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European Security: Four Priorities for 2020-2024

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- **As 2019 draws to a close, the European Union bids farewell to a year of historic change. With the election of a new Parliament and the formation of a new Commission, the Union looks ahead to the next five years as a period of change and new direction under a fresh executive ready to spearhead a new phase of European integration, progress and prosperity.**

So goes the optimistic view from Brussels. The more realistic perspective is, unfortunately, much less positive. The reality is that the Union faces enormous challenges in its immediate future, many of which are existential in nature and without clear answers. With the formation of the new Commission still mired in internal infighting that will not be fully resolved until December, it is not yet clear whether the European Union's new leadership will provide the oversight, impetus and leadership required to steer the Union through the next half-decade and bolster its defences against future, unseen challenges.[1] Indeed, some at the highest level within the Union are already making public their concerns over existential threats to EU security and stability: French President Emmanuel Macron's ominous dual warnings that the EU stands 'on the edge of a precipice' and NATO is undergoing 'brain death' comes at a particularly critical moment ahead of NATO talks in London in December, whilst NATO and EU security capacity is being challenged by ongoing security issues in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods.[2] The security of the Union, and of Europe itself, already faces significant external and internal threats – and whether or not the Union as a whole is well equipped to assess, plan for and overcome these challenges remains to be seen.

This paper aims to give a brief, broad-stroke overview of four of the most critical issues facing European security for the 2020-2024 period, and to highlight some additional areas that ought to be addressed by policymakers in the incoming Commission in order to build a more robust, practicable, cohesive security framework across EU member states that serves as a unifying – rather than dividing – factor in the Union's future.

Defining Security

The phrase 'European security' has only recently begun to see a broadening in its definition. Historically, it has been synonymous with Europe's strategic partnership with NATO, and has reflected Europe's reliance on American military support for security post-WW2. In more recent years the phrase has become interchangeable with 'European defence', a phrase that in turn conjures the controversial topic of a federalised European military – and invariably gives rise to the debate over the creation of just such a military force and whether it should be supplementary to or autonomous of NATO. For the most part, pre-2014 such debates remained more grounded in theory than in practicable reality.

In 2014, the annexation of Crimea and outbreak of conflict in eastern Ukraine sparked significant fears over the future of Europe's integrity – both from hostile external state actors and, once it became clear that no significant NATO response would be triggered, over Europe's willingness to commit to ensuring the security of potential candidates for Union membership. With the European response being largely limited to sanctions against Russia, however, the debate over reforming European security and defence gradually faded in intensity.

However, with the advent of Brexit and the steep and sudden decline in transatlantic relations linked to the USA's change of leadership in 2016, the issue of European security has returned with a vengeance to the forefront of European policy debates and remains very much a central issue in the European sphere. Increasingly, the concept of reforming European defence policy holds less stigma than it once did. Finally, European security is being recognised as a broader concept than simple kinetic defence, covering less tangible issues of cybersecurity, targeted disinformation campaigns originating externally and much longer-term considerations of energy security, climate change, economic decay and migratory movements outside the EU. All of these taken together under the label of 'European security' form a far

[1] 'Commissioners Assemble: Class of 2019-2024' Euractiv, November 12th 2019

[2] 'Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is brain-dead', The Economist, November 7th 2019

more holistic picture than that of the East-West physical divide of the Cold War era, and encourage an understanding of security as far more multifaceted and less tangible than traditional considerations.

However, although understandings of European security among policymakers are now broader and deeper than in the past, there is still no clear route forward for how to address the numerous threats facing Europe today. Such threats may be very broadly divided into two categories: extant – that is to say pre-existing – threats, and emergent threats, which latterly include some issues European policymakers have yet to address in a targeted manner.

Extant Threats – Border and Neighbourhood Security, Migration

The outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 was probably the greatest single shock to perception of European security integrity since the end of the Cold War. With the secession of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and the Russian annexation of Crimea, the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity – then a strong candidate for NATO membership and steadily on the path to EU membership – sent shockwaves through the European security and defence community. With the flagrant breach of a potential EU membership candidate's sovereignty and security, the Union's capacity to defend its interests and those of prospective member states was called into question, and NATO's capacity to protect potential members similarly challenged.

Five years on, the conflict in Ukraine remains an enormous problem for the EU. Despite positive movement toward a peace process in recent months under the Zelenskiy administration in Ukraine, a definitive peace remains elusive. Many within Ukraine feel that the so-called 'Steinmeier formula' proposed by the former German foreign minister – under which the separatist territories will receive special administrative status many fear will open the door to greater Russian influence – is a lukewarm attempt to support Ukrainian sovereignty at best, and tantamount to capitulation to Russia at worst. At the highest levels, there are those within Ukraine's political and business spheres now calling for a rapprochement with Russia based on what some perceive to be Europe's unwillingness to provide greater security and integration to Ukraine.[3] Indeed, Ukraine is likely to be a focal point for any attempts to build more cohesive European security and defence policy in the near future; in his final speech before concluding his term as President of the European Council, Donald Tusk highlighted '*…there will be no sovereign Europe without an independent Ukraine'.*[4]

Nor, it should be remembered, was Ukraine the first country in Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood to suffer from hostile state actor interference; the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 raised similar questions over Europe's capacity to protect its partners, and raised grave concerns over the future of the Eastern Partnership as a strategic and values-based partnership for the European Union to bring its eastern neighbours closer.

Other extant threats include persistent concerns over the Union's ability to deal with large-scale migration; the 2015 migration crisis demonstrated that the Union's open-border and migrant relocation policies, whilst well-intentioned, created significant discord and animosity between Eastern and Western member states, much of which simmers today unabated. Indeed, relations between the 'Visegrad Four' nations – particularly Hungary and Poland – and the Western European member states continue to be marked by divisions stemming from what many in Visegrad see as punitive measures inflicted upon them by Western member states resentful toward a perceived lack of solidarity from the V4 in 2015.

[3] 'A Ukrainian Billionaire Fought Russia. Now He's Ready to Embrace It.' New York Times, November 13th 2019

[4] Keynote speech by President Donald Tusk at the opening ceremony of the 2019/2020 academic year at the College of Europe, November 13th 2019

Whilst the ongoing divide between East and West is a significant factor in future European security considerations,it is a symptom of the Union's failure to build a concrete policy toward migration issues that at once supports European ideals and values without compromising on member state integrity or goodwill.

Most recently, the advent of Turkey's drastic military action in north-eastern Syria – coming shortly after the sudden withdrawal of US military forces at the behest of the Trump administration laid bare fundamental (and continued) weaknesses in Union security and integrity. With Turkish President Erdogan threatening to *'send 3.6 million migrants'* into Europe should the Turkish action be labelled as an invasion by European politicians, the weakness of the European Union's response belied grave concerns amongst member states over the real and present threat posed by mass migration to existing management mechanisms.[5] Rhetoric, not punitive action intended to limit the emergent humanitarian crisis in north-eastern Syria, characterised the collective European response. Although the majority of EU member states did commit to ending arms trade shipments with Turkey immediately following the humanitarian crisis caused by the Turkish action, it is significant that the decision was not unanimous and no common European position was achieved.[6] With Turkey long standing as a critical strategic partner of the EU in managing migration flows into Europe, and the recipient of significant European funding in exchange for limiting migration to European borders, President Erdogan put the EU in an extremely dangerous position and highlighted its current inability to sufficiently manage its own border security by threatening Europe with a migration crisis three times greater than that of 2015. Furthermore, by effectively limiting the Union's response to pure rhetoric, Erdogan's strongman tactics challenged Europe's ability to project power to support its own integrity and values.

Finding a long-term, sustainable and efficient solution to migration is an enormous challenge for the EU. Whilst some Western commentators argue that the crucial principle upon which the EU was founded – unity between member states – must be the solution to current divisions over migration, in practice attempting to enforce unity where significant dissent exists is more likely to add to existing woes and create even greater internal crises within the Union in future. In the case of the Visegrad nations and their divergence from the Union position on migrant relocation quotas after the 2015 crisis, for example, attempting to strong-arm Hungary and Poland into accepting the common Union position has so far only increased discord between Brussels and the Central European governments. The European Court of Justice's recent finding that Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic broke European law by refusing to comply with Union mechanisms for mandatory relocation of migrants in 2015, whilst legally sound, risks being tone-deaf at best and openly destructive to European unity at worst.[7]

Similarly, despite some attempts to portray the conflict in Ukraine as a crisis for NATO rather than the EU, the truth is that NATO's crisis is also that of the Union, and all the more so if American contributions to NATO are curbed.[8] Europe relies considerably upon NATO – specifically American – security provisions to guarantee its own security, an uncomfortable issue that has finally seen more debate since the shift in transatlantic relations in 2016. Unsurprisingly, therefore, concerns such as those raised recently by French President Macron will not die away; indeed, the fears of those in Europe's neighbourhood – that the Union cannot guarantee the security of its partner states if hostile state actors infringe upon their sovereignty – are slowly being understood by those within the European institutions themselves. An uncomfortable wake-up call, but a necessary one. It is uncertain what the forthcoming NATO conference in London in December 2019 will bring, but with the controversy stirred by the comments of President

[5] 'Europe "lacks leverage" over Turkey amid Erdogan migrant threat', France 24 October 11th 2019

[6] 'EU governments limit arms sales to Turkey but avoid embargo', Reuters October 14th 2019

[7] 'Court of Justice of the European Union Press Release No. 133/19' Luxembourg, October 31st 2019

[8] 'European security in crisis: what to expect if the US withdraws from NATO', International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 23rd 2019

Macron and the ongoing scandal surrounding US aid to Ukraine, it seems clear that Europe's understanding of its own security must change. Whether this ought to manifest in the creation of a European army – as President Macron and those tending towards Eurofederalism have suggested in the past – is not yet clear; however, there must be clear and measurable progress in Europe's understanding of the security of its neighbours and its capacity to handle significant migratory flows, otherwise the resultant internal divisions are likely to prove existentially challenging for the Union as a whole.

Emergent Threats – Energy Security and 'Creeping Influence'

With high-profile threats such as border and neighbourhood security and migration occupying much of European media and policy debate, it is easy to miss other lower-profile but no less critical threats to Union security in the longer-term future, such as the emergent unconventional threats posed by energy and climate issues, and what has been termed 'creeping influence' from foreign state actors – particularly China and Russia – that may pose existential issues for the European Union in the long-term.

Insofar as energy security is concerned, it must be noted that security has been a fundamental element of the EU's long-term energy strategy, specifically insofar as security of supply is concerned.[9] In an era where many European companies draw the majority of their gas supply from Russia, a strategic advantage Russia has historically weaponised[10], energy security should always be understood in the context of ongoing geopolitical tensions and broader diplomatic concerns. Furthermore, shifts in energy geopolitics may be at risk of exposing further divisions within European internal politics, leaving the energy strategies of many member states looking outdated and insufficient to meet the demands of a rapidly changing geopolitical climate. With diversification of energy sources gaining ground in European policymaking circles, those member states unwilling – or unable – to diversify may find their domestic energy policies leave them out of sync with the rest of the Union, as is already happening to some degree in the Visegrad nations, where fossil fuels dominate the energy market.[11] Encouragingly, developments in transforming European energy policy are taking place rapidly, with the recent announcement of the European Investment Bank that it would end funding for fossil fuel programmes from 2021.[12] Nevertheless, there is no real answer for Europe's reliance on Russian energy sources in the short-term, and the corresponding strategic weakness of European energy cannot be overstated.[13] Indeed, European reliance on Russian gas actually appears to be increasing – as is indicated by Denmark's recent green-lighting of a Nordstream II pipeline through its territorial waters.[14]

The more problematic question of creeping influence is one that similarly cannot be overstated, but is increasingly difficult to track in a more interconnected world. With Chinese infrastructure initiatives launched from the springboard of the Belt and Road Initiative subsuming European influence in the Western Balkans, Europe's relationship with its Eastern Neighbourhood is being redefined – with the European Union apparently having very little say in its new definition.[15] Nor is Chinese influence limited to the Western Balkans, as developments with the Huawei scandal and emergent influence in Western media and press indicate; foreign direct investment from China in Europe still has yet to reach American levels but reflects a

[9] '2020 Energy Strategy', European Commission, August 20th 2019

[10] 'EU concerned as Russia cuts off Ukraine gas', V.Pop, EU Observer January 2nd 2009

[11] 'Why Visegrad 4 need to get real about climate change', L. Zeilina, EU Observer July 2nd 2019

[12] 'EU bank brokers late-night deal to phase out fossil fuels', Euractiv.com, November 15th 2019

[13] 'Reliance on Russian gas has big risks for Europe', Financial Times March 12th 2019

[14] 'Denmark allows Nord Stream 2 Pipeline through its Territorial Waters', RFE/RL October 30th 2019

[15] 'How China Challenges the EU in the Western Balkans', A. Doehler, The Diplomat, September 25th 2019

steady trend in Beijing's interest in European infrastructure.[16] Similarly, with Russian influence in the energy sector, diplomatic and political influence is closely associated with Russia's status as an energy giant in Europe, and limits European reactions to Russian misbehaviour in the Neighbourhood.[17] Russia's involvement in European politics – whether in emergent fake news scandals, or more sinister allegations of interference in elections – remains an ongoing threat to European security that the Union, despite mounting efforts, has yet to counter effectively.[18]

A Hard Solution: Building European Security

The most controversial hypothetical solution to any of the myriad issues facing European security has undoubtedly been the spectre of a dedicated, federalised European defence force, existing to deter and counter hard power threats from external actors. Whether classed as an army or otherwise, the question of whether Europe's defence ought to be maintained by a standing military body answering not to one or two member states but to the Union's institutions as a whole has proven enormously controversial since first mooted in the post-war period.[19] With calls for more federalised European defence on the rise from France, the question of a European defence force will remain on the European security policy agenda for some time to come. It will not, however, be a factor in short-term future developments in European security, despite political grandstanding from Paris.

More pressingly, the resolution of the Ukraine issue is most likely to take centre stage in the coming months. With Normandy-format talks rumoured to take place in Paris in early December, and troop withdrawals taking place along the line of contact in accordance with the controversial so-called 'Steinmeier formula', there is every possibility that real progress could be made in moving the conflict in Ukraine closer to a lasting peace. However, with many Ukrainians feeling that the Steinmeier formula amounts to capitulation, it is by no means certain that the current thaw in relations will lead to a permanent solution. In this area, European policymakers risk alienating Ukrainian society through appearing indecisive and slow to counteract fears that the current peace process could amount to a capitulation to Russia. Attempts to bring Ukraine closer to Europe have largely stalled since the outbreak of conflict, and without timely revival of such attempts Ukraine may soon look elsewhere for meaningful engagement.[20]

Similarly, with the crisis in north-eastern Syria now gradually fading from mainstream European media, the threat of another migration crisis also seems likely to disappear from the public consciousness. This cannot be allowed to happen in the European institutions, however. For a third country – albeit a NATO partner and European strategic partner – to threaten the Union with a forced migration crisis, despite receiving significant financial aid from Union development programmes explicitly for ameliorating migration flows, is untenable for the European Union's long-term integrity as a global sovereign actor.

With a multitude of threats facing Europe from inside and outside, it is apparent that a paradigm change in how the European Union views its own security must take place. The risk from emergent threats such as energy supply security, foreign direct investment placing Union member state infrastructure under external influence and misinformation campaigns cannot be overstated, and must be considered equally alongside 'hard power' threats to European security. Ahead of the NATO meeting in London in December, it seems that some member states – most notably France – are aware that such a change in priorities

[16] 'China Is Waging A Silent Media War for Global Influence', D. Wagner, The National Interest, September 19th 2019

[17] 'Russian-Ukrainian-EU gas conflict: who stands to lose most?' Dr. F. Umbach, NATO May 9th 2014

[18] 'EU Commission warns of 'fake news', meddling in 2019 European elections, DW.com

[19] 'Churchill and the Unification of Europe', W.R. Mauter, *The Historian* Vol.61 No.1 1998 (accessed from Jstor.org)

[20] 'A Ukrainian Billionaire Fought Russia. Now He's Ready to Embrace It.' New York Times, November 13th 2019

and policy must occur. The real question to be answered is what form such policy could take – and whether it will lay the foundations for a more integrated, more cooperative Union, or serve as the catalyst for existing tensions to spill over into existential challenges from which the Union may not recover.

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