ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Organizing European security in yet another geopolitical era: consensus escapism or compartmentalized multilateralism?

Stephanie C. Hofmann[1]

Abstract

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in light of subsequent US administrations looking eastward and/or inward rather than westward, the questions of how, where, and with whom to organize European security and defense have reappeared on the agenda. Policymakers have debated and (dis)agreed over *who* is considered a beneficiary of European security initiatives, *how* to assure security/defense and against what/whom, and *in what way* to relate the many organizations that address European security policy. This forum takes stock of recent security and defense developments that have occurred in the name *of* and *in* Europe. To do so, this forum distinguishes between four types of actors: *architects*, *bricoleurs*, *agnostics*, and *spoilers*. When tracing these actors, what emerges are two alternative approaches to the organization of European security and defense policy: *consensus escapism* and *compartmentalized multilateralism*. No overall orchestration can be detected (yet). This would require architects (a) willing to bear the costs of coalition building, (b) to sideline spoilers or trying to bring them on board, and (c) to convince agnostics to engage more with European security and defense issues. It also would require bricoleurs willing to help implement these architects' organizational blueprints.

Keywords Geopolitics · Ukraine, Russia · United States · Organizational choice · Types of actors

Introduction

Questions about *whether*, *where*, *how,* and *with whom* to organize European security and defense policy have been on the agendas of national governments many times. Over the last seven decades or so, manifold ideas have been proposed, demonstrating

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✉ Stephanie C. Hofmann
   stephanie.hofmann@eui.eu

1   European University Institute, Via Boccaccio 121, 50133 Florence, Italy

that European security and defense policy can be organized in different ways. Actors have debated and (dis)agreed over *who* is considered a beneficiary of European security and defense initiatives, *how* to assure security/defense and against what/whom, and *in what way* to relate the many organizations that address European security and defense policy to one another (Hofmann 2013). While some of their proposals remained only that, others were formally ratified and implemented. This myriad of proposals and organizational innovations encapsulate different security visions and approaches.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, first partially in 2014 and then fully in 2022—and in light of subsequent United States (US) administrations looking eastward and/or inward rather than westward—the question of how, where, and with whom to organize European security and defense has reappeared on the agenda. These unfolding political dynamics can potentially change the ways in which policymakers have organized European security. While crises such as the sovereign debt crisis, Brexit, or the COVID-19 pandemic have tested European policymakers' willingness to invest in European security and defense, Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine and increasing US divestment in the transatlantic relationship have the potential to alter the political calculus of European governments (Hoeffler et al. 2024; Mader et al. 2024). Many European governments announced defense budget increases and Europe's most prominent security organizations gained new members. Denmark joined the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and Finland and Sweden joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These renewed investments and institutional reconfigurations potentially change many parameters that have structured what could be called the European security order, which consists of the relationships between organizations such as the European Union (EU), NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN), as well as many minilateral and bilateral initiatives. Some observers announced that 'the Western security architecture is consolidating' (Biscop 2023, p. 6) even as others question that unity (Youngs 2022).

In this forum, we take stock of recent security and defense developments that have occurred in the name *of* and *in* Europe. We address the questions of how European security and defense is organized in and across individual states, as well as in multilateral security and defense organizations since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the US's decreasing commitment to invest in European security. We furthermore inquire what is at stake for actors in the European security and defense realm, e.g., how do they position themselves *vis-à-vis* other powerful actors such as the US, China, or Russia?

To answer these questions, this forum distinguishes between four types of actors: *architects*, *bricoleurs*, *agnostics*, and *spoilers*. What distinguishes these actors are their different degrees of engagement and investment with European security and defense issues; alongside substantive preferences, they differ in how they define political stakes, what compromises they are willing to make, and what capacities are available to them. Individual contributions demonstrate how these types of actors can be found across European governments (see contributions in this issue by Cadier; Helferich; Onderco and Kühn; Tyushka; and Williams), political parties (see contributions in this issue by Coticchia and by Mastrorocco), parliaments (see

Kakhishvili and Felder, this issue), informal groupings (see Amadio Viceré and Sus, this issue), international bureaucracies such as the European Commission or NATO (Lepeu; Kunertova and Schmitt, this issue), international partners(hips) (Grgić, this issue), and the public (Beetsma, Buti and Nicoli, this issue).

When tracing the actions of these different actors, what emerges are two alternative approaches to the organization of European security and defense policy: *consensus escapism* and *compartmentalized multilateralism*. These approaches encapsulate how European actors differently understand and make use of how, where, and with whom to organize European security and defense. These different organizational options have enabled some European actors to evade meaningful consensus-making by allowing them to forum shop across organizations, while others have pursued brokerage, orchestration, and deference between compartmentalized multilateral initiatives (Hofmann 2019; Abbott et al. 2015; Pratt 2018). As of now, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continually decreasing American commitment to engage with and invest in European security and defense have not changed this, although the risk of bilateral deals with the US government has increased (in particular with the incoming Trump administration of 2025).

In the remainder of this forum introduction, I first elaborate on the conceptual vocabulary mentioned in previous two paragraphs. After presenting this conceptual toolbox, I then discuss previous attempts, failures, and successes in multilaterally organizing European security and defense. This section serves as a reminder that debates over whether, where, how, and with whom to organize European security and defense are recurrent and always (at least partially) geopolitically motivated. Before concluding, I briefly discuss the different dimensions around which contemporary debates are unfolding, an issue which is picked up in much greater detail by the individual forum contributions.

Organizing European security and defense: some conceptual vocabulary

All too often, we think of Europe or the EU as a homogeneous group of actors. However, not all actors take the same approach to engaging in European security and defense matters, if they are even interested in them at all. National governments, EU (or NATO) bureaucrats, and other actors can hold very different opinions about whether to take action and pursue different visions of whether, who (membership), what (mandate), how (organizational design), and where (interorganizational relations) to organize European security. To disentangle whether and, if so, how the Russian invasion of Ukraine and changing relationships with the US have affected the organization of European security, it is useful to classify different actor types and distinguish between diverse approaches to European security organizations and order. Alongside their substantive preferences, actors differ in how they define their stakes, what compromises they are willing to make, and what capacities are available to them. We can distinguish between at least four different types of actors in the European security and defense domain: architects, bricoleurs, agnostics, and spoilers. These actors pursue—more or less forcefully—different approaches to European

security: consensus escapism or compartmentalized multilateralism. I spell out each concept in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Four types of actors

Some actors approach questions related to the organization of European security and defense like a*rchitects.* Architects rely on preconceived blueprints or master plans to guide them as they attempt to arrange the different constitutive units. In the case of European security and defense policy, this units are the national and international organizational layers responsible for European security. *Architects* pursue a clear and precise vision of how these different layers should relate to one another. They want to orchestrate or shape the relations between organizations in certain ways and according to their (previously agreed) blueprints. For them, the stakes are high and they are only willing to compromise if deemed absolutely necessary. They would rather invest all available resources to bring their preferred blueprint to life (Fioretos and Hofmann, unpublished). To be successful, architects often need crucial material resources and expertise.

Other actors are more inclined to think of European security through the lens of everyday diplomacy and feasibility. *Bricoleurs* muddle through organizational challenges and obstacles by creatively assembling and reassembling existing practices and routines (Pouliot and Thérien 2023, p. 2). In other words, they are willing to compromise if agreement can be reached 'in the right direction.' For that, they are willing to invest their resources and adjust their risk and stakes calculations.

However, there are also actors who do not care much about a functioning European security order because they have other political goals. For them, the stakes are less high than for architects or bricoleurs. They only will be brought on board through side payments and concessions. The latter is more likely for *agnostics,* who are simply not very invested in security policy. Agnostics are not really invested in this policy domain for various reasons that can vary, such as neutrality,[1] having a small army and little military clout, or other policy concerns that take precedence.

Lastly, there are possibly also *spoilers.* Spoiler should not be conflated with architects. Spoilers do not hold a consistent vision of European security and defense policy (or architecture); rather, they are transactional in their use or neglect of organizational options. They are not interested in whether or not European security can be organized.

Two ways of approaching European security and defense

When architects, bricoleurs, agnostics, and spoilers are all present at once, European security and defense is torn between those actors that do as they please across organizations (spoilers, but potentially also agnostics and architects) and actors that want to more (architects) or less (bricoleurs) forcefully orchestrate, or otherwise organize,

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[1] This is not to suggest that all neutral countries are disengaged from the policy domain.

the different multilateral endeavors along functional and geographical lines. The former leads to *consensus escapism*, while the latter is captured through *compartmentalized multilateralism*.

Consensus escapism captures how actors make use of interorganizational relations to evade committing to consensus-making. Since European security and defense policy is devised in a dense institutional environment, different new and existing organizational layers enable actors, in particular national governments, to rhetorically commit to those organizations in which they have membership. Otherwise, they do as they please. Spoilers and agnostics are likely to pursue this approach, either more or less forcefully.

Compartmentalized multilateralism suggests an approach in which actors take the existing organizations for granted and try to conceive of ways to network across them or otherwise relate them to one another. This can be done either by designing a division of labor or by orchestrating organizational hierarchies and deference, for example. The emphasis here is that while the different organizations exist and actors acknowledge that they cannot be fused (hence compartmentalized), the multilateral approach aims to bring them together in one way or another.

Organized European security and defense: past attempts, failures, and successes

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many observed 'the awakening of geopolitical Europe' (Borrell 2022), associating it with a more assertive European security and defense policy under the EU umbrella. Many assume that this will not only drive a renewed interest in the policy domain, but also more material, ideational, and symbolic investments on the multilateral level. However, thinking and organizing European security and defense under geopolitical aspects—rather than solely as European political project—is nothing new, even if presentist biases in current political analysis suggest as much (Guzzini 2012; Cadier 2019; Nitoiu and Sus 2019).[2] If we only look back to the end of the Second World War, there have been repeated attempts to organize European security and defense which are at least partially geopolitically motivated. Some of the initiatives wanted strategic autonomy from the US, others wanted to embrace former geopolitical enemies, and still others were part of a broader political integration project. Their architects did not always succeed in convincing others to pursue these proposals. The organizations that were created vary in terms of proposed membership and organizational design, pleasing some more than others. As a result, architects and bricoleurs created a web of organizations subdividing European security and defense, both functionally and geographically, into several initiatives and organizations. Since then, some European actors

[2] It is not the intention of this forum to debate whether European actors—whether national, supranational, or intergovernmental—are now more or less geopolitically motivated than before 2022. Instead, we start from the assumption that a European security and defense approach is always likely to be (also) geopolitically motivated.

have pursued compartmentalized multilateralism in the name of European security, attempting to loosely connect these multilateral endeavors while not unifying them. Other actors use this web of overlapping organizations to forum shop, at times escaping consensus (Hofmann 2019; Amadio Viceré, 2021).

Early on after the Second World War ended, not one but several blueprints to organize European security and defense were already available. In terms of membership, actors proposed either a West European or transatlantic vision, while organizational designs varied from treaty-based arrangements to permanent organizational structures. The initial architects of European security did not foresee organizations but treaties, such as the Treaty of Dunkirk (1947) between France and the United Kingdom, which was extended to the Benelux countries with the Treaty of Brussels (1948), and the North Atlantic Treaty (1949). All treaties were centered on mutual assistance in case of an external attack. However, with the Cold War becoming the dominant prism through which security was understood, rearming of national European armies (as well as the positions of Germany and the US on the continent) increasingly became an issue that could not be handled solely by treaty. NATO emerged out of the North Atlantic Treaty, while the Brussels Treaty became the foundation first for the Western Union and then the Western European Union (WEU).

The WEU was the second-best option for a purely European security organization. In 1950, Winston Churchill (1950) proposed a European army. In the same year, the French government under Prime Minister René Pleven proposed the creation of the European Defence Community (EDC), which would comprise a supranational defense force including Germany. However, after a government turnover, that supranational structure did not please the new French government of Pierre Mendès; subsequently, the National Assembly spoiled existing plans and did not ratify the treaty in 1954. The EDC failed to materialize. Instead, bricoleurs proposed another solution to add more layers to European security: The 1948 Brussels Treaty was transformed in 1954 into the Modified Treaty of Brussels and created the WEU, which became subordinate to NATO (Article 4 of the Modified Brussels Treaty).

Several more attempts were made, many by French architects, to create an exclusively European security organization next to NATO. The Fouchet Plans, brought forward by France's De Gaulle government in the beginning of the 1960s, broke down since the Gaullist party advanced a vision of confederal, intergovernmental Europe at odds with the federal and/or transatlantic visions put forth by other European governments, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium (Howorth 1996, p. 28; Hofmann 2013). The Italo-German suggestion to include defense policy in the European Community, known as the Genscher-Colombo Plan of 1981, did not come to fruition either.

Only loose foreign policy coordination mechanisms and informal conference-style organizational forms with security implications were created next to NATO and the WEU. Bricoleurs were trying to assure consultation and information-exchange mechanisms. In 1970, the European Political Cooperation (EPC) was created, which refrained from defense provisions (Miskimmon 2007, pp. 30–31). The EPC was an informal and auxiliary mechanism to the European Economic Community (EEC), where foreign ministers could debate and inform each other

about foreign and security policy matters (Nuttall 1992). The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) also saw the light of day in the 1970s. In an attempt to reduce American-Soviet tensions, the US, Canada, European NATO allies, European neutral countries, the Soviet Union, and all Warsaw Pact members negotiated a meeting schedule in the form of 'conferences' to informally discuss security matters (Flynn and Farrell 1999). NATO and Warsaw Pact member states often pre-negotiated their positions, and the CSCE was used as a vehicle to communicate their respective preferences and red lines to one another (Maresca 2016).

With the end of the Cold War, not only did more multilateral initiatives emerge, but the existing ones also changed in scope and design. Governments across Europe pursued various design blueprints of a European security order over the years (Coticchia 2021; Hofmann 2013; Onderco 2019) and public opinion positioned itself differently as well (Nicoli et al. 2023; Mader et al. 2024). For example, French President Francois Mitterrand proposed a pan-European security system based on the CSCE (Flynn and Farrell 1999) and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev (1989) suggested a 'Europe as a Common Home,' both of which met with little interest from other European countries. Instead, the US and Russia signed a bilateral Charter for Partnership and Friendship in 1992, which spoke of Euro-Atlantic Security. NATO and the EU enlarged, while the CSCE was transformed into the OSCE in 1994–1995 (Dean 1999). The EU ventured into security in 1999 with what was named at the time its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) (called since 2009 the CSDP). E/CSDP would eventually incorporate most of the WEU. NATO became more political, promoting democratic values, intervening abroad, and creating global partnerships (Hofmann et al. 2023).

In addition to the broadening and formalizing of European security, some informal and minilateral organizations also emerged. Most but not all of them were auxiliary to the EU and/or NATO and targeted a specific policy goal— either addressing an issue pertaining to European security and defense policy or focusing on joint acquisition of military capabilities or joint military exercises. For example, since the early 1990s, Germany, France, and Poland meet at times in the format of the Weimar Triangle to discuss issues pertaining to European integration and foreign policy. Another informal political group is the Visegrád Four (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Other informal layers exist to generate military forces in support of existing organizations by creating joint capabilities. For example, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark created the Nordic Defense Cooperation in 2009 to strengthen cooperation in the areas of capabilities, human resources, education, training and exercises, operations, and armaments. The Central European Defense Cooperation, created in 2010, fulfills a similar purpose. The Three Seas Initiative focuses more on broader initiatives with security implications (Grgić, 2023). As these many proposals and organizations demonstrate, there is no one-size/form-fits-all solution to European security and defense. Instead, actors have thought and cared about European security and defense differently.

Organizing European security and defense today

Russia's aggressive behavior at the border of the EU and NATO—which is also a war among UN and OSCE member states—led many to call for greater European unity and assertiveness. Furthermore, subsequent US administrations have asked their European counterparts to do more for their own security and defense, most forcefully the Trump administration (2016–2020) that threatened/s to leave NATO, putting NATO's cohesion in doubt (Kunertova and Schmitt, this issue). All of this has forcefully brought back on the political agenda questions of how, where, and with whom to organize and strengthen European security and defense.[3]

The answers to these questions are not straightforward. While consecutive French governments have been pursuing some form of European strategic autonomy since the De Gaulle days in the 1960s and the EU has even adopted some of this language, not everyone is on board. Ironically, French insistence on European strategic autonomy has found its way into the EU across many policy domains but least so in the security and defense realm, since the war in Ukraine has also brought NATO back to the forefront of European collective defense (Hoeffler et al. 2024; Juncos and Vanhoonacker 2024). Europeans seem unsure and nervous about how to combine a discourse of strategic autonomy with their commitment and reliance on NATO; they are debating how to adjust to different political pressures. The main choice is between consensus escapism and compartmentalized multilateralism.

The debate over consensus escapism and compartmentalized multilateralism brings to the fore the fact that actors question whether existing organizational layers are enough or too many, and consider whether (and if so, how) they should rethink the ways they relate to one another. The outcome of these reflections can either bring organizational layers closer together (and even create functional hierarchies between them) or drive them further apart.

In European policymaking, the who (membership), what (mandate), how (organizational design), and where (interorganizational relations) are yet again being hotly debated. These issues that receive ample attention in the individual contributions to this forum. Suffice to say here that membership has been controversial for decades and Ukraine's requests to become a member of both the EU and NATO have demonstrated how contested this issue can be. Much turns on the question of who should benefit from security and defense promises and commitments. Full membership is one option to assure countries of a common security and defense goal. However, as the past has shown, third-party agreements and partnerships have also been options (Hofmann et al. 2023). Another dimension that should not be neglected is the mandate of organizations. Here, actors differ on whether security is understood narrowly or broadly (Buzan and Hansen 2009) and how the 'other' from which actors need security is defended against. Is the emphasis on a threat or a risk; can a common

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[3] Not much has happened in this policy domain between the Lisbon Treaty and Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea—initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) of 2009 were called sleeping beauties by none other than then-president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (Juncker 2017).

enemy be identified? It is not only membership and mandates that need to be established when organizing European security and defense. Actors also debate questions of organizational design, in particular whether new organizations should be created, if they should be permanent or temporary, or if they should be formal or informal. Lastly, given that these initiatives do not exist in a vacuum, but instead are created on top of already existing organizations as outlined above, the nature of their relationship is on the table (e.g., non, hierarchical, cooperative, competitive).

Taken together, these debates signal that architects continue to propose some initiatives as exclusive clubs, while others are more open. As such, they highlight what borders are deemed insurmountable and which ones can be more easily negotiated (Schimmelfennig, 2021). Current debates over organizing European security and defense also demonstrate that the few architects that exist cannot agree on a common blueprint, and bricoleurs are not powerful enough to engage in common practices irrespective of political disagreements. Linking it back to consensus escapism and compartmentalized multilateralism, these debates call attention to multilateralism's relationship to consensus-making. This relationship is not an easy one, especially if multilateralism is expressed in several different international organizations with non-identical membership and overlapping mandates. On the one hand, several overlapping organizations can aggravate finding a consensus over governance challenges and their solutions, as actors can block or ignore policy in whatever organization they like least. On the other hand, several organizations allow for the possibility that 'something' can still be done to circumvent gridlock in individual organizations (Hale and Held 2018; Haftel and Hofmann, unpublished). Individual contributions in this forum discuss how this has manifested across issues such as sanctions (Lepeu, this issue), alliance cohesion (Kunertova and Schmitt, this issue), nuclear deterrence (Onderco and Kühn, this issue), and Europeans relations with Russia (Tyushka, this issue) or the US (Williams, this issue).

Conclusion

Given the many organizational layers in which issues pertaining to European security and defense can be discussed today, the possibility of consensus escapism looms large, irrespective of the threat at hand. Actors, in particular spoilers and agnostics, can disengage from commonly defined goals across organizations rather easily. This makes investments in military hardware hard to come by since such equipment needs long-term financial investments and needs time to be developed and produced (Beetsma, Buti and Nicoli, this issue). However, actors can also work toward orchestrating these different layers and pursue compartmentalized multilateralism. Arguably, one such attempt is the recent initiative advanced by French President Emmanuel Macron known as the European Political Community (Cadier, this issue).

This forum tries to more explicitly address the different relationships and entanglements that exist across the many organizations. Contributions unpack the many ways in which European security and defense is being and can be organized. In so doing, the individual contributions to this forum together demonstrate several trends. Within the EU, we notice that the European Commission increasingly

has become an architect to be reckoned with (Lepeu, this issue; Hoeffler and Hofmann 2024). Through the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility, the European Commission is enabling a pathway through which the EU can become a more capable security actor. Member states that have increased their national defense budgets are also enabling this development. However, while both developments are creating the opportunity for the EU to become a security actor to reckon with, making it more capable, they are not necessarily making it more willing to act.

When we look at NATO, we see that the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea already re-centered NATO activities around collective defense and the 2022 invasion reinforced this trend. Within hours of the invasion, NATO had mobilized its rapid response force and deployed thousands of additional land and air forces on its eastern border to deter a possible Russian invasion. This recentering around collective defense is likely to become more permanent, with NATO falling back to its old mandate but also revealing different shades of alliance cohesion. However, the American commitment to this organization is not a given (Kunertova and Schmitt, this issue; Williams, this issue) nor does the US owe Europe any kind of preordained security and defense guarantee that goes beyond NATO's Article V commitment—which does not require a military response by NATO allies in case of attack.

Overall, we can observe recent readjustments of the friend, ally, partner, and enemy categories and the perception of a common threat coming from Russia. New resources have been mobilized in the wake of the 2022 Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, and new institutions have been proposed and created. Despite these developments, for the time being, European security and defense policy remains organized in a compartmentalized way, with more and more initiatives emerging that can make European actors more capable but also resemble (or at least enable) consensus escapism. Most actors so far do not suggest a complete reformulation of how European security and defense is or should be organized (e.g., in a single and unified organization or on the national level only). No overall orchestration, which would align the different organizational alternatives and manage their relationships, can be detected (yet). This would require architects that are willing to bear the costs of coalition building, that do not shy away from either sidelining spoilers and trying to bring them on board, that can convince agnostics to engage more with European security and defense issues, and that can identify skillful bricoleurs who can help implement their blueprints.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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