

A Safe and Sovereign Europe in a Changing Global Context

Lila Djait

The Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, with support of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in collaboration with the Representation of the European Commission in Belgium, has organised a series of three foresight workshops and three working dinners. Each session was dedicated to a key strategic challenge, providing a vital platform for dialogue and expert insight sharing among decision-makers from European Union (EU) institutions, the Belgian administration, and civil society. Far from being just a theoretical exchange, the discussions were a targeted effort to further develop strategic long-term thinking, with a vision extending over the next 5 to 10 years. The second round of the foresight workshops and working dinners reflected on 'A Safe and Sovereign Europe in a Changing Global Context'.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, the **EU is undergoing a transformation in its global positioning within the multipolar world order**. The perception of the EU as a strongly integrated regional entity in an era of heightened power politics necessitates a more assertive, unified stance in global affairs, as well as a reinforced coordination of the internal and external dimension of EU policies. Yet, translating this perception into a cohesive, integrated approach to global affairs has proven challenging for its Member States. Strengthening EU sovereignty becomes crucial in this altered geopolitical reality posing a paradox: Member States need to transfer some sovereignty to the EU to effectively safeguard their national sovereignty. This is particularly relevant in areas

like defence and migration, where national approaches fall short.

The EU's **defence** strategy, catalysed by the Russian aggression, is evolving from a peace-focused effort to one that prioritizes existential security and collective resilience. This shift, however, is still in the making, as it requires a delicate balance between national sovereignty and collective solidarity. Similarly, in the realm of **migration**, the EU grapples with intricate challenges spanning international diplomacy and domestic policy. On the international front, its approach is influenced by Member States' diverse interests, often favouring bilateral agreements, creating vulnerabilities and opportunities for third countries to strategically weaponize migration as a geopolitical tool. Domestically, the EU is faced with demographic shifts and structural labour shortages, further exacerbated by a lack of unity among Member States, growing tensions between fundamental values and strategic interests, and polarisation.

II. DEFENCE

(1) EU Adapting to Power Politics

Recent geopolitical tensions have necessitated a more robust and unified defence strategy within the EU, with the catalyst for this newfound assertiveness being the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and escalated into a broader conflict in 2021. These offensives not only served as a critical wake-up call, prompting the Member States to reevaluate and strengthen their defence capabilities, but also spurred a more

integrated EU defence approach. This evolution has resulted in significant milestones, including the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017, the establishment of the Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) in 2019, and the initiation of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and European Peace Facility (EPF) in 2021. Additionally, strategic documents like the European Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 and the Strategic Compass in 2022 have played important roles in shaping this new direction. This marks a departure from the **traditional EU defence efforts**, which were primarily focused on peace missions and conflict management. In the current geopolitical climate, European defence is increasingly viewed as vital to **Europe's existential security**, calling for a **strategic paradigm shift** in the EU's defence approach and priorities. The permacrisis compels the EU to pivot towards *realpolitik*, pragmatically recognizing the need to adapt to the realities of contemporary power dynamics. This strategic reorientation is not solely about responding to immediate threats; it is also about re-affirming and enhancing the EU's relevance and influence on the global stage.

It is crucial to emphasize that adapting to power politics does not imply losing sight of our **core values**. Even as the EU aligns strategically with its interests, it should remain committed to operating within a normative framework. This distinctive approach sets the EU apart as a global normative superpower, prioritizing sustainability and the well-being of citizens. This **balance** between **strategic interests** and **normative values** defines the EU's role in the international arena. **Interests and values need not be mutually exclusive**; if they were, the EU would lose either way.

(2) Domestic Challenges: Sovereignty versus Solidarity

The EU's defence sector struggles with significant challenges, which has been brought into sharp focus by the Russian aggression. These challenges encompass fragmentation, a deficiency in industrial capacity, standardization issues and inadequate investment. **Fragmentation within the defence industry** severely

hampers competitiveness and productivity, resulting in inefficient resource allocation. Diverse supply chains deliver equipment with varying maintenance and operational requirements, hindering the development of a robust **European defence-industrial base** capable of independently producing strategic technologies. Moreover, this fragmentation exacerbates the lack of **standardized defence capabilities**. The EU's defence sector also contends with a substantial **investment gap** and **structural challenges**, largely due to predominance of national-level spending. This situation not only constrains collective capacity and integration of defence initiatives across Europe, but also obstructs the formulation of a cohesive and effective **European industrial defence strategy**.

For many Member States, **NATO** remains the primary defence framework, with a particular focus on the **role of the United States in European defence**. For countries like Estonia or Poland, security heavily relies on US guarantees due to the current limitations of European armies, influencing their perspective on European integration. Geographical proximity to the Eastern front makes the US presence in Europe a crucial aspect of their security strategy. Similarly, countries like Germany, influenced by historical ties, show reluctance to alter their transatlantic stance. These bilateral connections with the US add complexity to the pursuit of a unified European defence strategy, underscoring the intricate interplay between geopolitical realities, historical ties, and the future trajectory of EU defence policy. Additionally, the US's strategic pivot towards Asia, as indicated by the 2018 National Defence Strategy and the Biden administration's priorities, suggests potential limitations in US support for European defence, reinforcing the need for an autonomous and cohesive European defence approach.

As the EU's defence sector contends with a myriad of challenges, the underlying tension between **national sovereignty** and **collective solidarity** lies at its core. The sector's fragmentation, limited industrial capacity, and other challenges are not merely logistical or financial; they are inherently tied to the delicate balance between

preserving national sovereignty and fostering solidarity among Member States. The notion that Europe can still think in purely national terms regarding defence is a fantasy in today's world. The path forward is contingent on Member States' willingness to relinquish certain autonomous powers and establish a deep-seated **trust** in each other's commitment to **long-term partnerships**.

(3) Navigating the Future of EU Defence

In view of intensified global tensions and instabilities, the **re-establishment of the European conventional line of deterrence** is imperative for safeguarding the national sovereignty of Member States. The current national backlogs in defence are practically irrecoverable, making it imperative to embark on bold initiatives. An industrial strategy, a common market, common infrastructures, and an investment program are essential. However, these initiatives raise questions about the availability of financial resources, as the Commission budget alone cannot meet this challenge.

Deepening EU defence integration not only enables significant cost savings in defence expenditure through joint procurement but also fosters innovation, standardizes equipment, and enhances interoperability among European armed forces. Embracing the concept of the EU's open strategic autonomy, especially in light of NATO's evolving role and the US' pivot to Asia, is indispensable for maintaining independent defence capabilities, thereby complementing NATO rather than conflicting with it. To further solidify its role as a geopolitical force on the global stage and to formulate a robust defence strategy, the EU should also consider appointing a dedicated EU Commissioner for Defence.

III. MIGRATION

(1) International Dynamics of Migration

The EU's approach to external migration cooperation is influenced, among others, by Member States' varied and historical relations with third countries, and consequently different interests. Although the EU acts unified in its

relations with some third countries, such as Turkey, it sometimes follows a **compartmentalized approach**, in which Member States favor bilateral agreements, in particular with regard to legal migration. While such agreements empower individual Member States, they also expose vulnerabilities as they provide third countries with opportunities to strategically leverage migration, impacting both individual Member States and the Union. Moreover, notable incidents such as the 2021 Ceuta entry attempt, the 2021 Belarus border crisis and the tensions at the land border between Greece and Türkiye illustrate the use of **migration as a tool in coercive diplomacy**.

(2) Intra-EU Policy Dilemmas

The **New Pact for Migration and Asylum** signifies progress in addressing protracted challenges. However, it faces criticism for not addressing certain humanitarian concerns and for over-reliance on external borders. Incremental reforms do not address structural shortcomings. Nevertheless, the pact is a step towards more coordinated cooperation among EU Member State in managing migration.

In the realm of EU domestic migration policy, three critical challenges stand out: demographic shifts, disunity among Member States, and the intricate interplay between values and strategic interests.

The first challenge involves **demographic shifts**, characterized by an ageing working-age population and declining fertility rates, ultimately leading to **labour and skills shortages** across the Union. These shortages, particularly pronounced in sectors such as construction, STEM, healthcare and services, indicate that Member States require not only high-skilled workers but also the entry of lower- and medium skilled workers. These shortages significantly affect the EU's internal market and competitiveness.

The lack of unity among Member States in effectively addressing these widespread labour shortages presents a second challenge. Despite being a common issue, the current EU labour migration policy remains largely

detached from other policy objectives. For instance, structural shortages in key sectors like construction and IT have a profound effect on common objectives such as the green and digital transitions. According to the European Commission's estimates, Member States will face a shortage of approximately 20 million experts in areas like cybersecurity and data analysis by 2030¹. Consequently, there is a compelling argument for integrating a labour migration component into the EU's ambitious industrial strategy to effectively tackle these critical labour deficits. However, the current **legislative framework is highly fragmented**, stemming from distinct limitations on EU competencies in labour migration, as specified in article 79 TFEU, and the allowance for Member States to develop more favourable national rules. This flexibility, often influenced by considerations of **national sovereignty**, has resulted in the underutilization of EU legislation. Nonetheless, depending solely on national strategies will not adequately address this common challenge, as intra-EU competition will exacerbate disparities among Member States' ability to fulfil EU industrial strategy objectives².

Lastly, the EU's migration policy debate grapples with a growing tension between upholding **values** (such as the principle of non-refoulement) and managing **interests** (such as electoral gains and curbing illegal migration). Migration is indeed frequently instrumentalized for domestic political gain and is perceived as a threat to societal identities. This fear-driven narrative exacerbates **political polarisation**, leading to a questioning of the EU's normative framework and decision-making efficacy in the face of migration challenges. Interestingly, research³ indicates that despite political rhetoric, immigration policies across the spectrum are similar in practice, revealing only a 'discursive gap' between political rhetoric and actual policy actions between the left and right.

1 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:12e835e2-81af-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1_0001_02/DOC_1&format=PDF

2 <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/race-for-talent>

3 <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/community/2018/07/25/theres-no-hard-right-soft-left-divide-on-migration-policy>

(3) Future Outlook

The EU's overreliance on crisis management as its primary modus operandi for migration policy has demonstrated its unsustainability and impairs the effectiveness of migration management. Looking ahead, the EU must fundamentally reconsider its approach to legal migration, with an eye towards harnessing the potential of a **future common labour market**.

Similarly, relations with third countries should translate into coordinated **comprehensive, long-term partnerships** that incorporate common interests and shared values. Such partnerships should aim to align immediate trade-offs with broader strategic goals.

Unpredictability and over-politicization should be overcome by **prioritizing long-term, data-driven scenarios** and bolstering the **EU's preparedness** for a comprehensive, well-informed response to these multifaceted challenges. A comprehensive European migration strategy should be aligned with the EU's sustainable development goals and the broader socio-economic objectives of Member States. To accomplish this transformation, a strategic paradigm shift is required, departing from a **security-centred and short-term focus**, and embracing a more **comprehensive, long-term perspective**.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is an imperative need for the European Union to adapt and evolve within an ever-changing geopolitical landscape. This is particularly necessary concerning defence and migration, where the complexities of modern power dynamics and internal policy challenges call for a more integrated and strategic response.

Recent collaborative efforts within the EU have demonstrated the potential for collective action. These developments raise vital questions regarding the future of European integration: Is the EU moving towards a more unified geopolitical role? Can this collaborative approach endure beyond immediate crises, fostering deeper



integration in defence and migration? Understanding the extent of Member States' willingness for future integration is of paramount importance, and the EU's challenge lies in preparing for and adapting to these possibilities.

In today and tomorrow's geopolitical climate, the **EU must not only proclaim its unified identity, but also act cohesively** in addressing the complex challenges it faces, even if it is just out of necessity. The pressing need for strategic reorientation reflects Europe's response to the complexities of modern power dynamics and the imperative of maintaining relevance in the global arena. For the EU, the best strategy for defending its interests is therefore to promote a multilateralism based as much as possible on the rule of law, while avoiding being locked into the formation of blocs. In this context, the relationship with NATO must be rethought with a view of rebalancing. It is often difficult to establish common positions on external relations issues and, even when they are reached, their implementation is imperfect and the lack of cohesion between the Member States is too often exploited by third countries. A safe and sovereign Europe also presupposes a perfect connection between internal and external policies. If this is the case, it does not matter who speaks, even if institutional clarification is necessary.

In conclusion, the path forward for the European Union is fraught with challenges, but also filled with opportunities. As the world becomes more unpredictable, the EU must navigate these turbulent waters with a clear vision of its role in the global order. The pursuit of a safe and sovereign Europe demands a delicate balance between asserting power politics and upholding its core values. It necessitates a deeper integration in defence and migration, as well as a re-evaluation of the EU's position in the multipolar world. Ultimately, the EU's ability to adapt and unify in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics will determine its capacity to safeguard its sovereignty and effectively address the complex challenges of the future.

Lila Djait joined the Egmont Institute in February 2023 to work in the European Affairs Programme as a Junior Researcher. Her research interests include European migration policy and strategic foresight. Lila gained international experience at the Permanent Mission of Belgium and the European Union Delegation to the United Nations in Geneva, and as a Diplomatic Assistant at the Embassy of Belgium in Australia. She holds MAs in International Relations and in Conflict and Development Studies from the University of Ghent.





The opinions expressed in this Publication are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.

www.egmontinstitute.be

© Egmont Institute, March 2024

© Author(s), March 2024