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**European Security and Defense in Times  
Of COVID-19**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

The worldwide outbreak of the coronavirus has accelerated structural changes on the geopolitical landscape and undoubtedly intensified the complexity of global affairs. The greatest risk can be found in the increasing political, economic, and social destabilization the virus created. The following paper explores recent developments in the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) of the European Union (EU) and outlines possible shifts in connection with the EU's role in the field of security policy after the Covid-19 virus outbreak.

## **Introduction**

At the end of 2019, the President of the new *geopolitical* European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, took office under the motto “A stronger Europe in the world” (European Commission, 2019). The goal was to strengthen the Union's foreign and security policy by reinforcing European norms and values. However, with the military conflict in Libya, which is causing a rift in Franco-Italian relations, and the resurgence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the year 2020 once again highlighted the limits of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Additionally, the Covid-19 crisis quickly overshadowed other challenges the Union was facing and demanded the undivided attention of decision-makers on both the EU and member states level, thus further exacerbating the existing lines of conflict. Experts even fear that the pandemic will put more strain on countries' budgets than the 2008 financial crisis and the impact on national defense sectors could once again be devastating. As a result, the year 2021 will be characterized mostly by comprehensive recovery plans.

Being marked by a decade of consecutive crises, the EU will continue to face an increasingly complex and occasionally unpredictable security environment. Numerous upheavals and disruptions will continue to shape an already volatile geopolitical environment and all this will have a negative impact on the regional stability and security in Europe. Although, so far, significant progress in the field of European foreign and security policy is absent, given the turbulences of the past years and the various strategic challenges ahead, the EU will have to adapt as fast as possible to the new global political reality and focus on deepening European defense integration in order to avoid geopolitical irrelevance.

## **CSDP and COVID-19**

Over the past four years, the EU moved at an unprecedented speed to create new instruments for its security and defense. Nowadays, mainly as a result of the pandemic, the focus has shifted from launching new initiatives to further improving the already existing system, which the Union has been setting up since 2016 with the launch of the Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS). The pandemic has also highlighted the need to strengthen the EU's competences in areas such as health security or security of supply and made it clear that if the Union's overall resilience is to be enhanced, the level of solidarity within the EU-27 has to be improved as well.

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis will continue to preoccupy the EU and, although the full extent of its various effects is yet to be determined, it could be harmful for European security and defense in many ways - economically, politically, and strategically. It could even lead to an extensive loss of trust and solidarity, which would result in a growing fragmentation both within the EU institutions and among the member states. Initially thought of as 'just' a health crisis, the pandemic is now expected to lead to an unprecedented global economic crisis with renewed cuts in national defense budgets. All this has the potential to bring the dynamic development of CSDP over the last 3-4 years to a halt and make Europe much more vulnerable. First cutbacks in the European Defense Fund (EDF), the European Peace Facility (EPF), and the space sector are already a reality (Brzozowski, 2020). Originally earmarked for €13 billion, the EDF was revised to €7 billion, whereas the EPF was initially supposed to encompass €10.5 billion and was eventually cut back to €5 billion for the period of the next multiannual financial framework 2021-2027 (Lazarou and Latici, 2020). The space budget was also reduced by a couple of billion Euros and now amounts to €14.8 billion, focusing mainly on continuing the Galileo and Copernicus satellite programs (Council of the EU, 2020). In addition to this, it could become increasingly difficult to mobilize European states to contain new hotspots, as the interest in crisis management is anticipated to decrease. It is widely known that the EU is usually slow in responding to the various crises in its neighborhood. This is to a certain degree because of the long CSDP planning processes, but mostly due to the member states' unwillingness to contribute forces and capabilities to planned operations— a situation that is unlikely to change, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Regarding the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), during the German EU-Presidency, an agreement was reached that would officially allow third countries to participate in PESCO projects, provided they fulfil a number of political, legal, and material preconditions (Council of the EU, 2020). This is considered a positive development mostly because it leaves the door open for a future participation of the United Kingdom (UK). PESCO has now entered the second phase (2021-2025), building on the progress made, and addressing areas where further improvement is needed. A fourth wave of PESCO projects is scheduled for 2021, taking into account the EU Capability Development Priorities derived from the Capability Development Plan (Council of the EU, 2020). Additionally, the focus on ‘strategic’ PESCO projects (e.g. European Medical Command) can also be expected to increase.

### **Relations with NATO and the US**

During the Covid-19 crisis, NATO boosted coordination with its European partners while strictly monitoring the virus’ impact on NATO forces in international operations. Despite the pandemic, the work of the Alliance remained largely uninterrupted. Although initially some military exercises, like ‘Defender Europe 2020’, had to be postponed (NATO, 2020), the continuation of NATO operations was assured. Both the EU and NATO quickly recognized the need for close coordination and cooperation, in order to create synergies through complementary capabilities and launch a pool of adequate resources based on their respective experiences and best practices. The pandemic revealed existing gaps in their coordinated response, but also underlined “both the need for and the potential of NATO-EU cooperation” (Lye, 2020).

It is a fact that during Trumps Presidency, Europe’s relations with the United States were put under considerable strain. The result was increased uncertainty regarding the US commitment towards NATO, and Europeans feared they could no longer rely on Washington for their defense. Eventually, the presidential election of last November showed that the so-called ‘Trump Effect’ was not a deep transformative trend in US politics, and with Joe Biden as the new President, Europe has reason to be hopeful again. Biden has pledged to recommit to multilateralism and international cooperation as well as re-engage in strengthening the transatlantic ties. However, there are certain issues that are most likely not going to be resolved under the Biden administration, one example being the long-running dispute over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is designed to transport natural

gas across the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany. The US opposes the pipeline, arguing that it would strengthen Russia's economic and political clout in Europe.

The strategic partnership with the US and a fully functioning transatlantic Alliance are of utmost importance for the EU, since NATO will continue to represent the main framework for European security - although with the UK having left the Union, 80 percent of the Alliance's defense spending will be covered by non-EU countries (Stoltenberg, 2019). It can therefore be expected that President Biden - like his predecessors - will put pressure on Europeans to contribute more to NATO; the pledge the Allies made back in 2014, to move toward spending 2 percent of their GDP on defense, will remain on his agenda despite the pandemic. At the same time, he will also try to restore European trust in the United States and the transatlantic relationship. Although an increasingly interconnected transatlantic security environment is undeniable, the same can be said about the existing credibility gap towards the US, caused by the Trump Presidency. In parallel to closely cooperating with NATO, the EU will therefore continue to pursue a deepening of European defense integration, mostly through PESCO and the EDF. In certain key areas, like security and defense industries or technologies, Europe will seek to reduce its dependence on the US, put more effort into achieving strategic autonomy, but also work towards strengthening the European pillar within NATO.

### **The Franco-German Axis**

Due to Brexit, the EU lost one of its strongest military powers and the most capable European maritime force; however, the full extent of the Brexit implications still remains unclear. Hence, the successful functioning of the Franco-German engine is of paramount importance. A weakened Franco-German axis would slow down or hinder the progress of CSDP, and the development of the overall situation will depend to a large extent on the election of the new German Chancellor in September 2021. The EU's remaining 'big two,' France and Germany, have different viewpoints as to how the credibility of European security and defense should be reinforced and, therefore, their current debate regarding the concept of 'strategic autonomy' will remain a vital issue. It reflects diverging positions on the EU's geostrategic orientation and contributes to a further polarization within the bloc. While French President Macron is pushing for an increasingly sovereign Union in defense matters, the German Minister of Defense, Kramp-Karrenbauer, pointed out that security and stability in Europe cannot be guaranteed without NATO and the US (DW, 2020).

However, regardless of President Biden's sympathies for Europe, the primary concerns of the new US administration will first and foremost be domestic – dealing with the pandemic and boosting the economy. The EU's military capabilities are indeed limited, but growing them at a steady pace would bring security and economic benefits. The importance of this issue can also be seen in the fact that strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy is one of the key priorities of the current Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU (2021portugal.eu).

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to security and defense, the EU is only as successful and effective as its 27 member states allow it to be. It is therefore of vital importance that the pandemic does not distract national policymakers from the volatile security environment of the new decade, since crises and threats will neither cease to exist nor will they wait until the EU is ready to tackle them. Especially in the aftermath of the pandemic, it is essential to establish clarity and concrete goals with regards to the future development of CSDP -limited spending in key areas like defense research and technology calls into question the Unions ability to achieve the much-debated strategic autonomy. The EU member states must decide whether they want to come up with joint solutions and coordinate any additional cuts, or whether, ultimately each state will act on its own. If this is the case, Europe's armed forces are at risk of shrinking even further - armies that are already small could eventually disappear altogether.

The EU-27 needs to reflect thoroughly on its security and defense ambitions. Without a strong (political) commitment to a European security order, which goes beyond the various national interests of the member states, an effective and autonomous security and defense policy will remain wishful thinking. Thus, vital issues like introducing qualified majority voting in CFSP matters need to be seriously considered. The development of a 'strategic compass' over the coming months, which is meant to narrow the gap between ambition and reality when it comes to the EU's external action and define the concept of strategic autonomy (Novaky, 2020), as well as a comprehensive exchange on key areas (e.g. partnerships, crisis management, resilience, capabilities), also constitute a development in the right direction. A more capable EU should signal to its citizens as well as to its international partners that it is willing and able to confront geopolitical challenges and secure its global interests.



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