

Background note

Session III: Strengthening European defence in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine. European Union Armed Forces – a need or an alternative?

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 became a turning point in the architecture of European security. This aggression not only destabilised the region, but also revealed vulnerabilities in Europe's defence capabilities. The conflict exposed the urgent need for a unified and effective European defence strategy to reduce the risk of further aggression and to ensure collective security. The purpose of this session is to discuss recent developments, identify key challenges and propose discussion points on strengthening European defence in the face of ongoing Russian aggression.

Latest developments

European countries, along with NATO and the European Union, have provided Ukraine with significant military assistance, including advanced weapon systems, training and intelligence support. This aid played a key role in enabling Ukraine's successful resistance against the Russian aggression. However, maintaining this level of support in the long run poses a challenge, especially in the context of a protracted conflict, which is a test for the Europe's ability to continue such an intensive involvement. From the onset of the Russian aggression until mid-March 2025, the EU provided Ukraine with a total of €135.4 billion in aid. A continued financial and military assistance to Ukraine remains a priority for the European Union. In October 2024, the EU adopted a new financial support package. It includes an exceptional Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) loan of up to €35 billion and a Loan Cooperation Mechanism that will support Ukraine in repaying up to €45 billion in loans from the EU and G7 partners. The first €3 billion tranche of aid from the MFA was disbursed to Ukraine in January 2025. The Loan Cooperation Mechanism is to be funded by revenues from frozen Russian state assets (95% of the profits stemming from the immobilisation of Russian sovereign assets will be allocated to the EU budget and 5% will to be allocated to the European Peace Facility). The new allocation will apply from the second half of 2025.

Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO was of the most important developments that bolstered European security. This step signals a significant change in the region's security dynamics, with both states' accession strengthening the alliance's northern and eastern flanks while increasing NATO's overall defence capabilities.

The European Union has accelerated its defence integration, which is evidenced by the adoption of the Strategic Compass. The document paves the way for a more autonomous and effective EU defence policy by 2030, which is critical for enhancing Europe's security independence.

Increasing the budget of the EDIP, the European Defence Industrial Programme, which currently has €1.5 billion at its disposal for the 2025–2027 period remains a challenge to face. According to the European Commission, the EDIP is a unique opportunity to introduce specific solutions to address the challenges faced by the European defence industry, such as security of the defence supply chain and support for the Ukrainian defence industry. We need to seek a leap surge in the EU defence budget. The low level of funding for existing EU defence initiatives, such as the Regulation (EU) 2023/1525 on supporting ammunition production (ASAP) and EDIRPA (European defence industry reinforcement through joint public procurement), highlight this issue. Compared to national defence budgets, the funds available for these programmes are in hundreds of millions or several billions of euros, which represents a symbolic amount.

The war in Ukraine has also significantly affected Europe's energy security, disrupting energy supplies and forcing European countries to reduce their dependence on Russian gas. This process has accelerated the energy transition, including the move to renewable energy sources, which is important for both economic stability and defence.

At the same time, Russia has intensified cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns against European states, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen cyberdefence and hybrid threats resilience. These actions pose a direct challenge to Europe's internal security and require a coordinated response at both national and international level.

Challenges

Despite enhanced defence cooperation, significant differences in defence spending and capabilities between European states persist, making it difficult to achieve a unified approach. Furthermore, the dualism of the NATO and EU defence incentive system often leads to duplication of measures and inefficiencies, which undermines cohesive actions. Maintaining long-term support for Ukraine is also a key challenge, in particular in the context of a protracted war that may cause political and public support for continued military and economic assistance to decline. Striking a balance between immediate support for Ukraine and long-term investment in Europe's defence capabilities is a difficult task, requiring strategic planning and coordination.

The European defence industry is facing challenges of increasing production to meet the growing demand for military equipment. More investment in modern technologies such as drones, artificial intelligence and cyber defence systems is needed to ensure competitiveness

and effectiveness in the face of a rapidly changing threat landscape. At the same time, reducing dependence on Russian energy resources while ensuring a stable supply for civilian and military needs remains a key concern. The transition towards renewable energy sources must be carried out in such a way that new risks are avoided and long-term energy security is ensured.

The need for and possibility of establishing the EU Armed Forces constitute a major challenge. This concept is linked with the priorities of the Polish Presidency and the EU in the sphere of broadly understood security, including military security. Enhancing security in this area is well-grounded, given that the EU is adjacent to unstable and war-torn regions.. The establishment of such forces should be in line with NATO strategy and priorities.

The war in Ukraine has also contributed to rising inflation and economic instability, which could diminish public support for increased defence spending. What is more, populist and pro-Russian narratives in some European states pose a serious threat to unity and collective actions, undermining the cohesion of Europe's response to Russian aggression. These challenges require a comprehensive approach that takes into account both military and socio-political aspects to ensure an effective and sustainable response to current and future threats.

Discussion points

1. How to better align the defence policies of EU Member States to make them more interoperable and effective?
2. How to avoid duplication of NATO and EU efforts?
3. Is it reasonable and possible to establish a joint EU armed forces?
4. How to ensure long-term support for the embattled Ukraine while maintaining popular support?
5. How to balance aid to Ukraine with investment in our own defence capabilities?
6. How to boost production and innovation in the defence sector?
7. What steps are needed to strengthen cyber defences and counter disinformation?
8. How can we enhance intelligence sharing and better coordinate responses to hybrid threats?
9. How should the energy transition be carried out while maintaining energy security? How to secure energy infrastructure against cyberattacks and sabotage?
10. How to counter pro-Russian narratives and strengthen EU unity?