



Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe

The War in Ukraine Will Either Forge or Splinter Europe

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Political shifts in Europe and the United States risk deepening divisions within the EU. Leaders should make clear that investing in Ukraine's defense is essential for securing Europe's shared future.

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Early 2024 marked a second “geopolitical awakening” for Europe, following the shock induced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Two years on, the trigger was the combination of Donald Trump disparaging NATO, the West struggling to support Ukraine, and Russia piling pressure along the frontline. This juncture dispelled any complacency among Europeans about the course of the war, while alerting them to the fact that U.S. commitment to European security is not a given.

This second awakening sparked a new outburst of European strategic cacophony. Paris and Berlin sparred on what the other side has not done, or is not prepared to do, to support Kyiv. The chasm between French President's Emmanuel Macron's assertive call for a step-change to push Russia back and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's principal concern with averting escalation reveals broader differences between France and Germany—and among other European allies—on how to respond to critical developments. This disconnect was only partially papered over by the show of unity delivered by Macron, Scholz and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk at the Weimar Triangle Summit on March 15 in Berlin, and by the EU leaders' summit on March 21.

The difficult year ahead will show whether such strategic dissonance is a diversion from a deeper pattern of convergence or if sets a trend. The fundamental question is whether the threat posed by Russia's war on Ukraine will ultimately forge or divide Europe.

The tension between convergence and divergence among EU member has shaped Europe's response to cascading crises for the best part of the last two decades—and continues to do so. Up until the COVID-19 pandemic, European leaders engaged in permanent firefighting to cope with successive crises that strained the cohesion of the EU. Laborious compromises kept the union afloat but could not prevent the

rising polarization of EU politics. Often rancorous national debates about common—but asymmetric—challenges precluded structural solutions.

Europe's response to the pandemic and to Russia's attack on Ukraine marked a step change. Both crises were of extraordinary scale and severity, threatened all EU member states at once, and required pooling large resources to deal with their wide ramifications. In both cases, Europeans joined forces to rise up to the challenge.

The war in Ukraine has certainly exposed differences among EU member states. However, these disputes punctuated a broader trajectory of political convergence, enabling unprecedented mobilization to support Ukraine. In early 2024, the prospect of U.S. military and financial support to Kyiv drying up has severely tested the EU's resilience. Toxic partisanship in U.S. politics is casting serious doubts on the reliability of American commitment to Ukraine. The potential victory of Donald Trump in November could undermine the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to NATO allies, as well. The result of the presidential election will determine Washington's attitude to Europe.

However, the deep currents shaping U.S. politics, and its global posture, are challenging Europe's ingrained assumption of reliance on the United States. Ultimately, responsibility for the future of Ukraine—and of the European security order—is shifting to Europe. It is not clear, however, that Europe's political fabric is designed to bear this burden. Beyond inadequate defense capabilities, a diffused reflex of dependence on the United States has prevented Europeans from developing a common, comprehensive strategic culture—a concept of their own priorities and of how to jointly advance them. In the absence of such a shared vision, grave external challenges risk further exacerbating political divergences within the EU.

The painful experience of the war in Ukraine must help forge this common strategic approach. It is vital that Europeans convert the geopolitical pressure they face into political energy. But how can this be done?

The immediate priority is to provide Ukraine with whatever it needs to hold the line and boost its air defenses. If the war ends on Russia's terms, that would both cancel Ukraine's sovereignty and shatter confidence in NATO and the EU. As the European Council recognized in March, this urgent effort should be part of a larger drive to empower Europe to take much more responsibility for its defense.

NATO's Washington summit in June will be an important milestone to focus minds and drive progress. By working together, Europeans can bolster their contributions to NATO, help reinforce U.S. commitment to Europe's security, and become better placed to manage the risks that Trump's second term would entail.

Recent initiatives such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy point in the right direction. However, the strategy's implementation will require far more sustained joint funding and there is no agreement among EU members states on how to deliver it.

The latter is another manifestation of the unstable balance between convergence and divergence within EU politics and decisionmaking. In the run-up to the European elections in June, domestic political polarization risks affecting EU debates, thereby blurring strategic agenda setting. Economic stagnation across the bloc could also amplify divergence among member states. When it comes to assistance to Ukraine, the EU runs the risk of reverting back to the pre-pandemic "firefighting" mode of damage limitation. Against the backdrop of cumbersome negotiations and creeping political fragmentation, piecemeal assistance measures would amount to less than their sum. This is not something that Europe can afford.

To avoid such a scenario, leaders should make the strong case that supporting Ukraine and building up European defense are critical dimensions of a larger, strategic investment in the shared future of Europe. This endeavor is a prerequisite to achieving all the other major goals driving the EU agenda, from economic competitiveness to technological sovereignty, from social cohesion to green leadership.

The point is not that the war in Ukraine should take precedence over these priorities. It is that Russia's victory would severely hinder their achievement. Failing the test of defending Ukraine and upholding European security today would drain the political cohesion needed to advance toward a stronger, sovereign Europe. It would also undermine what should be a much larger European global agenda aimed at promoting rules-based cooperation and delivering global public goods.

Back in March 2022, the Versailles Declaration expressed the commitment of EU leaders to protect Europe in the face of Russia's aggression. That message is all the more relevant today, when seismic turbulence across the Atlantic risks aggravating tectonic shifts in Europe. Meeting Ukraine's urgent military needs is the short-term imperative. However, it must be part of a determined approach to strengthen

Europe's economic, technological, and defense power base, which would enable the EU to thrive in a fiercely competitive world.

France and Germany, together with their European partners, must renew the spirit of Versailles. For one, they should firmly convey to Russia that there is no pathway to victory, and accordingly raise the costs of its aggression. For another, they should invest in the shared future of Europe, on a consequential scale. If the war in Ukraine does not help forge Europe, it might well end up splintering it.

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