainian President Zelenskyy [may or may not have said "I need ammo, not a ride"](#) in the first days of the invasion – and he was right. Ukraine has been using [thousands of rounds of artillery ammunition on a daily basis](#), emptying European stockpiles and straining even American supply. European production capacity is far behind the sudden surge in demand, with countries hastily looking to fill their stocks while keeping up the support for Ukraine. In its boldest move so far, adopting an Estonian suggestion, the EU pledged in March 2023 to deliver one million rounds of ammunition to Ukraine within a year, an initiative known as ASAP ([Act in Support of Ammunition Production](#)). Unsurprisingly to many observers, however, the EU is [struggling to meet the target](#), as production capacity is still lagging behind. The case of ammunition looks to become yet another example of "too little, too late", despite accurate problem diagnostic and political ambition. Muddling

through gets the EU through most crises but might prove too inefficient a method in wartime.

Not as soon as possible but as long as it takes

In Europe, the political willingness to continue backing Ukraine has remained overall firm, with some variation. The pace of support has differed over the course of the war, with the Baltic States, Poland and the United Kingdom initially driving European efforts. Germany had a slow start but has become [Ukraine's second-largest](#) provider of military assistance after the US in absolute terms. The Nordic countries have kept up a steady pace and all rank in the top 10, with the exception of Iceland, which does not have armed forces. Ukraine's direct neighbourhood is not as uniformly supportive as could be expected, with Hungary's consistent spoiler role sabotaging the EU's aid to Ukraine and [Slovakia's newly-elected government](#) pledging to follow a similar course. Even Poland, one of Ukraine's staunchest backers, had some hiccups over the grain row [ahead of the elections](#) in October 2023. On the other side of Europe, despite seemingly lower stakes in the war due to geographical distance, Portugal records over 90% support for Ukraine in the latest [Eurobarometer](#) – higher than Estonia.

In the US, in turn, sustained support is increasingly uncertain. The recent political crises with a narrowly-averted government shutdown in September (and [another one potentially looming](#) before the year ends) and the House of Representatives going [three weeks without a speaker](#) in October have demonstrated how especially Republican support is becoming less reliable and more conditional. Even [delays in US military aid](#) can impact battlefield calculations and a complete halt would likely prove fatal for Ukraine's chances of victory. Due to limited

and already heavily strained resources in Europe and increasing political uncertainty in the US, the often-repeated pledge to support Ukraine "as long as it takes" might prove hard to keep.

The best case of the worst case is bad enough

On the bright side, the common task of supporting Ukraine against Russia's war of aggression has also reinvigorated the transatlantic partnership. NATO's relevance was reconfirmed when Finland and Sweden decided to join the alliance less than three months after Russia launched its full-scale attack on Ukraine, and Ukraine itself has also officially applied for membership. President Biden has played a key role, making an effort to repair the damage Trump left behind. In the [2022 National Security Strategy](#), the Biden administration explicitly emphasised the role of allies and partners.

Highlighting the role of alliances indicates that security is not simply a service the US is providing globally, but America also needs others. It is a frequent topic in the political debates in Washington, D.C. that the US lacks the capacity to wage a two-theatre war and hence needs to focus its resources and prioritise. There are voices in both the Democratic and the Republican party suggesting that attention should be directed entirely to Asia and the "[pacing threat](#)" that China poses. Others see the obvious link between the European and the Asian theatre and maintain that supporting Ukraine to defeat Russia is in America's strategic interest, as it also sends a clear message to China. But at both ends of the Asia-Europe spectrum, American policymakers and analysts agree that Europeans must step up and take greater responsibility in the alliance, at least in their own region.

The Hamas attack on Israel and ensuing Gaza

war have been a reminder to US allies in Europe and in Asia, always jealously fearing abandonment for the sake of the other, that both might be left with less attention if the Middle East drags the US back in. It has also been a reminder of Ukraine's difficult position, without any formal security partnership with either the US or European countries apart from the status of a [NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partner](#), that treaty-based commitments take precedence. Both of Ukraine's largest supporters, the US and Germany, have a longstanding commitment to Israel's security – Israel has the legal status of a ["Major Non-NATO Ally"](#) in the US, and Germany has declared Israel's security ["Staatsräson"](#). What this means for Ukraine is that a small but influential group of Republicans in the US Congress is now attempting to [separate aid packages for Israel and Ukraine](#), approving the former but not the latter. In Germany, the developments in Israel capture political and public attention, shifting it away from the war in Ukraine.

If we are entering an era of increased global turbulence, with conflicts erupting in different parts of the world simultaneously, focusing attention and resources will become increasingly challenging. While the battle around the Ukrainian town of Adviiivka was fought in high intensity and Hamas attacked Israel, killing 1400, yet another gas pipeline was damaged in the Baltic Sea – the Balticconnector between Finland and Estonia. After initial suspicion that the incident was orchestrated by Russia, the Finnish investigation now has led to [a vessel](#) sailing under the flag of Hong Kong. October 2023 was an example of what is potentially to come for Europeans: many things happening in different places in Europe's vicinity all at once, requiring a response. If instability starts spreading, much will depend on America's ability to contain conflicts through its extended deterrence covering allies and partners around the globe. Even if Biden stays in office, Europeans need contingency plans

in the event that American attention and resources are required more urgently elsewhere. Cooperation is a European strength and more of it will be needed in the future.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

Editing and formatting: Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA).

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