

PREFACE

Preparing Europe for a more dangerous world

Security is the foundation on which everything is built

The European Union's security environment has in many ways taken a turn for the worse in recent years. The world is more dangerous and crisis-prone. The continuation of peace cannot be taken for granted and security cannot be seen as a given, as is manifested by the increasing damage caused by climate change. We must be better prepared, not only to survive, but also to thrive in this new reality. This calls for an overhaul of the way we Europeans see the Union's role in keeping us all secure.

The objective of European integration after the Second World War was to create lasting peace among its members. It was seen that only peace and security make development and people's well-being possible. This created a new European spirit and a new idea of cooperation that has taken long steps forward. This is a great achievement of the countries and the community that form today's EU.

Despite all the wars, conflicts and disasters that have taken place in the EU's neighbourhood and beyond, the EU and its Member States have been secure from immediate existential threats since the end of the Cold War.

During the first decades after the Cold War, it became easy to think that security is not something that is a very present concern in our daily lives. Yet, in fact, we need security for everything. This applies equally to individuals, communities, States, and the whole European Union. We cannot see and feel security when we have it, which makes its loss all the more dramatic and painful.

At the start of this decade, Europe has woken up to a new reality. The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis of a nature and magnitude for which all Member States and the EU as a whole were insufficiently prepared. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine showed that it takes two to maintain peace, but only one to start a war. Russia's invasion also underlined Putin's long-held perception that the West and Western people are weak. Moreover, the increasing damage caused by extreme weather events is forcing Europeans to ask not only how climate change will affect future generations, but also what we need to prepare for today.

The structures, processes and legal basis of the EU have been created over decades without our own security needs at their core. For example, the EU's common foreign, security and defence policies, as well as cooperation on internal security, were all launched in the 1990's when direct threats to the EU were perceived to be at a historic low. What's more, the gravity of the threat of climate change for our livelihoods and way of life had not yet been fully understood.

The optimism of that time stands in sharp contrast to today's security environment. This is increasingly shaped by great power competition and the readiness of authoritarian States to use violence to assert their territorial or political claims. In addition, instrumentalised migration and, for example, disruptions to global supply chains underline the multifaceted nature of threats. We need to make sure our legislation, working methods and tools match the challenges we face. However, at its heart, preparedness is an attitude.

A new mindset to preparedness

The need for better preparedness forces us to consider our mindset and even our values, and how to defend them from a new perspective.

A prerequisite for preparedness is to understand that security is the foundation of everything we hold dear. Security is a public good – the most important thing that everyone needs. It is the precondition for maintaining our values, as well as being a necessity for our economic success and competitiveness. If we lose security, it takes with it our well-being and our plans for the future.

Our democratic political systems and rule of law are based on the protection of individuals' rights and the provision of a broad open space for people to exercise their freedoms. This open space is exploited by malicious actors, as we constantly see in the diverse hybrid operations conducted against us.

Open societies provide both an ideal model for individuals to exercise their rights and a perfect opportunity to hurt us. A key underlying question that has guided the preparation of this report is how to protect our values without undermining them in the process.

Lenin instructed the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war to 'probe with bayonets: If you find mush you continue. If you find steel you stop'. A hundred years on, today's opportunistic actors use the same method. They target us by looking for weaknesses in our protection, take advantage of our political divisions, any lack of social cohesion and harmful economic dependencies, trying to weaponise anything they can against us. In being well prepared, a fundamental requirement is not to be an easy target.

A change in mindset is needed to build the trust that allows us to do this as the whole of society.

This change needs to take place across the full spectrum of the EU's activities. Preparedness requires a high level of trust between public authorities, Member States, EU institutions, the private sector, and civil society. Ultimately, preparedness begins and ends with the trust of citizens that the political community they live in is worth protecting and defending. Evolving threats, such as the sabotage of critical infrastructure and cyberattacks, continue to bring private and public actors' security interests ever closer. The systematic sharing of information and experiences is crucial for further deepening trust between different actors to prepare for and address these threats together.

Leaders have a responsibility to articulate clearly to citizens the threats we need to be prepared for. Raising public awareness of the risk landscape without creating panic and involving citizens more closely in building security is of paramount importance. We have several good examples of this in Europe. New options are currently being considered in many Member States – not only in the form of conscription, but also through other legal obligations citizens have to contribute to security and preparedness in different capacities. Voluntary engagement and participation in the activities of civil society organisations should also be further encouraged in this context. More active involvement can be asked when citizens trust that their leaders are prepared to keep them secure and are able to protect them throughout any crisis.

A common interest like preparedness requires common responsibility. Each individual has a stake in building and maintaining security, for example by choosing what kind of information sources we trust. Understanding everyone's responsibility for their own security and that of those closest to them makes it easier to accept the actions and investment needed from Member States and the EU to build stronger preparedness.

EU citizens are already expressing clearly their expectations for the Union to become a stronger security actor. In a Eurobarometer poll conducted across Member States in spring this year, for example, 77% of respondents confirmed their support for the EU's common security and defence policy and 71% stated that they want the EU to do more to reinforce the production of military equipment.

There is also an increasing awareness of the need for preparedness for disasters on a personal level. In a September 2024 Eurobarometer, 58% of respondents replied that they did not consider themselves well prepared for a crisis in the area where they live. Almost two-thirds feel that they need more information to prepare for disasters and emergencies.

Single security

EU Member States have a legal and moral obligation under the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 42.7) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Art. 222) to show solidarity and support one another during crises. However, these legal commitments have not been fully transformed into an attitude where security is seen as something shared across the EU.

Security is understandably perceived very much in a regional context. For example, the threat of Russian aggression is felt most acutely by its immediate neighbours. Worsening droughts, flooding, and other manifestations of climate change are most acute concerns in those areas where they have already been experienced. In reality, the most serious threats we need to be prepared for come with wide-ranging consequences that cross borders. Their impact cannot be prevented without common action.

We must understand that a threat to the sovereignty of any Member State affects the integrity of all others in the Union as well. The territorial integrity and political independence of every Member State is inextricably linked with that of other Member States, and the EU as a whole. If one Member State loses its security, it poses a problem for the others too.

Our societies, economies, physical and digital infrastructure, and networks needed to move goods, services, money, information and people are deeply integrated. This deep integration is not only what makes our Single Market function and enables our prosperity. It also needs to be seen as a tool that enables us to prepare for and work efficiently and systematically together during crises to address shared threats with common solutions.

The EU is key to better preparedness

The EU has already proven to be indispensable in crises that are too large for any Member State to prepare for and overcome individually. The Union's role was instrumental in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, including the rapid development and successful distribution of vaccines, and in organising Member States' support for Ukraine.

Yet, in responding to the pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, our action was initially focus on reacting to shocks with ad hoc solutions and improvisation. We need to move from reaction to proactive preparedness.

For the EU to be a fully fledged security actor, it must be prepared to maintain its own vital societal and institutional functions under all circumstances. It must be able to take decisions and implement them in the chaotic conditions of a major disaster. To provide support to the regions most in need, key functions of the EU, including the Single Market, must be kept operational no matter what to avoid competition for scarce resources between Member States, uncoordinated closures of internal borders, and other hindrances to efficient common action. This is a key demand in preparing for armed aggression and other most extreme threat scenarios.

Greater preparedness cannot be built by trying to isolate ourselves from the outside world. We must address external threats from a position of strength together with partners across the globe in ways that uphold and strengthen the rules-based international order. The EU's diplomacy must be geared to take the shared security interests we have with third countries more fully into account, and concentrate even more on addressing and eradicating where possible the root causes of external risks for our security. We must prepare for different threats by working beyond our closest like-minded partners to support the resilience of third countries and cooperate with them in ways that at the same time benefit our own preparedness.

Preparedness is a matter of credibility. Insufficient preparedness amid increasing threats weakens the trust that citizens place in public authorities. If there are doubts about our ability to function and deliver

during a major crisis, it will also diminish our value in the eyes of partners. Equally, inadequate preparedness invites malicious and opportunistic actors to target us to an even greater extent.

The fact that all Member States find themselves in the same boat sailing in choppy waters applies to our security as much as to our economy. The fundamental need to improve our competitiveness was recently highlighted in the report by Special Adviser Mario Draghi. The link between competitiveness and security works both ways, and is of particular importance taking into account that the EU's share of the world economy and its population are shrinking. Only a Europe that is competitive economically is able to keep itself secure and influence global developments, rather than merely adapting to them, and to provide the best environment for businesses to grow and succeed.

The current state of the EU's preparedness

Today, the EU is more able to deal with major crises and disasters than it was five years ago. Important pieces of legislation, mechanisms and tools across different policy areas, including health security, cybersecurity, defence and critical infrastructure resilience, have been developed or reinforced.

However, the multifaceted changes in our security environment have outpaced the speed of our action.

Despite the significant improvements in many sectors, there is an urgent need to enhance preparedness for all hazards and our readiness for major crises and disasters in a strategic way. We need to be prepared to deal with several major crises that may be connected, taking into account that crises do not occur in silos, or in orderly succession.

We need better preparedness to ensure that in the future the EU will not be taken by surprise by events we should have seen coming. Any major crisis includes unexpected elements, but the better prepared we are for anything that we can reasonably anticipate, the more capable we will be to deal with unforeseeable events.

This report proposes a step change in the way we think about and act on preparedness in the EU. For many years already, the EU has developed preparedness capabilities in individual sectors, in particular in the fields of civil protection and disaster management. Instruments, such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, have proven their value in practice. This is a good basis to build on, but looking at the EU as a whole in a deteriorating global security environment, two gaps are particularly evident:

- × We do not have a clear plan on what the EU will do in the event of armed aggression against a Member State. The threat of war posed by Russia to European security forces us to address this as a centrepiece of our preparedness, without undermining the work to prepare for other major threats. This includes those connected to disruptions to the global economy, disasters driven by climate change, or another pandemic.
- × We do not have comprehensive capacity to bring all necessary EU resources together in a coordinated manner across institutional and operational silos to prepare for – and if needed, act – in response to major cross-sectoral and cross-border shocks and crises.

Preparedness is still often misunderstood as a separate policy area, or something that would cover only certain aspects of the EU's functions. Instead, it must become a way of thinking, planning and acting that cuts across all sectors. While there must be clarity of leadership, organisation and coordination structures inside and between the EU institutions, everyone under the 'EU umbrella' should be involved and tasked with taking responsibility for preparedness within their own areas of responsibility.

Preparedness is built with actions instead of words. A realistic understanding of what we are currently capable of doing in the most challenging scenarios is necessary to understand where greater efforts must be made.

We must also be able to analyse threats and threat actors with greater accuracy. Making better use of intelligence analysis and foresight in the EU's policy planning and decision-making enables us to do so. For example, recognising earlier Russia's ability to mobilise its war economy and limit – or at least postpone – economic hardships could have underlined the urgency of our efforts to arm Ukraine, and to estimate sooner and more accurately the scale of long-term support needed during a protracted war.

Our ability to prepare for and act to tackle major threats is currently constrained by institutional, legal and political limitations that make it too difficult to bring relevant actors together quickly to address threats and manage a major crisis. One particular example is that defence and military security is still handled in the EU, to a large extent on a national basis, and in isolation from other fields of EU policy. Due to these limitations, developing new military capabilities urgently needed in Europe is slower, at a smaller scale, and more expensive than it should be.

This divide must be bridged in our structures and our mindset. Most crises are not military in nature and militaries alone do not offer all solutions. Yet, in preparing for the most significant security threats, including armed aggression with all its consequences, the link between militaries and civilian authorities and the rest of our societies must function effectively. This is also a key demand for EU-NATO cooperation in the preparedness context and an issue on which several Member States are currently working to create national models for enhanced cross-sectoral preparedness, and the ability to act in the event of war and other major crises.

Preparedness to maintain peace

We need preparedness and strength not to wage war, but to maintain peace. The risk of Russian aggression beyond Ukraine cannot be excluded. Preparing for this risk is not escalatory in any way, but rather intends to discourage Russia or any other actor from targeting the Union and its Member States. Improving the defence capabilities of EU Member States is necessary to ensure that they are able to support one another in line with their obligations under the EU treaty and contribute to a strengthened deterrence.

The EU is one of Ukraine's most important supporters when putting together military, economic and humanitarian aid, and we have a lot to learn from its brave defence against Russia. Ukrainians are fighting against a combination of hybrid and conventional means of warfare in all domains. Ukraine has, for instance, learned to use intelligence efficiently to support decision-making, to bring new technological innovation, such as inexpensive drones, rapidly to the front; to acquire massive amounts of weaponry and ammunition, and to train and mobilise hundreds of thousands of troops. It is showing every day what defence in a long war of attrition against an aggressor like Russia demands. This war also underscores the significant gaps Member States have in their own military readiness.

Stepping up our defence readiness and industrial capacity must take into account that 23 out of 27 EU Member States are NATO allies. NATO is the foundation of its members' collective defence and the bedrock of Europe's security to military threats. However, aggression against an EU Member State belonging to NATO would also fundamentally affect the EU as a whole. This would require a response deploying all the EU's tools and resources across policy areas from agriculture to space, and the economy to diplomacy.

When the EU Member States belonging to NATO fully meet their obligations as NATO Allies, they will be able to make a stronger contribution to a 'more European NATO'. NATO's European members must be ready to fill any gaps and additional needs created by changes in the global security environment, for example if the US would commit an increasing share of its military resources to the Asia-Pacific region. Cooperation within the EU is key to enabling the creation and production of the additional capabilities this would require. While the EU and NATO are separate, they share the goal of keeping Europe secure.

In preparing for military aggression against an EU Member State and a NATO ally, we must ensure that the two organisations are ready to work hand in hand, have a clear division of tasks, and see how

collective defence under Article 5 and measures in the EU mutually complement and strengthen each other in the best way. As Ukraine's example also shows, no military defence can be successful without keeping the economy running, providing basic services and critical goods for civilians, ensuring the mobility and communication of the military and other crisis actors, while supporting the resilience of citizens and society.

A European approach to comprehensive preparedness

This report proposes a conceptual and practical approach to comprehensive preparedness for the EU. It presents the evolving threat landscape from the point of view of preparedness and makes concrete recommendations to enhance the Union's level of preparedness and readiness to act in major crises, as called for by the European Council in its Conclusions from March 2024 and with a view to President von der Leyen's 2024-2029 Political Guidelines for the next European Commission.

In the context of this report, preparedness refers to the EU's ability to:

- × anticipate
- × prevent
- × withstand; and
- × respond to major threats or crises that a) concern the EU as a whole, or more than one Member State with broad cross-border and cross-sectoral effects; and b) are of a magnitude and complexity that require resources and policies beyond national capacities.

A sufficient level of preparedness for any threat must be measured by three criteria:

- × how serious the threat and its potential consequences are;
- × how likely the threat is to materialise; and
- × what capabilities and actions are needed to prepare for it.

Preparedness is not about an 'either/or' choice between preparing or not preparing for different types of threats. The focus of EU-level measures needs to be on the most severe scenarios. These pose many similar requirements for the Union's ability to function and contribute to the protection of citizens under exceptional and difficult circumstances, irrespective of the nature and origin of a particular threat.

Preparedness must start by analysing the full spectrum of threats against which we must be able to protect the Union and its Member States. Chapter 2 of this report deals with the current threat landscape and assesses key trends for the years ahead.

From chapter 2, the report provides short analyses and key recommendations on how to systematically strengthen the EU's preparedness, ranging from addressing immediate needs to mid and long-term processes. The EU Treaties provide the necessary legal basis for comprehensive and much more ambitious preparedness. All proposals are made in keeping with the competence of Member States as defined in the Treaties concerning their responsibilities in matters of national security, and in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

When making recommendations for future action, the starting point of this report is to build on the means we already have in the EU to support in different ways our preparedness, while also recognising the gaps where new tools and solutions are needed.

Being adequately prepared for major threats requires working according to a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach. These frequently repeated terms mean in practice the ability to develop and use in a concerted and coordinated fashion all the necessary tools and resources across different policy areas, while engaging the private sector, civil society organisations, and citizens.

Preparedness for today and tomorrow's threats cannot be built in silos, country by country, or separately in different sectors of government. Comprehensive preparedness requires interaction. For example, cybersecurity risks concern both public authorities and private companies in similar ways. Preparing for them must be done together as closely as possible, taking advantage of the information and legal means available to public authorities and the technical know-how and capabilities of private companies. The role of civil society organisations is also crucial, for example in raising awareness and training the skills and preparedness measures every individual needs.

Preparedness must also be seen as a key component of deterrence against malicious State actors and their proxies.

Deterrence is not how the EU has traditionally defined its role in security, but in facing a constantly evolving threat landscape, this must change. We must make it as difficult as possible for threat actors to achieve any of their intended objectives. In addition, preventing or even limiting the increasing sabotage and other hybrid operations requires that perpetrators face consequences that are much more severe than they are today. Perceptions matter, perhaps most importantly in the eyes of threat actors. They still seem to consider the EU weak, slow and disintegrated in our ability to prevent and, in particular, respond to malicious activities, from espionage on our territories to potential threats against our space capabilities, and everything in between.

Pandemic, war and other kinds of long-lasting crises affect all parts of societies and economies, can cause massive numbers of casualties, and challenge the ability of the authorities to provide basic services to citizens. Our preparedness must take into account that the consequences of these most serious threats may not be limited to a temporary disruption of the status quo, but result in profound and irreversible changes to our security environment and societies. Many threats, including hybrid operations, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion and damage caused by climate change, are already taking place continuously. Preparedness is needed to signal to potential adversaries that they will not be able to outlast the EU.

While consensus among all 27 Member States or a qualified majority is the precondition for moving ahead with many of the structural, legislative and organisational changes proposed in this report, we should also be open to launch new initiatives enhancing preparedness, where needed only among willing Member States, to enable faster action.

Together from the lowest to the boldest common denominator

Maintaining peace and providing security that allows people to live in freedom and prosperity remains at the heart of the European project. What in the 20th century was created through integration to eliminate the reasons for conflict between European nations must now be achieved by becoming as prepared as possible to face any threat together with unity, strength and resolve. Preparedness cannot be built on the hope that worst-case scenarios will never materialise.

Member States have at the national level prioritised different threats based on their geography, historical experiences, resources and other factors. These differing threat perceptions should not be a hindrance to being better prepared together. We all need the same core institutional and societal functions, goods and abilities to protect our citizens, regardless of the nature and origin of a specific threat.

Looking at the magnitude of the threats we face, we cannot limit our level of preparedness to what is politically convenient, or where the lowest common denominator between Member States currently lies. This approach will not work, because it will not be enough. We must be able to take more risks together as the EU to limit the national exposure of Member States.

Many of the proposals made in this report will no doubt be difficult to reach consensus on among Member States. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that if we would be faced with an immediate existential threat to our Union, we would not be able to cross the red lines, political sensitivities and mental blocks that under normal circumstances often keep the EU from reaching its full potential. We have already shown in the past years that when crisis hits, we are able to come together. Being prepared in advance for the next event of this kind increases the likelihood of success and diminishes related costs, or in the best case makes it possible to avoid a crisis altogether.

The EU needs to take more strategic responsibility for security in Europe, and this must be fully reflected in our preparedness. This is an important signal to the US and other key partners with whom we have a shared interest to continue and deepen our long-standing close cooperation. If we are not doing everything we can for our own security, we cannot ask anyone else to do it for us. The need for stronger European responsibility for our security will remain beyond individual elections or political cycles in the US. The more we are ready to do together as the EU, the more we can expect our partners to be willing to contribute to our shared preparedness.

Preparedness is a precondition for the EU to have the strength to defend its citizens, interests and values. Only the strong ones will be able to thrive in a dangerous world. Weak ones get pushed around and divided ones are taken advantage of.

Preparedness requires a clear-eyed understanding of this reality, yet it is the opposite of pessimism and hopelessness. Europeans should not forget that we have achieved historic success in developing a social model and a political community that continue to inspire and attract more nations to join our Union, while also offering a chance to disagree and tolerate a plurality of opinions. In today's world, this in itself is worth protecting.

Making the EU better prepared for the risks and threats we face depends on us. We have the necessary financial and other resources to become safer together. The only open question is if we have the political will to prioritise the long-term benefits of a fully prepared EU over its short-term costs. It is also a question of our readiness to change the ways we work together to ensure our ability to respond to cross-border threats with cross-border solutions.

It is high time to put preparedness at the heart of the EU's work. The world around us will not wait for Europe to be ready.

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