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– Analysis –

The New "Global Policeman"?

The European Union and its Role in the International Security Order

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Executive Summary

The global order has been shaking for years, if not centuries. In the midst of this uncertainty, however, there was one story of hope: The European Union (EU) was and still is one of the greatest successful peace projects in the last century. Its own integration process has developed rapidly and so has its role on the international stage and have its strong relations to international alliances and partners. The EU has become an important international actor which comes with a great international responsibility. In a present world of various crises, some even call it a time of "polycrisis" (Juncker 2016), the EU is hence urged to redefine its role in this global order to stay a strong and reliable international actor. This paper offers an analysis of the self-claim of the EU in the international security order. It does so by analysing the EU's "Strategic Compass for Security and Defence" (March 2022) and other strategic papers that established a common strategic vision of the Union in this policy area. Furthermore, this paper discusses the question on whether today's global context is still the same as it was when the so-called Strategic Compass was developed and agreed on and what implications the new global order has on the EU's role in the international security order.

The New "Global Policeman"?

The European Union and its Role in the International Security Order

Rima El Chaker

The EU and its Self-Discovery Process in the International Security Order

The global order has been shaking for years, if not decades. In the midst of this uncertainty, however, there was one story of hope: The EU was and still is one of the greatest successful peace projects in the last century. Its own integration has developed rapidly and so has its role on the international stage and its strong relations to international alliances and partners. In the aftermath of two World Wars, the EU was another attempt at obtaining peace on the continent. Six countries pooled together their coal and steel industry in order to create a certain interdependence and hence lasting and sustainable peace and created the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in the early 1950s. After having experienced the great success of this project, they created the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the European Economic Community (EEC). While starting as a relatively small group focusing on economic questions, the EU has, besides its economic success, nowadays also become one of the greatest peace projects in the world.

In addition to its inner success, the EU has also become one of the most important actors on the international stage. First of all, the EU has been one of the leading donors of humanitarian aid (Financial Tracking Service 2024). The EU has also carried out more than 30 civil and military missions and operations worldwide with many of them still going on (European Union External Action 2023). Those missions and operations focus on a broad variety of topics, such as conflict prevention, military advice and post-conflict stabilisation, to name just a few (European Council and Council of the European Union, last review April 2024).

Moreover, the EU highly focuses on international alliances and cooperation. There are already three EU-NATO joint declarations (European Council and Council of the European Union, last review: March 2024). Together with the United Nations, the EU is the "world's leading proponent and defender of the multilateral and rules-based global governance system" (European Union External Action 2023). The transatlantic relations are still one of the most important pillars of the EU's politics. The United States and Canada remain the most important partners of the EU in different respects, including economic, political and cultural aspects. Additionally, there is a strong cooperation in the security and defence policy. Besides joint initiatives, both countries also contribute to missions and operations in the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU (Auswärtiges Amt 2023).

As one can see, the EU has become an important international actor in a broad range of policy fields. Its own integration process can be declared a success and also its contribution to a stable, prosperous and safe world based on values and international rules is remarkable. The EU carries out its own missions and operations and is, at the same time, involved in various bilateral and multilateral initiatives. But is this truly the end of the story? Surely not! Nowadays the well-known global

order is under threat. The past years were branded by various crises. This prompted leading experts, such as the then-President of the European Commission, Mr Jean-Claude Juncker, to talk about a global "polycrisis" (Juncker 2016). The sad peak was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that has brought back war to the European continent and hence has forced the EU to (re-) define its role in the international system.

In December 2003, the EU adopted its European Security Strategy (ESS) "A Secure Europe in a Better World" establishing "principles and […] clear objectives for advancing the EU's security interests" (European Council and Council of the European Union 2009). The title already clarifies the focus of the EU and its strategy. It is clear that the EU aims at securing its own territory and its citizens. However, it is also clearly stated in the document that this can only be assured in a stable world. Based on this recognition and its commitment to its global responsibility, the EU has started to define its role in the international system with this document in 2003. Nevertheless, the international context has been changing in the past decades which has led the EU to adopt two more strategic papers to better meet the new reality with its new challenges. In June 2016, the EU agreed on its so-called Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe," which not only replaces the ESS but also builds the new basis for all following documents in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as well as the EU's CSDP stating the five key points of the EU's external action: the security of the EU, state and societal resilience to the EU's east and south, an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, stronger cooperative regional orders and a global governance for the 21st century (European Centre of Excellence for Civilian Crisis Management 2016). With the new strategy, the EU has already adapted

to the new global order with its specific challenges and opportunities. Nonetheless, the world keeps on changing which has urged the EU to adopt yet another strategic paper in 2022: the "Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security" (European Union External Action).

The EU's Strategic Self-Image in the International Security Order

As already stated, the EU is well aware of its international responsibility. To this responsibility the EU wants to contribute to global justice with its politics. However, besides its own projects and behaviour, the EU highly bases this task on international cooperation. As the global order is not a stable one, also the EU's international allies and relations are constantly changing and developing. To remain a reliable and powerful partner, the EU has therefore to become more autonomous. Already under former President Barack Obama (2009-2017), the United States encouraged Europe to take more responsibility with regard to its own security and to rely less on the US military. Ever since, the focus of the United States has shifted towards Asia and the Pacific region. The EU's "Strategic Compass" consequently also defines specific goals towards a greater European autonomy as well as the corresponding instruments.

The process of the so-called Strategic Compass started in the second half of 2020 during the German presidency of the Council of the European Union and was finalised in 2022. The aim of the "Strategic Compass" was to decide on how the EU can increase its strength, capability and resilience regarding questions of its security and defence policy (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung 2022). It is based on four main areas:

crisis management, capability development, resilience and partnerships (European Council and Council of the European Union 2022). The main strategic goals of the EU are already integrated in the title, namely the protection of its citizens, values and interests but equally important its contribution to international peace and security (cf. Strategic Compass 2022, p. 3).

In the paper, the EU starts by defining the new global order and the challenges that come with it, but also the strength of the EU and its partners to tackle these challenges. First of all, the Compass talks about the "unjustified and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine" (Strategic Compass 2022, Executive Summary) and the "return of war in Europe" (ibid., p. 10) but also "major geopolitical shifts" (ibid.), "strategic competition" (ibid.) and "complex security threats" (ibid.) in general terms. For the EU, the war in Ukraine is not only a violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, but also of security and stability in Europe and also worldwide (ibid.). In a next step, the EU calls the "return to power politics" (ibid., p. 14) a threat to a peaceful global order but also to security and stability on the European continent. According to the "Strategic Compass," there has also been a shift towards a "competition of governance systems" (ibid.), which makes the new challenges and threats an ideological issue. These conclusions show that the EU considers different types of threats to be coming up again. On the one hand, there is the obvious threat for European and global citizens through acts of war and violence. On the other hand, there is also a threat to European values and interests, to the idea of democracy itself. To fight this, the EU refocuses on its global responsibility and aims at becoming "a stronger and more capable security provider" (ibid., p. 15). The four goals that the EU sets for itself in its "Strategic Compass" are based on the two guidelines of their

future strategy to strengthen their role on the international stage: First, they seek to develop a more coherent and more unified security and defence policy within the EU. Second, they seek to deepen their cooperation with international partnerships.

In a first step, the EU analyses the new common threats it faces. As a severe threat, the so-called Strategic Compass states instability in different regions worldwide which also has an impact on the EU's own security and on the "multilateral system" (ibid., p. 17) with its "rules-based international order, based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, universal values and international law" (ibid.). This system, according to the document, is threatened by a "return to power politics" (ibid.).

By referring to Russia and its "military aggression" (ibid.) and "revisionist actions" (ibid.) with regard to Ukraine and the Crimea as well as to China and its potential threat to security on a regional and global level, the EU concludes that it has to "take a more active stance to protect its citizens, defend its interests, project its values, and work with partners to provide security for a safer and more just world" (ibid., p. 18). This shows that the EU's future strategy in the international security and defence policy is based on three aspects: a stronger international role, a stronger relationship and cooperation with international partners and lastly international agreements that ensure an international rules-based order. To fulfil these goals, the EU will focus on both, its civic but also its military means.

Being aware that also after 2016 the global order kept on changing so that the EU came up with a new strategy: the "Global Gateway Strategy." Ursula von der Leyen described the new strategy as a "template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world" (European

Commission). At first sight, the so-called Global Gateway Strategy has nothing to do with EU's security and defence policy. It mainly focuses on investments in infrastructure as well as sustainability. However, the EU clearly states that the strategy is based on the EU's values, naming six concrete principles: democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean, security focused and catalysing private sector investment (ibid.). These principles show that the latest strategy paper refers to the long-term goal of the EU: Creating a stable world in order to create constant peace. Hereby, the "Global Gateway Strategy" is indeed in line with the EU's previous strategy papers.

The International (Security) Order Today and its Implications for the EU

The global order has been shaking for years, if not decades.

The past decades were marked by many different major challenges and changes in international politics. The end of the Second World War and its impact on Europe. The subsequent Cold War and its impact on the world. The end of the Cold War and the hope for change and lasting peace. The ongoing integration and growth of the EU. For a few years, the world gained more and more hope that democracy would be the winning political system, and that peace was the new stable reality – at least in Europe.

However, both, democracy and peace, shall still not be taken for granted. Not in Europe nor in the rest of the world. The dominance of the United States has been weakening recently. Its leading role in the global order has been weakening accordingly. The Western system and ideas of freedom and democracy are being challenged. China is becoming

the big new player on the international scene in both an economic and a military way. While the country was an economic partner to some extent, the latest developments also make it a threat to the international order and peace. For a while, China has been demonstrating its opinion on Taiwan. However, the latest development shows that China is willing to militarily intervene in Taiwan's territory (Tagesschau 2024). The situation in the Gaza Strip gets worse and is getting a humanitarian crisis according to many experts, including the German government (Auswärtiges Amt 2024). The Houthis became a threat in the Red Sea that has led the EU to create a new operation as part of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in February 2024 (European Union External Action 2024). But also within the EU and its neighbourhood the situation gets more and more unstable. In some member states, the situation with regard to human rights and international law gets more and more worrying. Nationalism and populism are still getting stronger in many EU member states. Russia has more and more shifted away from democracy and its partnership with Europe. In the end, it brought back war to the European continent. These are just a few examples of how the global order is in constant change. As the EU has become a global actor on the international scene, all of these developments also have an influence on the EU's policy and behaviour in international politics. In accordance with its strategy papers, the EU engages in both a military and a civic way. While it delivers humanitarian and financial aid to the Gaza Strip, it also imposes sanctions on other countries such as Russia but also on its own member states such as Poland or Hungary. For a long time, the EU has relied on the United States to be the dominant actor in international politics. The EU considered itself as a partner but never as the leading part in the transatlantic relationship. As the US has shifted its

focus away from Europe towards Asia and the Pacific region, the EU is urged to redefine its own role as a global player. First of all, to fulfil its own claim, secondly as the United States openly demands it.

Already in July 2020, the European Union worked out its "EU Security Union Strategy." In this strategy it acknowledged the changing global order together with the new threats and challenges that come with it. The EU focused on four strategic priorities: a future-proof security environment, tackling evolving threats, protecting Europeans from terrorism and organizing crime and a strong European security ecosystem (European Commission 2020).

Figure 1: The Pillars of the "EU Security Union Strategy"

(European Commission 2020)

In the document the EU also emphasizes the connection between its security policy and its values and therefore recognizes that its security policy will be based on the "common European values" (EU Security Union Strategy, p. 1) and that "[s]ecurity and respect for fundamental rights are not conflicting aims, but consistent and complementary." (ibid.). The EU also recalls that security not only is a question of the EU's territory and boundaries. On the contrary, it declares that "[p]rotecting the Union and its citizens is no longer

only about ensuring security within the EU borders, but also about addressing the external dimension of security." (ibid., p. 2).

Between 2020 and 2025 the EU hence redefined its security policy in order to adapt it to the new global order and its challenges. The main goals are to defend its own security and territory, to protect its citizens and values, but also to contribute to global stability and peace, all in a long-term perspective. The different strategy papers show that the EU is well aware of its new responsibilities at the international level and its new role that comes with it. Besides its efforts to fulfil this role with more autonomous actions, the EU also tries to strengthen international cooperation. In different documents the EU clearly states that a broader and deeper cooperation with international partners will be one of the goals for its international security policy. According to the so-called EU Security Union Strategy, "[c]ooperation with third countries and at global level to address common challenges is central to an effective […] response, with stability and security in the EU's neighbourhood critical to the EU's own security." (EU Security Union Strategy, p. 2). Especially its cooperation with NATO is a main aspect of the EU's international security policy. In January 2023, the EU and NATO agreed on their third joint declaration. This declaration is based on the institutions' "shared values" (Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, 1.) and their will to "promote and safeguard peace, freedom and prosperity in the Euro-Atlantic area." (ibid.).

As one can see, the EU has acknowledged the new reality in the global order together with all its challenges. It also acknowledges its own new role that comes with its international responsibility. On the one hand, it is the EU's goal to protect its citizens and territory. On the other hand, the EU is well aware of the fact that sustainable peace can only

be achieved and preserved in a global environment that is stable. Therefore, the EU will not only focus on its own territory but will act internationally in a civic but also in a military way. Moreover, the EU will aim at becoming a more powerful and autonomous actor in the international security policy. However, at the same time, it will deepen its international cooperation.

Perspectives

How will the EU's future role in the international security policy look like? Will it remain the junior partner in an alliance with the United States? Will it develop into a stronger European pillar within NATO or rather into a more powerful and coequal partner? Or, lastly, will it eventually become an autonomous actor as being demanded by some voices in the EU and will it even be able to create a true European army? Of course, there is never a way to predict the future of any actor. Especially in an unstable and constantly changing field, such as international politics, it is impossible to certainly know what the future holds. However, as the paper showed, there are some probable developments with regard to the EU's role in the international security policy.

First of all, the inner stability of the EU is being put in question. While on the one hand, more and more countries want to become part of the Union, other countries that are already member states start to challenge the EU's values. Populism and nationalism are getting stronger among the 27 member states of the EU. Consequently, the EU has to secure its inner stability. This is essential to ensure peace and security for its own citizens and to act coherent in the international security landscape.

At the same time, it is a question of values and political systems. Only a European Union that is

stable and able to secure peace and prosperity will also be able to defend democratic and Western values in international politics. But the international system has also to be stable. Therefore, the EU will take responsibility for international sustainable prosperity and peace. It does so in a civic as well as in a military way. With financial and humanitarian aid, the EU contributes to this goal. However, with the new global order and its challenges, this is no longer enough. Hence, the EU is engaged internationally with its missions and operations of its CSDP.

As the global system is changing and the power is redistributed on the international scene, the EU also has to redefine its self-claim in the international security policy. It is no longer enough to only contribute to and rely on the actions of the United States. There has been a development for the past years that has urged the EU to redefine its role and strategy in international security policy. The US has shifted away its focus from Europe towards Asia and the Pacific. It has demanded from the EU in a more and more forceful way to become more powerful and responsible for its own security. Especially with regard to the next US election 2024, this is a serious topic.

At the same time, the EU's neighbourhood is also becoming increasingly unstable. At the latest, the war in Ukraine has shown that democracy and peace are not as self-evident as Europe and the world have considered it to be. On the contrary, democracy and peace are still values that have to be fought for every single day, nowadays even in a military way.

These days the EU has to fight against many challenges and threats. As stated in the beginning, it is impossible to predict all further challenges that will come up in the near future. However, it is incontrovertible that there will be challenges, inner ones as well as external ones. It is also clear that the

EU has to define the role that it wants to play in international politics, especially in international security policy. For the past few years, the EU has developed new strategies in order to become a more powerful autonomous actor and a strong partner for international allies. Even though, the future is unpredictable, this is the way, that the EU has to follow in the future. In order to secure peace, prosperity and freedom for its own citizens but also at an international level, it has to continue taking responsibility in the international order to defend its democratic values in an internal as well as in an external manner. Only by doing so, it can fulfil its self-claim and new role as a normative power in international (security) policy.

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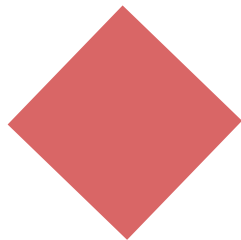
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