



POLICY PAPER

How to Make EU Security Policy More Effective? The “Intermarium” as a Coalition of the Willing

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HOW TO MAKE EU SECURITY POLICY MORE EFFECTIVE? THE “INTERMARIUM” AS A COALITION OF THE WILLING

Introduction

In the EU, when it comes to the use of military force, the necessary consensus is often lacking. Security interests and the perception of threats differ immensely across the bloc. And decisions at the Council level are taken by unanimity. In case a rapid response is required, would the EU be capable of reacting militarily? Decision-making procedures for joint action are lengthy and no previous EU-endorsed combat operation has been recorded. However, the EU could overcome its frequent disagreements on matters of foreign and security policy if it mandated operations by coalitions of willing member-states through Article 44, the only element in the EU treaties granting rapid intervention.¹

The brutal aggression Russia perpetuated in Ukraine represents a crucial test for the Union. It has been said that President Putin achieved the impossible: breathing new life into the EU by uniting a bloc that has never felt this strong.² Nonetheless, some countries seem to be dragging their feet as time and sanctions go on.³

The displayed unity of purpose and the shared intention to counter Moscow's expansionism - shown through the latest threat analysis run by the EU's Strategic Compass - will have to be turned into action where necessary. Who would come together if Russia were to pose further threats? Most probably, NATO countries would take action.⁴ However, according to the brand-new strategic vision laid out in the Compass, the EU plans to act geopolitically while seeking strategic autonomy. After having warned Washington that “cooperation is not dependence”,⁵ could Brussels do it on its own?

To this extent, there is little doubt a military alliance of the states between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea would be indispensable to deter Russia.⁶ As this string of countries - which would include Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and Romania - lies between two seas, it is often referred to with the Latin term “Intermarium” by geopolitical analysts. Russia is the common global threat that unites them and the war in Ukraine could not help but reinvigorate the Intermarium.

The EU has every interest in an armed and committed Intermarium, itself a coalition of the willing. Its eastern flank has historically been subject to Russia's strategic depth, which is according to the Kremlin what has allowed Moscow to survive foreign invasions since the 18th century.⁷ Not only does the Russian leadership perceive it as its natural buffer zone against the West,⁸ but the loss of such, namely the fall of the Soviet Union, is considered “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”⁹.

At a time of return to power politics, the EU must work on its capability to react militarily and intervene. What does the Union have at its disposal not to be caught off guard?

¹ Scazzieri, L. (2022). *Could EU-endorsed ‘coalitions of the willing’ strengthen EU security policy?* *Centre for European Reform*.

² Politico. (2022). *How Putin made the EU great again*. February 27.

³ *Conclusions of the European Council meeting of 24-25 March 2022*. Debate: Guy Verhofstadt (Renew).

⁴ Lindley-French, J. (2022). *What if Russia Attacked NATO?* *Sage International*.

⁵ The New York Times. (2021). *Macron Tells Biden That Cooperation With U.S. Cannot Be Dependence*. January 29.

⁶ Geopolitical Futures. (2022). *From the European Buffers to the Intermarium*. January 14.

⁷ Geopolitical Futures. (2020). *Russia's Search for Strategic Depth*. November 17.

⁸ Euractiv. (2021). *Russia tells NATO it wants its buffers*. December 17.

⁹ Nbcnews. (2005). *Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'*. April 25.

Current State of Play

1) The Strategic Compass and Article 44: the coalition of the willing

With the recent adoption of the Strategic Compass by the Council, the EU has agreed on a new security strategy, that is the Union’s shared ambition to become a more relevant geopolitical actor on the international stage and a security provider for its citizens. Its first draft has been available since November 2021, and the member states have thus had five months to revise the numerous deficits it presented, strategic fragmentation and diffusion of responsibility above everything.¹⁰ Russia’s unjustified and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine prompted a significant rewrite of the document. It moved the EU’s approach towards Moscow away from an engagement in specific issues (e.g. climate change) and paved the way for the introduction of a “language of power”, notably in the expressed commitment to defend the European security order from the Russian attempt to restore its spheres of influence.¹¹

In the words of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, the “member states-owned” Compass “sets out concrete actions” compared to the many papers the EU agencies “usually produce in Brussels” and marks major differences from the 2003 EU Security Strategy and the 2016 Global Strategy.¹² The first pillar to strengthen the EU’s defence and security policy has been identified in the capability to “act rapidly and robustly when a crisis erupts”¹³, which translates into the pursuit of greater flexibility in the decision-making process. As reported in the document, more rapid responsiveness and greater flexibility will in turn lead to military missions and operations that are more effective on the ground.

In the very same section, the Compass touches upon the shared intention to exploit the unused potential allowed by the EU treaties, including the proposal to set up a 5000-strong rapid deployment force (to replace the so-called ‘battlegroups’, on standby since 2007) and to further discuss the activation of Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). According to Article 44: “The Council may entrust the implementation of a task to a group of member states which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task. Those Member States, in association with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, shall agree among themselves on the management of the task”.¹⁴ The launch of an EU military operation conducted by a ‘coalition of the willing’ has never been set off, and many think it is time to explore such a pattern.

The EU-endorsed operations so far launched (more than three dozen)¹⁵ all fall into the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and their objectives range from peace-keeping to conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation.¹⁶ CSDP missions have not yet recorded combat operations, as member states failed to reach the unanimity requirements on several occasions. For instance, EU rapid military interventions were requested and seemed necessary in Libya in 2011, in Mali and Iraq between 2013 and 2014 against Islamist insurgents, and more recently in 2021 during

¹⁰ Kaim, M., Kempin, R. (2022). *Compass or Wind Chime? An Analysis of the Draft “Strategic Compass” of the EU*. SWP.

¹¹ Euractiv. (2022). *LEAK: Russia’s war on Ukraine rewrites EU’s upcoming military strategy*. March 6.

¹² *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. (2022). *European Union*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union*. (2012). *Official Journal of the European Union*.

¹⁵ Scazzieri, L. (2022). *Could EU-endorsed ‘coalitions of the willing’ strengthen EU security policy?* *Centre for European Reform*.

¹⁶ *EU Missions and Operations* (2021). *EEAS*.

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the evacuation of Afghanistan.¹⁷ Since they repeatedly failed to agree on collective action, member states are more likely to find an accord on small groups taking part in the mission. Alternatively, they would resort to ad-hoc grouping outside of the EU with the participation of non-EU countries (as we have seen with operation Agénor in the Straits of Hormuz and Task Force Takuba in the Sahel).

Exploring the use of Article 44 would offer more benefits in terms of flexibility and speed of action than a regular CSDP mission and would meet the need to deal more effectively with the member states' varying levels of ambition and capacities.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it would not extend the scope granted by the CSDP framework, as Article 44 does not create a new category of EU operations.¹⁹ Therefore, an Article 44 operation would still depend on a unanimous decision of the EU states, with all the pros and cons that go with such a vital approval. Once agreed, the deployment is facilitated because the participation of every member state is not required - that would bypass the ordinary force-generator process and save time - and the planning and command of the operation are entitled to the coalition group in association with the High Representative.

Although not responsible for the management, the Council remains the decision-making body that acts unanimously, and it must be kept informed regularly or at the request of another (non-participant) member state, especially when major consequences occur and different decisions must be taken. The unspecified part that still needs to be clarified is which decision-making powers remain with the Council and what is delegated to the coalition group. The latter would most probably receive the planning support from the crisis management structure of the European External Action Service (EEAS); in this case, too, the EEAS' level of support remains to be addressed.²⁰

At least two member states can carry out a military mission on behalf of the whole bloc. This issue concerning political legitimacy is among the main potential advantages. An operation under the EU flag could enhance the Union's visibility and add coherence to national responses as well as make the member states' participation more affordable with the EU partially covering the costs. Furthermore, countries with constitutional constraints on out-of-area deployments such as Germany would be incentivised to take part in EU-endorsed coalitions.²¹ What may hamper the launch of a rapid response through Article 44 is the unanimity criteria, which has been the main obstacle to resorting to CSDP combat operations in the first place.

Unanimity dominates decision-making in EU foreign policy and several member states are reluctant to scrap such a requirement. However, discussions on reviving tools that could speed up the reaction time for CSDP operations are mounting once again. Despite continued adherence to unanimity, the Compass specified the use of 'constructive abstention' will be considered.²² According to this notion, a member state can refrain from using its veto and enable the operation without assuming a role in its implementation and in its funding. However, the decision is not adopted if nine or more member states, representing one-third of the EU population abstain.²³ In particular, the EU would have to

¹⁷ Blavoukos, S., Pagoulatos, G. (2022). *Europe after Putin's War: EU Foreign and Defence Policy in the new European security architecture*. *HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)*.

¹⁸ Bakker, A., Biscop, S., Drent., M., Landman, L. (2016). *Spearheading European Defence Employing the Lisbon Treaty for a Stronger CSDP*. *Clingendael*.

¹⁹ Tardy, T. (2014). *In groups we trust. Implementing Article 44 of the Lisbon Treaty*. *European Union Institute for Security Studies*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Puglierin, J. (2021). *The Engine Room: Germany, the Unwilling Coalition Partner*. *INTERNATIONALE POLITIK Quarterly*.

²² *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. (2022). *European Union*.

²³ Blavoukos, S., Pagoulatos, G. (2022).

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agree on a more systematic use of constructive abstention,²⁴ as for foreign policy it has only been used once (by Cyprus in the vote on EU operation EULEX in Kosovo). To this extent, it is advisable that the member states conduct operational exercises to test the use of constructive abstention in the context of Article 44. Especially on the different scenarios emerging from which cluster of member states opts to abstain and the related demographics.

Another possibility to activate Article 44 without holding each other hostage in search of consensus - yet not contemplated by the Compass, as it would require an EU treaty reform - is turning to the use of ‘qualified majority voting’ (QMV), seen by a growing number of countries²⁵ and several prominent figures²⁶ as the right proposal to overcome the EU’s deadlock in foreign and security policy. Moving to a more majoritarian rule would mean increasing the bloc’s responsiveness to security crises and consequently its international relevance since the member states would be discouraged to resort to extra-EU groupings.

On the other hand, small member states hold greater doubts about QMV and Treaty change.²⁷ The Council would give the green light to a military operation if voted by 55 per cent of member states representing 65 per cent of the EU’s population²⁸: it is, therefore, easier to outvote small EU states. In turn, if member states are often outvoted, the EU decisions risk being delegitimised, and this may trigger tensions and inner divisions that can be exploited by the adversary.²⁹ Small member states would thus need reassurance by the Council on their possibility to use emergency brakes in case the decision to be taken through QMV undermines their national security.

If the first criteria to have an Article 44 operation is willingness, you hardly find more willing EU countries than those withstanding their geographical exposure to the Russian threat.

2) The modern “Intermarium”

Talking science, the first line of defence is the innate immune system: the surface barriers that prevent the infected pathogens from entering the body. Along similar lines, geopolitics imposes the EU to consider which is the supposed pathogen (where does the threat come from?) and how to equip the first line of defence for solid prevention. Simply put, the EU has to consolidate its eastern flank, that is the containment line against Russia. And a good place to start is to support those member states (innate immune system) that perceive Russia as the biggest threat to their existence.

It is therefore worth reviving the idea of the *Intermarium*, originally ‘Międzymorze’ (Land between the Seas), an early 20th-century geopolitical project advocated by Józef Piłsudski, marshall and leader of Poland, who sought to establish a federation of states in central and eastern Europe.³⁰ At the time,

²⁴ Koenig, N. (2021). From Strategic Compass to Common Course: Key deliverables and implementation paths. *Hertie School Jacques Delors Centre*.

²⁵ Euractiv. (2022). With such members, who needs foes? February 7.

²⁶ EUobserver. (2022). EU should drop unanimity in foreign policy, Italian PM says, May 3. Euractiv. (2022). Letta for a federal Europe, April 14. LeMonde. (2022). Macron and the audacity of a more powerful European Union, May 10.

²⁷ Non-paper by Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden on the outcome of and follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe. (2022). *Government Offices of Sweden*.

²⁸ Bendiek, A., Kempin, R., von Ondarza, N. (2018). Qualified Majority Voting and Flexible Integration for a More Effective CFSP? A Critical Examination of the EU’s Options. *SWP*.

²⁹ Monday Talk With Sven Mikser, Former Minister Of Foreign Affairs, Estonia. (2022). *Vocal Europe*. April 14.

³⁰ Newsletter for the European Union. (2016). Intermarium: a fresh start for an old, vital security project in Eastern Europe? August 29.

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the chief of state of the newly-independent Poland was attempting to promote an alliance with Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine - partially recreating the mediaeval Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth - to counteract the German expansionism on the west and the Russian imperialism on the east.³¹ However, the smaller Slavic countries involved did not welcome the prospect of restoring Poland in the form of a great power,³² and the interwar project never sailed. Not even a couple of decades later, Piłsudski's concerns were turned into reality when the German Reich invaded Poland from the west and so did the Soviet Union from the east. As a result of World War II, the Russians occupied the whole region, entailing the Baltic States, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and the eastern part of Germany. It took the end of the Cold War for the string of states from the Baltic to the Black Sea to set free from the Soviet Union's sphere of influence and allow the inevitable reappearance of the Intermarium concept.



The structural features of Piłsudski's Intermarium are still present today. The Kremlin adventurism has never faded. If anything, the invasion of Ukraine has given the Intermarium one more reason to exist. To see how a modern-day Intermarium would resemble highly depends on the length of the conflict and how Ukraine will look at the end of it. Nevertheless, for the project to satisfy its guiding principles - improving regional security, deterring Russia from attacking via traditional or other warfare and increasing its member states' elbow room in the international arena³³ - would be enough to embed those countries that shape a semicircle of containment in the map. This runs from the Baltic Sea-washed Estonia, Latvia Lithuania, to the central Poland, Slovakia and Hungary and as far south as Romania by the Black Sea. All affiliates are EU member states and enjoy the security umbrella of NATO.

³¹ War on the Rocks. (2017). HOW TO SOLVE UKRAINE'S SECURITY DILEMMA? THE IDEA OF AN INTERMARIUM COALITION IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE. August 30.

³² Ištók, R., Koziak, T. (2009). Międzymorze as a Polish Geopolitical Concept. *Folia geographica* 14.

³³ Umland, A. (2016). Countering Russian expansionism: Blueprints for a new security alliance. *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*.

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Why them? Geography speaks for itself: they are widely considered to be the most vulnerable to a Russian attack. But they are also the most generous with regards to their NATO contributions in defence spending (in particular, the Baltic states spend proportionally more than any other country in the region)³⁴ and display a willingness to fight for their homeland significantly higher than in Western Europe.³⁵ The mutual aid pact they would engage in might better reassure than NATO's Article 5 on collective defence (according to which an armed attack against one NATO member is an attack against them all), as the latter is not an absolute guarantee and the language used leaves a lot of leeways.³⁶ Similarly, the Intermarium countries should not expect too much from a US-led NATO, as Washington pursues its own interests (more inclined to spend its energies on the contention of supremacy with China) and often makes mistakes³⁷ (Afghanistan, to name one).

Given its historical background and being its territorial integrity perceived as threatened, this coalition of the willing would represent the only Council of Europe formation that is ready to commit militarily to confronting Moscow.³⁸ As a result, a north-south axis in central-eastern Europe would be essential for those plain countries (e.g. Germany) which lack orographic barriers and are wary of potential threats coming from the east. Furthermore, the modern Intermarium could be fundamental for the EU's eastern neighbourhood, by dispensing effective security assurances to Chişinău, Tbilisi and most importantly to postwar Kyiv. In this respect, it can provide a soft security pillar the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP - the joint initiative involving the EU member states and six eastern European partner countries) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP - the policy alternative to EU membership for the bloc's bordering countries) have failed to deliver in over a decade of mismatched results.³⁹

The EU can only benefit from the Intermarium. And to a certain extent already benefits from it. In 2015 Poland and Croatia launched the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), *Trimarium* in Latin, as a forum for political and economic dialogue, gathering ten more countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria) from the Baltic, Adriatic and the Black Sea. The 3SI - which has so far enjoyed the conspicuous support of the US,⁴⁰ Germany and the European Commission⁴¹ - aims at fostering regional cooperation through the implementation of transport and energy projects, (mainly through new liquified gas terminals)⁴² and reducing the region's dependence on Russian gas.

Although it does not envision a security integration within the region, the 3SI proposes to shield its members from Russia's assertiveness - just like Piłsudski's Intermarium, by which it was certainly inspired. This testifies that an operative willingness can also be found within the EU.

³⁴ Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021). NATO.

³⁵ Burden Sharing: Income, Inequality and Willingness to Fight. (2018). *British Journal of Political Science*. Also see Gallup International. (2015). WIN/Gallup International's Global Survey Shows Three in Five Willing to Fight for Their Country. May 7.

³⁶ Euractiv (2022). The Brief – Towards a Central Alliance? April 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Umland, A. (2016).

³⁹ For the EaP's (unfulfilled) works, please see: Paul, A., Ciolan, I. (2021). Lessons from the Eastern Partnership: Looking back to move forward. *European Policy Centre*. Concerning the ineffectuality of the ENP as also revealed by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, please consult: Polegkyi, O. (2021). The Intermarium in Ukrainian and Polish Foreign Policy Discourse. *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*.

⁴⁰ U.S. Embassy in Estonia. (2020). Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at the Three Seas Virtual Summit and Web Forum. October 19.

⁴¹ Three Seas Initiative. Joint Declaration of the Sixth Summit.

⁴² Musialek, P. (2020). The Three Seas Initiative: Natural Gas in Central European Foreign Policy. *ISPI*.

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Policy Recommendations

- *Rethinking the future security architecture of the EU. The conceptualisation of a modern Intermarium as the reference point.*
The EU should promote a foreign and security policy in line with Piłsudski's concept and its 21st-century revival. The Intermarium is a flexible geopolitical project, and as such must be looked at. Participants and degree of intervention vary according to the historical framework. Nevertheless, the EU's and Intermarium countries' priorities coincide at present and presumably for a long time ahead. The eastern flank is the most endangered EU border, and if a rapid reaction is requested, the bloc must appeal to those countries that are most concerned (because more threatened) and willing to conduct a military mission. Since it aims to become a relevant security provider in the international arena, Brussels must be able to equip the Intermarium member states with the needed security guarantees and only then it will be able to reap the fruits. The EU has every interest in a committed Intermarium that plays as the first containment line against Russia and dispenses stability in the eastern neighbourhood as a sustainable solution to security challenges of Georgia and Moldova as well as post-war Ukraine. A 'coalition of the willing' is the only instrument of urgent reaction the EU possesses. In the long run, crafting a Three Seas Initiative-styled security alliance is instead the most optimal solution.
- *Exploring the use of Article 44: technical clarifications and operational scenario exercises.*
An Article 44 operation would increase the effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP missions. But the Union, and in particular the European External Action Service, must work to overcome the Article's ambiguities and elaborate on those terms and conditions that are largely unspecified. Further clarifications on which decision-making powers remain with the Council and what is delegated to the group of member states are needed. The operational role of the High Representative (HR/VP) - other than acting as a link between participating and nonparticipating member states - deserves more attention. Also, in terms of crisis management, the EU must address what level of support lies in the hands of the EEAS. Finally, it is advisable to hold preparatory exercises and communication-based scenarios on the part of the Council to reduce uncertainty and lengthy discussion when Article 44 is activated.
- *Conceiving alternatives to the unanimity rule to speed up interventions.*
Unanimity is the norm for decision-making in foreign policy and has several advantages by its side. However, it has impeded the EU's interventions on various fronts. In these cases, member states resorted to ad-hoc grouping outside of the EU to conduct the required missions. The Treaties allow for constructive abstention and the Strategic Compass touches upon it, but the member states would need to agree on a more systematic use of such criteria. The recent calls to switch to a QMV integration and Germany's and France's appeal for the establishment of a European Security Council (echoing the UN model) of 2018⁴³ - as disputed as they are - signal that new formats are sought, if not on the verge. After the 24th of February, the world changed. The EU decision-making process for security and defence must adapt accordingly. The revival of such discussions says a lot about the EU's intention not to miss yet another opportunity and act.

⁴³ Bendiek, A., Kempin, R., von Ondarza, N. (2018).

Conclusions

This paper should be seen as a wake-up call for the EU to finally equip itself with a credible military response force. Brussels should rethink its capability of reacting militarily, by exploring what it has at its disposal, rather than injecting new questionable tools. The recently approved Strategic Compass cautiously offers “unused” (Article 44) or “underused” (constructive abstention) clauses of the Treaties, hence developing a modest action plan in the right direction.⁴⁴

The activation of Article 44 TEU is the only viable instrument of urgent reaction, but it has never been launched. It allows a coalition of willing member states to conduct and manage a mission. And a group of EU countries willing to militarily confront the greatest topical threat to the bloc already exists within the Council. It calls back the interwar concept of Intermarium, according to which a military alliance formed by the string of countries between the Baltic and the Black Sea is necessary to deter Russia’s adventurism and its influence’s projection.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has altered the commercial-driven mindsets of most of the member states to a more security-demanding approach. However, moving from the Strategic Compass to an EU rapid intervention - that is, moving from theory to practice - may well be detrimental if the requested action is trapped by consensus, as it occurred with the 2021 evacuation of Afghanistan. Not to add fuel to the fire, but if the 71 action points conceived by the Compass are not implemented by 2030 (51 of which already need to be adopted by 2022)⁴⁵, the train will be missed. And so will be the chance to put a remedy to the EU’s collective action problem as well as to the ineffectiveness of the 2003 and 2016 strategy documents. Claiming “this time is different” will not be repeatable any longer. Credibility is a ticking clock.

⁴⁴ Yuksel, S. (2022). *A Quick Overview of the Strategic Compass. Beyond the Horizon*.

⁴⁵ *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. (2022). European Union.

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