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# The EU-Ukraine Security & Defense Cooperation: Think Bigger, Act Bolder

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*Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has pushed security and defence cooperation between the European Union and Ukraine into new territory. Military assistance, an aspect of bilateral cooperation quasi-dormant before the war, has undergone a profound transformation. Although military assistance has grown significantly in scope, however, it remains reactive and mainly driven by the immediate defensive needs of Ukraine. EU-Ukrainian cooperation in the security and defence field needs a strategic reappraisal that examines the next stages of the war and far beyond. The EU needs to make military aid to Ukraine sustainable in the medium to long term. It should endow Ukraine with the capabilities required to liberate all its territory, and in future to be able to deter and, if necessary, repel any renewed Russian aggression. The EU should also fully institutionalize its cooperation with battle hardened Ukraine in order to absorb its war-time experience and integrate its armed forces into Europe's crisis management initiatives.*

## Lessons From the Past

EU-Ukrainian cooperation on security and defence has grown slowly for the past two decades. A first impulse came in the 2000s in the wake of the Orange Revolution while the second big impulse came in the mid-2010s in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine. The third impulse came in 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. EU-Ukrainian security and defence cooperation is currently in the midst of perhaps its most consequential transformation. In the span of 11 months of war, the EU provided massive lethal aid for the first time, while setting up a military training mission for Ukraine's soldiers (the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine) and sharing geospatial intelligence.

With the benefit of hindsight, what lessons can the EU draw from the past? How should these inform future security policy on Ukraine?

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<sup>1</sup> The text is written in a private capacity and does not reflect the views of the European Union.

### *Self-restraint out, deterrence in*

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU's engagement with Ukraine in the security and defence field had been guided by the logic of self-restraint. Each time a demand for closer cooperation was made in Kyiv, the EU response was cautious and progress incremental. Moreover, the EU mainly channelled cooperation with Ukraine towards soft security threats rather than hard security challenges. Even when the EU expanded cooperation to area of hard security in 2021, its first package of assistance from the European Peace Facility (EPF) to Ukraine envisaged only provision of non-lethal assistance. The expectation in Brussels was that the EU's self-restraint in Ukraine would be mirrored to a certain extent by Russia. On the contrary, on numerous occasions Moscow systematically took advantage of the EU's self-restraint. In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, Russia militarized the peninsula and initiated the construction of a chain of military bases in Ukraine's proximity. Both served as staging grounds for the full-scale invasion in 2022. What ultimately constrained Russia's ability to prosecute war in Ukraine was not the EU's self-restraint but its provision of lethal aid. In future years, Russia's (non)restraint vis-à-vis Ukraine will largely depend on the latter's capacity to deter and, if necessary, fight back. The EU and its member states have an essential role to play in building and maintaining Ukraine's deterrence potential vis-à-vis Russia after the war.

### *Be proactive not reactive*

The EU's approach to cooperation with Ukraine in the security and defence domain has often been reactive. The EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Ukraine was deployed in 2014 in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, and its regional coverage was expanded to Mariupol only in 2020 in response to Russia's attack on and seizure of three Ukrainian naval ships sailing from the Black Sea to the Azov Sea. The EU's reactive approach ceded the initiative to a third party, making Russia an agenda setter in Ukraine and in the wider region. This reactive approach on hard security issues had an even bigger disadvantage: the EU now faced a fait accompli on ground sealed militarily by Russia. In such conditions restoration of the status quo becomes more difficult and costly. The EU's above-mentioned responses in 2014 and 2020, while assisting Ukraine's internal strengthening, had no potential to restore the status quo. The EU's unprecedented response in 2022 has more chance of bringing about the desired results but at a much higher cost. Looking ahead, the EU should take the initiative and develop forward-looking cooperation with Ukraine. This will be an important factor in constraining Russia's regional policy options regardless of who is in charge in the Kremlin.

### *A piecemeal approach is costly and ineffective*

In many instances, albeit reactively, the EU has demonstrated the right instincts in the security field. What ultimately diluted the effectiveness of its response were piecemeal measures backed by insufficient funding. In response to Russia's military exercises and build-up near Ukraine's border in 2021, the EU began an internal discussion on a military training mission for Ukraine. However, the EU could only agree (on the cusp of Russia's invasion) on an advisory mission to support professional military education. While this will be very useful in the long run, such a mission would have had no immediate impact on the combat readiness of Ukraine's armed forces. In another instance, in December 2021 the EU included Ukraine in the EPF, allocating €31 million over three years. The amount earmarked, however, was nowhere near the level Ukraine needed to ward off the coming threat from Russia. The EU ultimately launched a military training mission for Ukraine and allocated €3.1 billion in lethal aid in 2022, but only after Russia's full-scale invasion. The EU could have provided training and defensive weapons before the invasion, and earlier provision of military assistance would have put Ukraine in a much better defensive position than it was in February 2022. The EU often only acts in moments of acute crisis, such as Russia's war against Ukraine. Such crises are often necessary, however, in order to justify the high costs of breaking political taboos.

## Strategic Reappraisal

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion, the EU made a significant leap forward in its security and defence cooperation with Ukraine. To the surprise of many in Moscow, the EU proved that it can act rapidly and decisively in the face of high costs. This new-found confidence and determination should be sustained but also transformed into a more proactive and forward-leaning approach. The EU needs to shift from crisis mode, addressing the immediate security needs of Ukraine, to a more forward-looking posture. A future-oriented approach should have three components.

First, the war in Ukraine is seemingly transitioning to a new stage. Over the summer and autumn, Kyiv has slowed Russia's advance and made progress in liberating its territory (Kharkiv and Kherson oblast'). Ukraine is preparing for new offensives. The EU should plan, allocate resources and supply Ukraine with military platforms that can support its push to liberate its territory. This means the provision of more armour artillery and ammunition, as well as air defences. It will also require greater maintenance efforts to keep donated equipment in service. The transition to more offensive operations will require the training of Ukrainian soldiers in combined arms and joint manoeuvre, which is essential for successful offensives. To make deliveries of equipment sustainable, the EU and its members states will have to pool resources. EUMAM Ukraine and the planned expansion of an ammunition factory in Romania funded by Germany are positive developments. More such cooperative solutions will be needed to put aid to Ukraine on a sustainable footing.

Second, even if Kyiv manages to fully de-occupy Ukraine, there is a high risk that Russia will try to reconstitute and resume its aggression in the future. Long after the war has ended, Ukraine will need defence assistance that would make it prohibitively costly for Russia to violate Ukraine's sovereignty again. The EU will have to provide economic assistance not only to rebuild the country, but also to ensure that Ukraine can defend its citizens and economic infrastructure from missile and drone attacks. EU assistance to build multi-layered air defence and naval protection should be key priorities not only in the present, but also in the future. To ensure effective air defence of the country, plans for the modernization of Ukraine's fighter jet fleet have to begin sooner rather than later.

Third, battle-hardened Ukraine has great potential to contribute to and strengthen the EU's capacity to perform as a security actor. Ukraine could transfer invaluable accumulated experience that would improve Europe's conventional and cyber defences. Urban warfare, counterintelligence and counter-sabotage operations, as well as the defence of critical infrastructure against simultaneous kinetic and cyberattacks are just a few critical areas where the transfer of practical knowledge could have great added value for Europe in updating the military training of EU member states' troops. Europe's defence industry could also benefit significantly. Ukraine could provide insights on how donated equipment performed under duress, share the technical parameters and weak points of advanced Russian equipment captured during the war and be part of future joint defence industrial projects. Last but not the least, Ukraine could make a significant contribution to the EU's rapid intervention capacities aimed at managing crises and providing emergency evacuation of EU citizens from war zones. Back in August 2021, Ukraine's Special Operation Forces conducted an extremely risky but successful evacuation mission in Afghanistan after US troops had left the country. After the war, Ukraine could re-enforce its participation in EU battlegroups, which it joined several times in the 2010s.

## Policy Recommendations

The EU's security and defence cooperation with Ukraine is at a revolutionary stage. The EU needs to seize the moment to actively shape this relationship with the desired parameters of the immediate and distant future in mind. In addition to providing the sustained assistance needed for Ukraine to prevail, the EU should push for the closer integration of Ukraine into the security and defence realm. With this in mind, the EU should:

- Lift all remaining caveats and fully institutionalize relations between the EU's and Ukraine's security and defence institutions; and establish regular working exchanges modelled on the EU-Ukraine cyber dialogue.
- Include Ukraine in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects in the areas in which Ukraine has expressed an interest and where both sides can benefit the most (e.g., cyber defence, countering drones, and chemical, biological and radiological surveillance).
- Intensify intelligence sharing with Ukraine, notably from the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN) and the EU Satellite Centre (SATCEN), without geographical caveats.
- Expand defence industrial cooperation with the aim of initiating multiple joint defence production projects with Ukraine.
- Take account of defence imperatives in the process of designing transport infrastructure modernization projects to link Ukraine with the EU. Infrastructure has to be able to sustain increased military traffic.



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