

# Culture shock: The EU's foreign and security policy and the challenges of the European Zeitenwende

Niklas Helwig

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**Abstract** The EU is in a state of culture shock. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the European Zeitenwende placed the EU in a largely unfamiliar international environment for which its past modes of operation and behavioural patterns are unsuited. The EU was able to geopolitically repurpose its existing processes and instruments to cope rather effectively with the challenges of the war and its global fallout. However, the EU is also faced with more fundamental questions related to how it will navigate a much more competitive international environment. For effective and sustainable answers, it will need to develop a joint strategic culture.

**Keywords** European Union · Common Foreign and Security Policy · Russia's Ukraine war · Geopolitics · Strategic culture

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✉ Niklas Helwig  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, Finland  
E-Mail: [niklas.helwig@fiia.fi](mailto:niklas.helwig@fiia.fi)

Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

## **Kulturschock: Die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik der EU und die Herausforderungen der Europäischen Zeitenwende**

**Zusammenfassung** Die EU befindet sich in einem Zustand des Kulturschocks. In Folge des russischen Angriffskrieges auf die Ukraine und der Europäischen Zeitenwende findet sich die EU in einem weitestgehend ungewohnten Umfeld wieder, für welches die erlernten Wirkungsweisen und Verhaltensmuster nicht angemessen sind. Die EU schaffte es die bereits existierenden Prozesse und Instrumente geopolitisch umzufunktionieren und somit weitestgehend effektiv mit den Herausforderungen des Krieges und dessen globalen Folgen umzugehen. Jedoch sieht sich die EU auch mit grundlegenden Fragen konfrontiert, wie sie sich in einer mehr auf Wettbewerb ausgerichteten Welt positionieren sollte. Effektive und nachhaltige Antworten werden die Entwicklung einer gemeinsamen strategischen Kultur benötigen.

**Schlüsselwörter** Europäische Union · Gemeinsame Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik · Russlands Ukraine-Krieg · Geopolitik · Strategische Kultur

### **1 Before and after**

“The world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before.”

This is how the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2022) summarized the meaning of *Zeitenwende* in his historic speech in front of the German Bundestag three days after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is thus clear that the *Zeitenwende* should not be reduced to the changes in German defence policy and spending, but that it marks a fundamental change to the conditions and assumptions by which Europeans operate and organize their security (Vorländer 2023). The deep changes in the international environment also require us to reassess what we thought we knew about the European Union (EU) and its role in international affairs and security policy.

To assess the implications of *Zeitenwende* for EU's external activities, it is key to define what has changed from the situation “before” to “after” the 24th of February 2022. First, traditional warfare has returned to the continent and with it a new threat perception that brings territorial defence back to the centre of attention. As a result, NATO has experienced a revival. Questions related to military procurement and the provision of lethal aid to Ukraine rose to prominence in the public debate. Second, the relations of Europe and its allies with Russia have changed almost overnight (Mehrer and Puglierin 2023). The ties have been deteriorating already during the last decade. The invasion rendered any prior aspirations of organising European security together with Russia in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood futile. Instead, even strong advocates for diplomatic solutions and rapprochement in countries such as France and Germany had to concede that an antagonistic relationship with Moscow will dominate the foreseeable future.

The third change concerns the future of the international order. The war accelerated the already existing fractures in the relations between global powers. On

the one side, a political US-led “West”, including Europeans and their partners in Asia, is solidifying and increasingly worried about the spread of authoritarianism. They are confronted with a partnership between China and Russia on the other side, which has remained stable despite power imbalances and different perspectives on the invasion of Ukraine. Yet, this dualism does not capture the complexity of global politics well. The *Zeitenwende* has elevated the agency of the countries of the so-called global south, whose position on the war in Ukraine and towards the two big power blocs might determine the shape of the order (Schirm 2023).

Where is the EU's foreign and security in all of this? The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is the EU's main framework for decision-making and policy implementation and reflects the ambition of EU member states to project their interests and values externally (Helwig 2023). Born in the 1990s and operationalised in the 2000s, it was conceived in a different world marked by the narrative of the end of history and the effectiveness of multilateralism. It now must face a harsher reality. This article argues that the EU's foreign and security policy is in a state of culture shock. The EU is displaced in a fundamentally new and largely unfamiliar international environment for which its past modes of operation and behavioural patterns are unsuited. While it was able to improvise in the first year of the war and repurpose its instruments to meet the urgency of the crisis, the EU needs to further adapt to the new reality in order to cope with the challenges of the *Zeitenwende*.

To make the argument, the article will proceed as follows. First, it will briefly review the CFSP development in the past thirty years, which was marked by reactive rather than proactive policies and top-down institutional engineering. The EU ultimately missed its opportunity to spark the creation of a joint European strategic culture that would prepare it for operating in the current geopolitical and contested environment. A strategic culture can be understood as norms and preferences related to the use of armed force shared among the most influential actors and social groups within a political community. It therefore influences what is regarded as acceptable foreign-policy behaviour (based on Meyer 2005; Biehl et al. 2013). Second, the article will review selected activities of the EU after the Russian invasion and make the argument that the EU is still improvising and running in a largely reactive and ultimately unsustainable crisis mode. The final section will discuss the prospects for the development of a genuine European strategic culture.

## 2 The “before”: A foreign and security policy without a joint strategic culture

Reactive patterns and tendencies for top-down institutional engineering were already visible during the first foreign policy tests in the late 1990s. The war in Kosovo prompted European partners to develop distinct capacities for crisis management and to create what should later morph into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). France and the UK declared in 1998 in St Malo the ambition for the EU to become a credible crisis management actor that can scramble troops and deploy them out of area. However, despite the activism of the two states, the founding moment of the CSDP was not grounded in a joint strategic culture. The UK

was hoping to promote defence ambitions in Europe beyond lofty rhetoric, while France envisioned autonomous capabilities for actions independent from the US. The bigger strategic questions on the EU's position in the international order were not tackled.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, the unresolved strategic differences resurfaced. While the UK and other "Atlanticist" member states supported the US invasion, a "Europeanist" group around Germany and France was worried about the repercussions of the US invasion for the stability of the region and the credibility of the rules-based international order (Menon and Lipkin 2003). The EU crafted the 2003 European Security Strategy under the lead of CFSP High Representative Javier Solana in order to bridge these divides. With its emphasis on effective multilateralism, strategic partnerships and civilian and military crisis management, it foreshadowed the main pillars of the EU's approach to the outside world in the coming decade.

At first, these policies yielded results. The EU initiated the E3+3 format for the Iran nuclear negotiations (headed by the High Representative for the CFSP and involving Germany, France and the UK from the EU plus the US, China, and Russia) to solve the simmering crisis through diplomatic means. The growing number of civilian and military crisis management missions in the EU's wider neighbourhood put its presence on the international map. However, inbuilt in the EU's approach was also a fallacy that the age of geopolitics is over, and that major power relations will not anymore be marked by strategic competition, but by pragmatic cooperation. The 2014 Ukraine crisis showed the continuity of multilateral problem-solving-reflex that led to the well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective Minsk agreement. Despite the growing role of sanctions in the EU's toolkit, larger strategic lessons for EU's foreign and security policy were not drawn.

Instead, the late 2000s and early 2010s were marked by attempts of top-down institutional engineering with the aim to make the EU a more efficient global actor. The Lisbon treaty innovations, including the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Foreign Affairs Council and the double-hatted position of High Representative/Commission Vice-President, provided the EU with structures to organise diplomacy and foreign policy in a more coherent and consistent manner (Wessels and Bopp 2008). On the security side, the European Council together with the Commission initiated reforms to enhance EU's military capabilities in crisis management triggered by the inept reaction to the 2011 war in Libya. Ultimately, the institutional approach to the reform of the EU's foreign and security policy reached its limits. It did not alter the largely national focus of member states and hence the progress remained piecemeal.

The EU's wake-up call came with the double-shock of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 (Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2019). While previous challenges could be reduced to regional crises, Trump's views on the transatlantic alliance and international cooperation and the UK's decision to leave the EU questioned the operating system that the external relations of the EU was based on. The ideas of the positive force of EU integration and the benefits of rules-based global cooperation were the basis for EU's external action. In particular, the growing US ambition to decouple from China, moved the EU in an uncomfortable

spot where it had to reassess the close economic ties with Beijing. The contestation of international norms of cooperation and the emerging great power competition prompted a geopolitical reckoning of EU institutions, famously captured in Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announcement of a “geopolitical Commission”. Strategic autonomy became a key catch phrase in the EU debate that translated the new challenges in the geopolitical environment into policy adjustments in different areas of EU's economic and foreign policy.

However, the strategic autonomy concept captured an ambition rather than reality, as the EU was neither autonomous, nor very strategic yet (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022). A joint strategic culture that would serve as a frame for EU practitioners and policy makers and enable action in times of crises, was still missing. Instead, the EU was stuck in “survival mode” (Schuette and Dijkstra 2023), rather focused on defending the old ways of international cooperation, than actively promoting alternatives.

### 3 The “after”: Improvising and geopolitical repurposing

Despite warnings from the US and Central and Eastern European member states, the EU had up until the 24th of February 2022 stuck to a biased assessment of Russia's intentions in Ukraine. The visits of the German Chancellor and the French President in the weeks before the Russian invasion were the last attempts for a diplomatic solution to the crisis. In hindsight, they became prime examples of the ill-fated trust of Europeans in the power of economic interdependence and rules-based conflict resolution. The stoicism with which French and German diplomacy operated in the run-up, makes the quick EU reaction to the invasion quite remarkable. In a special European Council meeting on the day of the invasion, the heads of state and government condemned the Russian attack in strongest terms. In their conclusion, EU leaders placed the “full responsibility” for the “unprovoked and unjustified military aggression” on Russia and vowed that the EU would stand in solidarity with Ukraine (European Council 2022). As Brigid Laffan (2023) observed, by this member states managed to set a strong “collective frame” (p. 6) that would guide EU's further action in the crisis. The Versailles declaration (European Union 2022) two weeks later went further and underlined the “tectonic shifts in European history” and started with the statement that “Russia brought war back to Europe”. For the first time European leaders acknowledged Ukraine's EU membership aspiration by welcoming Kiev to the “European family”. By that the EU set itself a normative commitment that would become difficult to back away from (Jopp 2022; Lippert 2023). EU leaders also came to terms with the wider implications of the *Zeitenwende* as they underlined the need for European sovereignty on defence, energy and the economy.

The EU's short term declaratory adjustments were possible due to factors particular to the Russian invasion. Russia had blatantly violated international law and norms with its military aggression despite the various diplomatic efforts by the EU, NATO and the US in the months before (Maurer et al. 2023). Thus, EU leaders could easily point to the exclusive Russian responsibility. Reported Russian crimes against

humanity in Ukraine, such as the atrocities in Bucha uncovered in April 2022, further solidified a responsibility to act. In addition, the EU had learned through past crises, such as the pandemic and Brexit, the importance to align quickly behind a collective interpretation that guides future action (Laffan 2023).

How to translate the situational assessment into joint action remained a separate challenge, however. The urgency of the crisis did not leave the EU with other possibilities than to make use of the already existing instruments and repurpose them to address the challenges of the war. The European Strategic Compass—under preparation for two years—had to be quickly updated in a last-minute negotiation marathon to incorporate the changing geopolitical context. The final document sharpened the focus on a more regional security role, hybrid and cyber threats and coordinated defence spending (Koenig 2022). It also underlined the primacy of NATO in collective defence. However, the document stayed on the previous chosen path with its ambitions to develop the EU's crisis management toolbox.

As the CFSP and CSDP have a comprehensive understanding of security, the main challenge for the EU was to deal with the clear military dimension of the crisis. Member states together with the European Commission had to repurpose some of the existing instruments to address a continental war (Kaim and Kempin 2023). The most glaring example of the geopolitical repurposing concerned the European Peace Facility (EPF). Established in 2021 as an off-budget instrument to finance joint CSDP operations and provide military support for partner countries, it became the EU's main financial tool to facilitate lethal and non-lethal military aid to Ukraine by EU member states (Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2023). By April 2023 the EU's contribution to Ukraine military aid had reached 4.6bn EUR. This was almost the amount of money that EU member states initially planned to spend in total via the EPF until 2027. It shows how far the EU is willing to stretch its existing instruments to accommodate the support for Ukraine. A small part of the resources was used for the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine). The mission itself also represents a significant adaptation of EU's instruments, as, for the first time, the CSDP operates on EU soil to train Ukrainian soldiers for an ongoing and nearby land war.

Arguably the strongest response of the EU was not military, but economic. By February 2023, the EU had introduced ten sanctions packages against Russia, covering almost every sector of economic or technological importance to Russia, including finance, energy, dual-use goods, and aviation. As with the military aid, the EU showed a remarkable ability to adapt its usual ways of working in order to meet the urgency of the crisis. A new *modus operandi* emerged by which the Cabinet of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen met with groups of member-state ambassadors in so-called “confessionals” over weekends to hammer out the scope and details of sanctions packages (Politico 2022). These sanctions were then publicly announced before they were voted on in the Council. The new system sidestepped the very thorough—but also slow and ‘leaky’—decision-making process in the Council hierarchy. The Commission took the agency of the process, which partly reflected the centrality of sectoral sanctions organised by its services compared to most other sanctions regimes. Yet, the power grab also paid testament to the leadership claims of Ursula von der Leyen.

The biggest challenges ahead for the CFSP might concern its bread-and-butter business: diplomacy. The EU diplomatic machinery, including the EEAS with its delegations around the world and in cooperation with member state embassies, initially adapted quite well to the new environment. The large majorities for the UN General Assembly votes on condemning Russia's invasion and excluding it from the Human Rights Council (HRC) can be seen as successes. European diplomats with the help of the US had rallied the majorities in the first months of the war. However, the votes also hold a cautionary tale. The medium powers in the "Global South" did not readily sign up to the EU perspective on the war. Among others, India, South Africa, and Vietnam consistently abstained, while Brazil, Indonesia, Singapore and Mexico held back on Russia's HRC ejection. Many countries in the Global South are hedging their bets in a shifting global order. The operational environment for EU diplomacy had already become more contested, with the US following an instrumental approach to international cooperation, and China questioning the values enshrined in the UN Charter. The EU is forced to re-evaluate the effectiveness of multilateralism and instead has to become more strategic in navigating international diplomacy (Helwig 2022).

What happens after the initial phase of the EU's culture shock, when the short-term strategies to cope with the altered international environment wear off? Signs are that the current mode of operating is not sustainable. There are limits to which the EPF as an off-budget instrument for crisis management can be stretched to address the military needs of a land war. First reports of accounting difficulties and disagreements have already emerged. While the Commissions' leadership on sanctions was effective in crisis times, it does not represent a viable model in the future. The challenge of sanctions circumvention shows that it is challenging to get member states to follow through with implementation and monitoring. Moreover, while the EU is celebrating diplomatic achievements in the UN general assembly, the multilateral system remains contested. What will be the broader lessons for the future?

#### **4 From "culture shock" to "strategic culture"?**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revealed an underlying shortcoming of the EU, namely that it lacks a joint European strategic culture that would allow it to operate effectively in this new contested and geopolitical environment. Member-state elites were not widely sharing norms and preference related to the use of armed force when Russia attacked Ukraine. The EU had not developed a joint understanding of threat perception ("east" vs "south"), alliance politics (Europeanist vs. Atlanticist) or the use of force (civilian vs. military instruments). However, these security related questions not only matter in response to the war, but also with regards to the wider external action of the EU and how it positions itself in the geopolitical competition. Should the EU become a more strategically autonomous actor from the US? To what extent should it use economic coercive instruments in its foreign policy? Without a joint understanding of key security challenges, these kinds of questions remain difficult to answer.

Strategic cultures are based on the geography, history and societal beliefs of a given community—usually assumed to be a state—and thus only develop and change over long periods of time. Every now and then, however, a big external shock—such as the experience of war—can act as a “formative moment” (Heiselberg 2003; as cited in Greathouse 2010) and challenge existing beliefs in fundamental ways by exposing decision-makers and society to a continuous stream of information that runs counter the established narrative. Arguably, the war in Ukraine can serve as such a formative moment and help developing a new historical narrative and joint understanding of the EU in its strategic environment.

Some developments in Europe point toward that direction. The threat perception across EU countries has arguably aligned within the last year, with member states in Europe’s south now paying more attention to territorial defence against Russia. On alliance politics, the invasion has caused a historic popular opinion shift in Finland and Sweden to join NATO and put an end to their decades long tradition of staying outside of formal military alliance structures. The acceptance of military means as a tool in international relations has also shifted, with the prime example being Germany. While for decades, military investments had been seen as a minor priority and unpopular with voters, Germany is now planning a turnaround. The need for robust military deterrence in Europe has become a widely accepted and shared policy goal. The shifts of member-state strategic cultures have implications for the EU, which has to adjust its policies accordingly.

However, some discussion in the EU still show that Europe has a long way to go in establishing a joint strategic culture. Disagreements on the future China policy persist with some member state governments (France) still operating on the assumption that economic interdependence is ultimately a positive force, while others (Central and Eastern Europeans) more readily sign up to the competitive approach advocated by the US. Indeed, relations with the US and a possibly more autonomous European stance continue to divide Europeans. While Central and Eastern European member states see the idea of strategic autonomy as settled, given the lifeline support that the US provided to Ukraine and European deterrence, others—in particular France—still warn of an overreliance and dependency on the transatlantic ally. The looming 2024 US election could in all likelihood bring back an alliance critical US President and in turn elevate the Europeanist voices in the debate à la Macron.

The question is not only if the EU manages to develop a strategic culture, but what form it will take. Based on the current experience of war and the kind of military response that it triggers, a “hard” strategic culture focused on military tools and security seems a likely scenario. A European military identity would quite fundamentally change the traditional role of the EU as a civilian power (Mustasilta 2022). While the Union might never fight wars itself, it would provide (and does so already) lethal support to countries around the world and support member states in their defence procurement. A military power EU, combined with a more isolationist course towards other players, such as China, might make its traditional normative approach in defence of European values worldwide more difficult (Youngs 2021).



## 5 From “normative” to “normal” power EU?

This article made the argument that we can witness a transitional phase of the EU right now marked by a culture shock. The EU repurposed with much success its current toolkit to meet the demands in a suddenly altered environment. However, after the initial coping phase, the long-term adjustment will start. The results of this reorientation are still uncertain, including the open question of a joint strategic culture in the wake of the war.

The *Zeitenwende* possibly marks a start for a new research agenda for the EU's international role. The first publications post-February-24, this one included, are mostly taking stock of the initial EU response without being able to draw larger conclusions on its further development. However, it becomes more and more clear that the primary and secondary effects of the Russian invasion on the geopolitical environment are very profound and will challenge the EU's international activities in fundamental ways. This will require a critical reflection on how scholars have conceived the EU in the literature so far, mostly as a bit of an exceptional civilian or normative power in an uncivilised world. A more geopolitically-minded—or “normal”—EU will, however, prompt antagonistic responses from third countries. The EU will need to position itself vis-à-vis competing interests and ordering visions in the rest of the world.

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