

Blog

The Militarization of Europe: Three Reasons the EU's Defense Strategy Changed

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During the first stage of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, foreign observers discussed the nuclear threat Russia poses. With approximately 1,500 nuclear warheads in deployment and another 3,000 in reserve, many were concerned with Putin’s Russia and the threat it posed to world stability. In light of calls to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine, the threat of nuclear war became a tangible possibility. A no-fly zone over Ukraine, despite what the phrasing might suggest, is not a passive intervention; it would require actively shooting down and engaging with both land and air-borne enemy units on and off Ukrainian territory. Since these calls for a no-fly zone have rapidly stagnated in the last month or so, discussions of nuclear threat have waned.

With the recent Russian testing of ICBMs on April 20, 2022, and Putin’s call to put his nuclear forces on a “special regime of combat duty,” the reception toward the Russian nuclear threat is mixed. On the one side, cynics claim that Russia is merely boasting its nuclear might to prevent any military intervention from the liberal order, as it did during the first stage of their invasion. They further point to previous Russian policy toward their usage, namely that they would only be used in the case of an existential threat to the Russian Federation as we know it today. More fearful observers point to Putin’s instability and unpredictable behavior in recent months and claim that there is no way to know for certain if Putin will use tactical nuclear weapons, which can be deployed relatively close to friendly forces.

Because of the real threat Putin poses to EU stability, EU deterrence strategies have significantly changed. Prior to 24 February 2022, the day of Putin’s full-scale invasion, EU deterrence showcased a heavy reliance on (1) economic sanctions, (2) the promise of nuclear disarmament, and (3) an interventionist U.S. foreign policy. Each of these strategies have been overturned and put into doubt.

Three Reasons the European Union’s Defense Strategy Changed

The first defense strategy that changed in the EU is its reliance on economic sanctions as a main deterrent. The belief was that economic sanctions were meant to dissuade Putin from launching a full-scale invasion. This belief came despite the fact that sanctions have not been effective in deterring Putin from actively backing Russian separatists in Donbas, who have for 8 years destabilized the region. In Europe, very few political parties advocated for increased military budgets partially because politicians believed that war would not come to European soil again, due to more pressing policy priorities, such as green and digital transformations, expansive welfare states, and economic growth. Therefore, increasing defence budgets had relatively little traction. In fact, even after Putin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, some EU member states continued to call for nuclear disarmament, including Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, along with 21 other countries, who joined the ‘Humanitarian Initiative’ in 2015 for disarmament advocacy.¹

Similarly, and despite Putin’s actions in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, and Donbas, Germany continued to build their Nord Stream II pipeline, which would make Germany more reliant on Russian oil and gas exports, and more susceptible to blackmail. Most German politicians believed that Russia could be deterred by economic sanctions and that continuing trade with Russia under business-as-usual conditions would prevent any major instabilities between Russia and the West. Needless to say, this understanding has changed.

In fact, EU member states like Austria, Finland, and Germany, which have largely been pacifistic, have all called for an increased military budget. Sweden and Finland, which will soon be voting on their inclusion in NATO, have both shown keen interest in joining the defensive alliance. The EU has seemingly realized that

¹ Most of the members of the organization are not included in NATO, however, with the exception of Denmark, Iceland, and Norway.



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economic sanctions alone will not be enough to deter autocrats. That does not mean that the EU will not continue to issue sanctions on Russia, however. They will arguably continue to do so along with increasing their military budget as another deterrent.

Secondly, the EU changed its progression toward nuclear disarmament. Globally, the advocacy of nuclear disarmament would make complete strategic sense. And it also makes some sense to believe that the Non-Proliferation Treaty will continue to reduce the global nuclear arsenal. Although, both of these arguments are contested. Disarmament could mean that autocratic regimes would not be able to colonize nations with the threat of using nuclear weapons if anyone would militarily intervene. We haven't seen comparable nuclear blackmail from North Korea or China, thus yet, but that does not mean that this cannot change in the coming years or decades in light of Putin's expansion into Ukraine. For state actors with imperialist visions, nuclear disarmament would mean losing the main leverage they have. For both of these reasons, any real hope for disarmament is far away.

Lastly, the EU has increasingly realized that they cannot rely on the U.S. to intervene on their behalf. This is a serious defensive problem, however, because the only European member state with nuclear weapons, following the exodus of the United Kingdom, is France with some 300 warheads. Therefore, when it comes to nuclear defense in the wake of Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons, Europe would have to entirely rely on the largest military of NATO: the U.S.

Trump's selectively non-interventionist foreign policy and calls to reduce U.S. funding to NATO surprised U.S. allies. Many could simply not imagine that an 'America First' foreign policy could appear on the central stage and go back on the many binding agreements these institutions require, especially when it came to collective defense. Because of Trump, the EU was already put into a position where they were forced to discuss increased military budgets to protect their borders. With Putin's threat, the possibility of another 'America First' foreign policy would spell serious trouble for EU stability.

The Militarization of Europe & Future of Deterrence

The message Putin and the liberal order are inadvertently sending to autocratic regimes with nuclear warheads, such as China or Pakistan, is that if you have nuclear weapons, you can annex territory without foreign military unit intervention. If your economy is contingent on imports and exports, as Russia's is, then economic sanctions might do some damage if enacted multilaterally. But they are not as swift as we might hope. And they are not capable of singlehandedly deterring expansionism.

One question we should ask ourselves here is whether there is a threshold of EU or NATO action toward Russia, in the form of economic sanctions, or military and intel support to Ukraine, that would make Putin consider militarily engaging a NATO member. We do not have any real guarantee of this not happening. Although, it should be said that with recent evidence of Russia's poor military performance, it would be hard to imagine them embarking on another conflict with NATO. From recent evidence, the EU is not willing to take that chance.

Putin aimed to demilitarize Ukraine; in due process, he has managed to remilitarize the EU.



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