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the rest: journal of politics and development
Previously published as Journal of Global Analysis (JGA)

Vol.15 | No.1 | 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

RESEARCH ARTICLES

6 **A New Strategic Responsibility for the EU: EU-NATO Cooperation against Hybrid Warfare from Russia**
By Maurizio Geri

20 **Africa Through the Lens of Chaos and Complexity**
By Fernando Jorge Cardoso & José Manuel Félix Ribeiro

32 **Ethnic Conflicts in Ghana: Colonial Legacy and Elite Mobilisation**
By Beenish Ayub

42 **Examining Political Parties' Perspectives on Foreign Policy through Their Election Manifestos: 2023 General Elections in Türkiye**
By İbrahim Yılmaz

52 **An Analysis of Egyptian and Israeli Discourse on Israel's Control of the Philadelphi Corridor during the 2023 Gaza War**
By Fatmaelzahraa Nassar & Ahmet Üçağaç

67 **The Impact of Energy Security on Inter-Relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries**
By Haila Al-Mekaimi

82 **The Political Process Involved in Formulating Healthcare Policy in Japan: With a Particular Focus on Advisory Councils, Interest Groups and Medical Officers**
By Yukio Sakurai

98 **The Role of Mass Media Propaganda in Shaping American Culture: A Study on the Torches of Freedom**
By Oğuz Kartav & Mikail Uğuş

115 **The Yemeni Civil War: Territorial Partition as the Path to Peace**
By Riddhi Likhe

126 **Transnational Government: A Faster Path to Developing Underdeveloped Nations**
By Ahmad Reza Taheri

135 **Impact of Trieste Port on China-Italy Geoeconomics Relations**
By Tianyi Liu

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A New Strategic Responsibility for the EU: EU-NATO Cooperation against Hybrid Warfare from Russia

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ABSTRACT

The article critically examines the process of the EU as a defence actor, its cooperation with NATO, especially in hybrid warfare, and how the EU needs a new 'strategic responsibility', in front of an increasing hybridization of war by Russia.
Since the beginning of the European Community in the 1950s, the idea of a 'defence union' reemerged regularly in the history of the European continent. Since 1999, the EU has developed common defence and security policies, collaborating with NATO for decades; however, this cooperation is increasingly insufficient. Since the Russian war against Ukraine and the increased use of hybridisation of warfare by Russia, the EU has been forced to rethink the need to 'defend itself by itself', even if it is unable to achieve full 'strategic autonomy'.
After describing the EU becoming a security-defence actor in the last decades, this article argues that the EU must look to a new 'strategic responsibility' for more efficient common defence and stronger cooperation with NATO, especially in hybrid warfare. Strategic responsibility means that the EU will need to maintain its Atlantic Alliance but increase its part of the responsibility, its engagement not only in its periphery but globally and not only with political and economic means but with military ones. Hybrid warfare is a concept that includes the use of a 'whole of government' approach, meaning using all tools of national power to attack a rival in its political, social, economic and military spheres. Russia is increasingly using this towards the West, and so the EU and NATO need to step up their cooperation in order to deter, defend and react to this hybrid warfare. To increase this cooperation, the EU will need to pass a new strategic responsibility.

The EU as a security-defence actor

Scholars argue that the EU lacks sufficient 'hard' military power to shape international politics, a claim explored through various traditional and critical debates (Galbreath, Mawdsley, and Chappell, 2019). According to liberal-idealist IR theories, in fact, the EU is a postmodern civilisation and normative power (Whitman, 2011; Manners, 2002) and acquiring military strength could destroy the idea of the EU's peaceful identity itself, while realists believe that European integration, including at defence level, has to follow systemic changes in the distribution of power (Hyde-Price, 2006). Some scholars stressed that Europeans abandoned power politics to focus on integration, losing the possibility to influence the international arena (Kagan, 2002), especially after the end of the Soviet

Union (Rosato, 2011), while others see Brexit as a moment of change towards a new direction (Biscop, 2016).

In any case, the EU, and before it the European Community, has always been considered an engine for economic integration and development, even if not for investing in defence, at least until recently. This was also possible because of NATO's presence, with its main goal of defending Europe from the Soviet Union. Without NATO, an investment by European countries in common defence would have been a necessity. Furthermore, while economic integration was seen as an important element for development that did not necessarily impact the sovereignty of nation-states, the defence integration would have been seen as an unnecessary imposition from the EU on the members, eroding the national interest and sovereignty of each nation-state. Therefore, a possible 'European Defence Union', after an economic and political one, has always been rejected by the EU members, at least until recently.

The EU started thinking more seriously about this possibility during the Trump presidency when Trump himself frequently questioned NATO's relevance and the financial contributions of member countries. He suggested that the US might not come to the defence of NATO allies if they did not meet their spending commitments. This rhetoric raised concerns about the future of the alliance, so the EU started to think about 'strategic autonomy.' The Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' also contributed to discussions in Europe about strategic autonomy and defence capabilities, prompting EU leaders to consider how they could bolster their own military readiness. The war in Ukraine further intensified these debates, highlighting the importance of NATO but also the need to start quickly with an EU new engagement, in the face of Russian aggression, ultimately reaffirming the European need for a common defence. Overall, the combination of Trump's rhetoric, the impact of the pivot to Asia, and the urgent situation in Ukraine has prompted significant reflection and debate about NATO's future and Europe's defence strategy.

Nevertheless, even if a 'Defence Union' was not a question of discussion until recently, the EU has been working on the path of integrating its security and defence policies for decades, especially after the end of the Cold War, when US military presence in Europe started to decline (Allen, Martinez Machain, and Flynn 2022). Furthermore, the natural development of European institutional and economic integration also started to impact the foreign and security policies of each member state. Both these elements compelled the EU to launch its first Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (also known as the Treaty on European Union, TEU). The CFSP was important as the first step of the EU in building a common foreign policy to preserve peace, strengthen security, and defend democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. However, not much was done on defence until 1999, when the Treaty of Amsterdam created a 'European Security and Defence Policy' (ESDP), that allowed the EU to carry on peacekeeping and conflict prevention actions, with the deployment of military operations or civilian missions, following the principles of UN Charter. Since then, the EU has intervened abroad with civilian or military operations and missions at least 37 times, in Europe, Africa and Asia, from the former Yugoslavia in 2003 to Armenia and Moldova in 2023. Today (2024), there are 24 missions and operations: 13 civilians, 10 military, and one civil-military (EEAS, 2024). The Treaty of Amsterdam also created the figure of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, as chief co-ordinator of the CFSP.

Then, in 2004, the EU created the European Defence Agency (EDA) to promote and facilitate defence integration between member states with four main functions: support the development of defence capabilities and military cooperation among member states; promote defence Research and Technology (R&T); promote armaments cooperation; and create a competitive European Defence Equipment Market strengthening the European Defence, Technological and Industrial Base/DTIB (European Defence Agency, 2005). Actually, in 2007, the EDA also adopted a Strategy for the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), clarifying that a fully adequate DTIB

was no longer sustainable nationally. Still, the momentum to really ramp up and accelerate the common defence industry had not yet come.

An important moment for the common security and defence of the EU came in 2009 with the Treaty of Lisbon amending the Maastricht Treaty coming into effect and specifically strengthening the solidarity with its Member States in dealing with external threats by introducing a 'mutual defence clause' (Art. 42 (7) of the Treaty of the European Union). This clause was important as, similarly to Art. 5 of NATO, it stated that 'if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter' (EUR-Lex 2024). This obligation of mutual defence is binding to all Member States; however, it does not affect the neutrality of certain Member States and is consistent with the commitments of the NATO members.

Additionally, with the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU transformed the ESDP in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as the policy framework through which member states could develop a European platform of security and defence, and created the European External Action Service (EEAS), as the diplomatic service of the EU.

In 2017, another step was made towards the defence structural integration, with the creation under the CSDP of a 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' (PESCO), enhanced cooperation of the EU members' national armed forces with different projects and bodies, to include the European Commission's defence industry directorate-general; the Crisis management and planning directorate, in charge of civil-military planning; the EEAS permanent operation Headquarters for command and control (C2); the Military Staff (EUMS) with its Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) headquarter; and several Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and preparatory bodies, such as the EU Military Committee (EUMC) composed by member states Chiefs of Defence (CHODS). PESCO has been important in strengthening operational cooperation among member states, connecting their forces with interoperability and improving industrial competitiveness.

In 2017, the EU also opened a European Defence Fund (EU Defence Industry and Space, 2024), for the industrial side of defence in which, until then, member states were independent, in the context of the multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027 has a budget of € 8 billion, to finance multinational defence projects and stimulate defence industry cooperation. Finally, in 2021, the CSDP created an off-budget European Peace Facility (EPF) to fund the common costs of the military CSDP missions and operations, thereby enhancing burden-sharing between the member states. By September 2024, the EU had provided around € 6.6 billion in military assistance to Ukraine through the EPF, for example, and the initial facility budget of € 5 billion for 2021-2027 was increased by € 2 billion in 2023 and € 5 billion in 2024 (EU Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, 2024)

Nevertheless, only as a consequence of the strategic challenge and threat to European security posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine did the EU start to think seriously about the possibility of a Defence Union (Fiott, 2023). Before NATO's Strategic Concept of June 2022, which defined Russia as the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, in March 2022 the EU adopted a 'Strategic Compass for Security and Defence' (EEAS, 2024), a joint strategy to strengthen the bloc's military capabilities by 2030. European citizens also felt the urgency: at the EU Conference on the Future of Europe in May 2022 involving thousands of European citizens, political actors, and civil society, the second among the 14 recommendations, after the energy resilience, was to strengthen the EU's common defence and security (EU Commission, 2022). Actually, even if some scholars (Anicetti, 2024) argue that the Russian war against Ukraine has negatively impacted EU defence cooperation, potentially increasing EU fragmentation, the EU launched several new initiatives of its CSDP, in a joint effort for common procurement and so a 'common defence industry'.

the rest | volume 15 | number 1 | 2025

In particular, in September 2023, the EU Parliament adopted the Commission's proposal on establishing the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through the Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), a short-term joint defence procurement instrument worth € 500 million. It tries to address the most urgent and critical defence capability gaps and to incentivise member states to procure defence products jointly. Also, in November 2023, the Foreign Affairs Council emphasised the need to strengthen the EDTIB. Of particular importance has been the recent enhancement of the EDTIB's access to both public and private finance, fostering innovation and enhancing competitiveness (EU Foreign Affairs Council, 2023). Finally, at the beginning of 2024, the EU Commission sent a proposal to the Parliament and the Council introducing a European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP) to finance joint defence projects and present measures to ensure the timely availability and supply of defence products. The EU Commission also proposed a 1.5 B Euro for a European Defence Industrial Strategy that was approved by the College of Commissioners (Borrel, 2024). The package is still very small financially, but it can give countries incentives to buy jointly from European firms and encourage industries to raise capacity and develop new technologies. The Commission actually asked to spend at least 50% of defence procurement budgets in the EU by 2030 and 60% by 2035 and to collaboratively buy at least 40% of defence equipment by 2030 (European Commission, 2024).

As we can see, gradual but steady developments related to Europe's common defence are happening at the EU level, even if the path for a Defence Union is still long, and the EU has to think about clear strategies to reach that goal. To do that, it should improve its relationship with NATO and its role within NATO, but first, it should start with a new 'strategic responsibility'.

A European path for a new "strategic responsibility"

Following these groundbreaking initiatives and growth in military spending, the discussion on European defence in recent times passed from the concept of 'Strategic Autonomy' (EU Parliament Think Tank, 2022) to a possible fully fledged 'European Defence Union' (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024). Even if the quest for 'autonomy' failed to deliver what was expected for European defence in the last decade (Howorth, 2019), the current historical moment to give new impetus to a European strategic union for its own deterrence and defence is evident, even if still in cooperation with the US that remains the main ally of EU (Atlantic Council, 2024). Nevertheless, to create any type of 'European Defence Union' in the future, the EU would, first of all, need what we can call a 'strategic responsibility', meaning maintaining its Atlantic Alliance but increasing its part of the responsibility, its engagement not only in its periphery but globally and not only with political and economic means but with military ones. This has to be based on two fundamental elements: a strong political will, with leadership to support the EU treaties reforms and a geopolitical understanding of how a defence union should be established, and a financial capability to invest in common defence, given the fact that the European protection since WWII has been based on the American ally of NATO that is the US. As the Russian war has pushed these two political and financial elements, they seem to be gaining *momentum*.

To reach the goal of a European common defence, a real 'Defence Union', there are two possible ways in the long term: one approach sees each member state merging the military capabilities into a unified, overarching super-force with a common doctrine. Some scholars argue that the EU's growing engagement in an area of national sovereignty, like defence, is already beginning to eliminate the traditional distinction between intergovernmental and supranational decision-making (Håkansson, 2021) with new initiatives like the EDF that could lead to further supranationalism (Haroche, 2020). However, national interests are still strong in the EU, as we saw with the recent results of the European Parliament elections, and so are still able to block such outcomes, at least in the short term. Alternatively, following the path of PESCO and EDIP, but also collaborative military initiatives of some EU countries, like the Joint Expeditionary Force or NORDEFCO (Government

Offices of Sweden, 2024), member states could continue the gradual integration and defence cooperation, to contribute an increasing portion of their resources to a collective military organism and industrial complex, and strengthen their coalescence in a common defence policy and structure. This second path seems more doable as it has already started, for a real 'strategic responsibility' of the EU in its defence.

At this point, the EU should decide the means to use and the practical economic steps to reach that goal. For example, the EU should first create a single market for defence, making joint investments in EU defence capabilities and creating agreements for industry and businesses for a 'European military-industrial complex'. A common procurement could ensure that manufacturing takes place in different countries of the EU to build common assets, as until recently, for example, the 22 EU member states with battle tanks operate 14 different basis models (Marrone and Sabatino, 2020). The European Investment Bank (EIB), which agreed in 2024 to invest in defence innovation, could become more active in financing defence projects and invest in common projects with strategic partners. All these elements will probably come out with the White Paper of the new Commissioner for Defence and Space. According to a report (Martens Center, 2024), there are at least ten building blocs for a viable European Defence Union: a rationale of European defence; armament production capabilities with an internal market; military mobility with transport and logistics guaranteed; the case for a European DARPA, with an ambitious strategy for technology and defence innovation; the filling strategic capability gaps; reinforcing the European Civil Protection Service; to design a European military model; to reform the EU's military operations; an EU institutional reform in defence; and a nuclear deterrent. These are all important elements to consider, as the EU has the political, legal and financial infrastructures preconditions for a 'strategic responsibility' needed for a Defence Union.

The momentum seems really coming. The recent EU report by Mario Draghi (Draghi, 2024) showed that the EU has an existential threat, as it has slow growth and low investment in innovation and competitiveness, so to become a leader in tech and a player on the world stage, the EU needs investment to rise by 5% of GDP, something like 3 Marshall Plans. The report identifies three needs: to close the innovation gap between the US and China, especially in advanced tech; make a joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness; and increase security by reducing dependencies, in particular from the Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) and advanced technologies. Furthermore, the new 2025/2029 Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen created for the first time the Commissioner for Defence and Space, even if some scholars argued that the EU needed more of an 'Armament Commissioner' (Guntram, 2024) or others believed that the first priority was the EU defence bonds (Chihaia, 2024). Very importantly, in the mission letter (European Commission, 2024) the President asked the new Commissioner first to prepare a White Paper on the future of European Defence in the first 100 days of the mandate, that "should frame a new approach to defence and identify investment needs to deliver full-spectrum European defence capabilities based on joint investments".

Furthermore he will have to draw on the work of the report on how to enhance Europe's civilian and military preparedness and readiness by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs; identify and harness the EU's dual-use and civil-military potential across all relevant domains; work on creating a true Single Market for Defence products and services, enhancing production capacity and fostering joint procurement of European equipment; as proposed in the Draghi report work to increase the aggregation of demand for defence assets; in close coordination with NATO lead the work on proposing Defence Projects of Common European Interest; overseeing the implementation of the European Defence Industrial Strategy; seek to reinforce the European Defence Fund; rapidly implement the European Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) and of the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP); incentivise public and private investment in defence; address our vulnerabilities to cyberattacks and hybrid attacks; contribute to

strengthening the EU-NATO partnership; and foster a strong and innovative space industry. The new European Commission made, therefore, the common defence a priority as the new EU Strategic Agenda (2024-2029), adopted by the European Council in June 2024, was also focusing on security and defence as the first priority, the others being resilience and competitiveness, energy, migration, global engagement and enlargement (European Council, 2024). And it also asked to reinforce the EU-NATO partnership.

EU-NATO relationship and the Hybrid Warfare from Russia

For the deterrence and defence of the European continent, the strategic partnership and cooperation between the EU Member States and NATO Allies become crucial, especially given the rising assertiveness of strategic competitors and the growing complexity of security threats. When we speak about EU-NATO cooperation, therefore, it is important to consider that a possible Defence Union would not substitute but complement NATO, improving the cooperation between the two organizations, and it would focus not only on traditional deterrence and defence but also on more modern 'hybridization of warfare,' as threats are not only military but comprise economic, technological, political dimensions.

In this landscape where virtually everything is weaponized, the traditional roles and capabilities of institutions like the EU and NATO have been challenged, as they lacked the comprehensive tools required to address the multifaceted hybrid security challenges of today. However, with a prospected long-term hybrid conflict with Russia, the EU and NATO have an opportunity to cooperate more in these grey zone conflicts and challenges in the sub-threshold (of war) and, in doing so, complement each other in other sectors. The EU and NATO, therefore, must work in tandem against hybrid warfare. Some scholars have discussed whether the final goal of possible increased cooperation would have been more of an EU-NATO division of labour or a new balance of responsibilities and commitments between the US and the Europeans (Howorth, 2017). In any case, as other scholars argued (Marrone, 2024), a 'Europe-led NATO', with tailored and specific US support, could be a much more viable option than creating an alternative EU defence.

This article does not analyse the definition of 'hybrid warfare' as the concept is already much debated in academia (Libiseller, 2023). However, in general, we can say that hybrid warfare refers to a strategy that blends conventional military operations with unconventional tactics, including cyber warfare, information campaigns, and economic measures, to achieve strategic objectives. While the concept of using diverse means to conduct warfare is not new, the increasing emphasis on non-kinetic approaches—such as misinformation, political manipulation, and economic coercion—has become more pronounced in recent conflicts. This blend of tactics allows adversaries to exploit vulnerabilities in their opponents across multiple domains, making traditional military responses more complex. Hybrid warfare reflects the evolving nature of conflict, where both military and nonmilitary tactics are employed to achieve strategic goals, adapting to changing technologies and societal dynamics.

Even if Russia's hybrid warfare strategy has been carried out in its peripheries already over the last decades (Marsili, 2021), it is clear that recently, Europe has been increasingly experiencing the 'weaponization of everything' (Galeotti, 2023) by Russia. NATO actually sounded alarmed about this increased hybridization of warfare for several years, but recently, there have been more and more hostile Russian activities in Europe (Askew, 2024), and also the EU called for a firm response to counter Russian interference (European Parliament, 2024). Russia's strategy of 'weaponising everything' is evident: from the blockade on Ukraine's grain exports to the orchestrated influx of refugees towards the Belarus-Poland border, from the removal of border markers with EU countries like the case of Estonia river to the jamming of GPS for air transport on the Baltic Sea, to plotting sabotage across Europe (Seibt, 2024). NATO (NATO Council, 2024) and the EU (EU Parliament,

2024) became, therefore, increasingly worried about Russian hybrid actions and made several declarations against Russia's hybrid warfare in the NATO-EU sphere.

The two organizations can work complementary first because of their nature. NATO has a role at the forefront of the confluence of deterrence defence and hybrid warfare with its military preparedness and its common command structure, under which the different national armed forces train together and, when necessary, fight together. The EU has the political and economic integration necessary to better fight the hybridization of war, especially today with the energy and technological transition. Beyond that, NATO has a 'military model', with a strategic concept, tactics, and a doctrine, that is the way the defence is conducted at the operational, tactical and strategic levels, while the EU has a 'political model' with a CSDP to work in synergy for preserving peace, defending democracy, strengthening international security, and promoting international cooperation. Finally, NATO includes non-EU states like the UK, Türkiye, US and Canada, who are, in fact, the strongest members of the alliance and so will be helpful for the EU in the case of a major escalation in Europe, while the EU has countries that are non-NATO members that will result useful for the future international security architecture in Europe.

It makes sense, therefore, to strengthen the European role within NATO and reinforce their collaboration, in particular, to fight hybrid wars together, which is the future of warfare, given that technological advancements will make hybrid warfare more and more pervasive. But how do the EU and NATO already cooperate today?

The collaboration between the Transatlantic Alliance and the EU has been crucial in the last decades for deterrence and defence from possible attacks, to ensure security at a broader level, and to defend democracy (Tardy and Lindstrom, 2019). NATO actually has in its security tasks not only deterrence and defence but also two other pillars: Crisis management and cooperative security. Cooperative security, in particular, is conducted through partnerships with many countries around the world, along with civil society (NATO, 2024), defence industries (NATO, 2024), and international institutions like the UN, OSCE, African Union, and European Union (NATO, 2024). The partnership with the EU is the strongest of these, given that both organisations aim at peace and security and share common values. In addition, many countries, for now 22, belong to both organisations (and the other 4 NATO countries are EU applicants: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Türkiye). The EU, too, has in its mandate the important tool of cooperation with other international or supranational institutions, and the EEAS acts as the EU diplomatic service, with delegations in many countries in the world and inside international institutions, including NATO.

Therefore, the cooperation between the EU and NATO has existed for decades but has been institutionalised in particular since the early 2000s. The EU-NATO Declaration on European Security and Defence Policy (NATO, 2024), signed in December 2002 in particular, allowed the EU's access to NATO planning capabilities for its own military operations and affirmed the political principles of a strategic partnership. Furthermore, in April 2003, the two organizations signed an agreement of a framework for cooperation, the 'Berlin Plus agreement' (EUR Lex, 2003), that provided the basis for EU-NATO cooperation in crisis management in the context of EU-led military operations that make use of NATO's assets and capabilities, including command arrangements and assistance in operational planning.

Nevertheless, since 2016, the EU and NATO have really stepped up their cooperation. Since the NATO summit in Warsaw that year, the EU and NATO have issued three Joint Declarations (in 2016, 2018 and 2023) that have outlined a series of actions for the two organisations to take together in concrete areas, strengthening and expanding the EU-NATO strategic partnership. Additionally, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept identified the EU as a distinctive and indispensable ally, advocating for an intensified and fortified strategic partnership between the EU and NATO.

Therefore, the two organizations cooperate in a complementary way. In general, while NATO supports the EU, especially in deterrence and defence, the EU offers support in areas where NATO's capabilities fall short, including financial assistance, infrastructure development, humanitarian aid, and fostering a unified European political community, all important elements also for the security of the continent. Additionally, the EU possesses tools like economic sanctions that NATO does not have and should not wield. Cooperation between the EU and NATO, therefore, is becoming vital, especially when addressing hybrid warfare, such as energy, economy, cyber and other non-kinetic threats.

The EU-NATO Cooperation in Hybrid Warfare

NATO stated that hybrid actions against a member of the alliance could lead to the invocation of Article 5 of the Treaty already in 2016 (NATO, 2024). In 2018, NATO set up counter-hybrid support teams to assist Allies upon their request in preparing for and responding to hybrid activities (NATO, 2018). In July 2022, NATO Leaders endorsed comprehensive preventive and response options to counter hybrid threats, and NATO's Joint Intelligence and Security Division created a hybrid analysis branch to improve situational awareness. In 2023, NATO created a Virtual Cyber Incident Support Capability. Furthermore, to deter nonmilitary hybrid threats, NATO has several Centers: a Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure just opened in the UK; a Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (COE) just opened in Canada; a Space COE in France; a Strategic Communications COE in Latvia; a Cooperative Cyber Defence COE in Estonia; and an Energy Security COE in Lithuania. Sweden also has a proposition to open a new COE on "Supply Chain Security" for the energy transition supply chain.

The EU also already has strong policies and programs against hybrid warfare, in particular, two major documents: the 2016 Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats (EUR-LEX, 2016) and the 2018 "Joint Communication on Increasing Resilience and Bolstering Capabilities to Address Hybrid Threats" (EEAS, 2018). The Joint Framework already in 2016 declared that an 'essential element for countering hybrid threats is to further diversify EU's energy sources, suppliers and routes, in order to provide more secure and resilient energy supplies' for example, even if the EU didn't do that and the results were evident with the invasion of Ukraine. Also, the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre Hybrid Fusion Cell (HFC) has an annual Hybrid Trends Analysis, with contributions from Member States and EU institutions. Furthermore, the EU has a Protocol for countering hybrid threats, which outlines the processes and tools applicable to hybrid threats or campaigns throughout the whole crisis management cycle. It starts with prevention and goes through preparedness and initial identification to response, recovery, and lessons learned, as well as to map the roles of various EU institutions. The EU Protocol for Countering Hybrid Threats of 2023 (Council of the EU, 2023), a revised version of the one in 2016, includes the lessons from Parallel and Coordinated Exercises (PACE) and deepens cooperation with NATO. As stated in the Annual Progress Report of the Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2024), the EU developed Hybrid warfare Toolboxes (EUHTs) like the Cyber diplomacy toolbox, and finally, recently, the EU adopted a series of acts to fight hybrid warfare in the cyber, information and supply chain of CRMs sectors: the Cyber Resilience Act; the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI); and the CRM Act.

Today, the EU and NATO cooperate on hybrid threats with a specific emphasis on cyber defence, enhanced resilience, strategic communication, and situational awareness (NATO, 2024). Countering hybrid threats was one of the seven areas of cooperation between EU and NATO already in the first Joint Declaration signed in Warsaw in 2016, while the third and last one in January 2023 aimed to deepen their cooperation in hybrid threats "to address in particular the growing geostrategic competition, resilience issues, protection of critical infrastructures, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, the security implications of climate change, as well as foreign information manipulation and interference" (NATO, 2023). As an example of fighting in hybrid warfare, the EU

and NATO in March 2023 created a Task Force on resilience and protection of critical infrastructure, focusing on resilience in four sectors: energy, transport, digital infrastructure and space (EU Commission, 2023).

EU and NATO cooperate indirectly on hybrid warfare, as well as through the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (HCoE) in Finland, an arena for exchanges between the EU and NATO on hybrid tools. This is an autonomous international organization that promotes the need to counter hybrid threats through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, inaugurated in 2017 by the NATO Secretary General and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Together with the EU Joint Research Centre (JRC), the HCoE developed a conceptual framework for hybrid threats, besides the ongoing trends in hybrid threats in a report in 2023, 'Hybrid threats: a comprehensive resilience ecosystem' (Jungwirth, Smith, Willkomm, Savolainen, Alonso Villota, Lebrun, Aho and Giannopoulos 2023). This report proposes a 'Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem' model, CORE, which is a systems-thinking approach to help policymakers counter complex hybrid threats in an efficient and coordinated way. This model could be the base for stronger EU-NATO cooperation in hybrid warfare, for example.

Actually, in 2023, the "Eighth progress report on the implementation of the common set of proposals endorsed by EU and NATO Councils in 2016 and 2017" (NATO, 2023), highlighted how the EU and NATO cooperate in the HCoE and how cooperation between the NATO Joint Intelligence and Security Division Hybrid Analysis Branch and the EU INTCEN Hybrid Fusion Cell further developed, with the aim of strengthening situational awareness. Also, the report underlined how the EU and NATO collaborated closely to stay informed about hostile activities in the information environment, using methods such as analyst exchanges, the EEAS-led Rapid Alert System, and the Commission's Network against Disinformation. Their focus is on Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine and China's efforts to support Russia.

How to improve EU-NATO cooperation in Hybrid Warfare

To deal with future hybridization of war will be important the use of new emerging technologies as they play a significant role in hybrid warfare, from infowar to energy war, and the defence using dual-use (civilian-military) technologies must now consider a wider range of risks and opportunities that could be exploited by malicious hybrid actors. The path to stronger cooperation is still long, but better cooperation seems the only solution in defending the Transatlantic community from increasing conflict and hybridization of war and winning at the same time the future competition and transition towards new technology, energy, and societies.

Improving EU-NATO cooperation in hybrid warfare can be approached through several key strategies, but here are a few ideas and suggestions:

1. Strengthen interoperability. Enhance joint exercises and training programs that focus on hybrid threats, ensuring that both EU and NATO forces can operate seamlessly together in crisis situations.

2. Information Sharing: Develop robust mechanisms for sharing intelligence and information about hybrid threats. This could include establishing joint task forces that facilitate real-time data sharing

3. Policy Alignment: Ensure that EU and NATO policies are aligned when addressing hybrid warfare. Regular meetings, workshops, and joint strategic frameworks can help harmonize their approaches.

4. Capacity Building: Invest in building the capacities of member states to detect and respond to hybrid threats, including cyber threats, misinformation, and unconventional tactics.

5. Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch joint campaigns aimed at raising awareness about hybrid threats among the public. Educating citizens on the tactics used by adversaries can help build resilience.

6. Cyber Defense Collaboration: Enhance collaboration in cyber defence through joint initiatives. This includes sharing best practices, conducting joint cyber exercises, and developing coordinated responses.

7. Research and Development: Encourage joint research and development initiatives focused on countering hybrid threats. This involves exploring innovative technologies and methodologies that can be shared between EU and NATO members.

8. Crisis Response Plans: Create comprehensive crisis response plans that specifically address hybrid warfare scenarios. This may involve simulations to test the effectiveness of these plans.

9. Engage with Nonmilitary Stakeholders: Collaborate with civil society, academia, and the private sector to develop a comprehensive approach to countering hybrid threats. These stakeholders can provide valuable insights and support.

10. Tailored Support for Neighboring Regions: Support non-member states in their efforts to counter hybrid threats through assistance programs, training, and resources. This can help stabilize regions that may be vulnerable to such threats.

By focusing on these areas, the EU and NATO can enhance their cooperation and readiness to address the challenges posed by hybrid warfare more effectively. Nevertheless, to start this, the EU must recognize that it needs to develop a resilient defence infrastructure and capabilities, as the new EU Commission realized, and the new Commissioner for Defense and Space will explain this in its first White Paper soon.

Conclusions

This article explored at the beginning the role of the EU as a security and defence actor and the urgent need for the EU to adopt a new sense of ‘strategic responsibility’ in response to Russia’s growing imperialism and use of hybrid conflict tactics. Afterwards, the article recounted the EU-NATO relationship, especially in hybrid warfare. Finally, the article argued that the EU and NATO need to cooperate more efficiently, taking a complementarity approach to avoid overlapping actions, improving their institutional collaboration to adapt faster to new conflicts, and giving some possible recommendations for new strategies.

Hybrid warfare with Russia and other rivals is evolving so rapidly that the EU and NATO need to step up their collaboration to fight and win the competition, the kinetic conflicts, and the hybrid warfare together. The EU and NATO are committed to enhancing the resilience of their societies, including internal unity against evolving threats and risks in different sectors, from disinformation to infrastructure attacks, from technology dependencies to supply chains for critical materials. Deterrence and defence of the members of both organizations, therefore, should be achieved through parallel and coordinated collaboration, taking proactive measures to address any present and future vulnerabilities.

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