

Who Shapes European Security? Assessing Europe's Ability to Respond to Security Challenges

Europe's security landscape has evolved significantly since World War II. Regional organizations such as the EU and NATO play a central role in coordinating policies, mediating conflicts, and fostering cooperation. Today, European states face complex challenges, from geopolitical tensions with the US, Russia's war in Ukraine, and China's growing influence on global politics, to internal divisions that affect their ability to act collectively. This working group examines Europe's capacity to manage crises and respond to security challenges like Russian aggression, considering for example military capabilities, critical industries, societal resilience, and political decision-making. Participants will examine how power, strategic priorities, and institutional structures interact to shape Europe's ability to maintain stability, foster cooperation, and respond to both traditional and emerging threats in an increasingly uncertain environment.

Summary of the Discussion in the Working Group

The working group explored the "Power Triangle" of States, the EU, and NATO. Through Strategic Foresight and a negotiation role-play with, participants analyzed the "security dilemma" and national red lines. Key interests included Transatlantic relations and the influence of defense lobbyists. Participants highlighted the EU-Ukraine context, noting Ukraine's combat experience as a strategic asset for NATO training. Discussions also emphasized non-traditional actors, such as the impact of civil society and EU technical commissions on modern international security and societal resilience.

Key Questions Emerging from the Discussion

- Considering that the US has become an unreliable partner for Europe, it seems that strategic autonomy is the way to go for European States. However, structurally they are still dependent on the US. E.g., the European armament industry does not produce all capabilities required for Europe to conventionally protect itself, the US extended nuclear umbrella is one of the most important deterrents Europe can count on, and the list goes on. Now, Europe finds itself in a structural tension between structural dependence and pursuing strategic autonomy. How can Europe pursue its autonomy without losing the US as a partner?
- Apart from states (like the USA, Russia, China or different European states) and institutions (like the EU and NATO) there are more relevant actors shaping the European Security Architecture such as the arms industry and their lobby. What role has the lobby of the arms industry played in hindering European defence integration?

Summary of the Discussion at the Closing Panel

Balancing Autonomy and US Dependence: Addressing the tension between structural dependence and strategic autonomy, the panel argued that Europe must gradually build its own conventional capabilities without severing transatlantic ties overnight. They suggested that to pursue autonomy without losing the US as a partner, Europe needs to position itself as a more capable, burden-sharing ally rather than a competitor, thereby reinforcing mutual security benefits.

The Arms Industry's Role in Defense Integration: Discussing non-state actors, the panel emphasized that in a fragmented and multipolar international order, competing national arms lobbies actively hinder European defense integration. They argued that when European states prioritize their domestic defense contractors over unified, cross-border procurement, it blocks the development of sustainable and inclusive security concepts and makes true collective defense more complicated.