# Great Ambitions

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A myriad of voices within the European Union took to the stage to argue in favour of stronger European unity after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States. The probable next German Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz called the election of Trump the "last call to action" and promised to lead Europe in a joint response to Trump. President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen argued that this is a *"new era of harsh geostrategic competition"* and French President Emmanuel Macron called for Europe to wake up and strengthen its defence capabilities in light of Trump's inauguration. Draghi argued even before Trump's election in his renowned report that "Europe is vulnerable to coercion, that US strategic doctrine is shifting away from Europe", and that a gap is created

that Europe must fill. With von der Leyen creating a task force to translate the Draghi report into practice, it looks like the repeated calls for a more serious European Union foreign-security, and defence policy are being put into practice. However, looking at the history of the EU strategic autonomy debate, there is a high probability that this will not be enough.

European leaders have been drowning their messaging in calls to action and great ambitions since the end of the Cold War. In 1991, while speaking about the ongoing hostilities in the former Yugoslavia, Luxemburg's Foreign Minister Jacques Poos claimed that *"this is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans"*. The European institutions were destined to play a large role in the end of the humanitarian disaster in the Balkans. The European moment was here! In reality, the European economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts were utterly impotent. In 1992, Bernard-Henri Lévy declared that "Europe died in Sarajevo". Today, U.S. President Bill Clinton enjoys a statue in Priština, Kosovo, while the European Union's Western-Balkan policy has become dysfunctional at its worst, and stale at best.

This failure of the European Union to influence a conflict in its backyard did not go unnoticed. In 1998, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair signed the Saint-Malo declaration announcing that France and the UK agreed that "the EU must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces". However, the EU Battle groups that resulted from the Helsinki European Council in 1999 were never used due to financial problems, prioritisation of NATO, and political reluctance. In 2008, one year after the EU Battle groups became operational, the French mentioned strategic autonomy on the EU level in a French White Paper for the first time. In 2010, the European Parliament agreed and stressed that the European Union must enhance its strategic autonomy through a strong foreign, security and defence policy to protect the Union's interests and values.

Only a single year later, another conflict in Europe's direct neighbourhood would test these ambitions. EU member state Armed Forces under the leadership of the UK and France intervened in the Libyan civil war. After a few days, NATO and U.S. leadership took over the operations due to the lack of adequate European capabilities regarding intelligence, refuelling, munitions, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Three years later, Russia annexed Crimea and started the armed conflict in the Donbas, which led European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker to call for a European army. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump made EU strategic autonomy into a buzzword, Macron argued that NATO was experiencing brain death due to Trump's disdain for Europe, and in 2019, von der Leyen called her new European Commission a "geopolitical commission". Again, fears became greater, ambitions were expressed, and nothing of value happened.

The biggest shift in the defence and security policy of the European states occurred after Putin invaded Ukraine. The European Peace Facility was used to transfer weapons to Ukraine, nearly all European states increased their defence expenses, and even German Bundeskanzler Scholz called for

the "*Zeitenwende*" and shifted its policy framework towards German remilitarisation and increased weapon deliveries to Ukraine. The effectiveness of these efforts is in serious doubt now that Trump has expressed his intent to force Zelensky and Putin to negotiate. If the Russian-Ukrainian war is settled without deterring Russia with clear and credible security guarantees for Ukraine, the consequences for European security would be catastrophic.

A short look at the European history of defence integration shows European strategic autonomy to be a Sisyphean task. Since the end of the Cold War, European foreign, security, and defence integration has moved slowly and incrementally, while the world is running circles around the European institutions. The ambition to deepen European defence integration, achieve strategic autonomy, or establish a European army is not a recent development. Thus, when politicians like Merz, von der Leyen, or Macron call for increased European unity, the real question should not be if European unity and strategic autonomy should be achieved but how they are going to achieve these goals. How will Merz protect European unity and rally actors like Orbán and Fico behind the European cause? How will von der Leyen respond to this "new era of harsh geostrategic competition"? How is that different from her attempts during her "geopolitical commission"? How will Macron implement a Europe-first policy, even if this opposes his domestic interests? How are the new European leaders going to be different from the clichés, platitudes, and hollow ambitions of the past?

If these questions remain unanswered, we might be forced to accept —to paraphrase Albert Camus — that the struggle for European strategic autonomy itself is enough to fill a European's heart. In that case, one must imagine Europeans to be happy with the current state of European security and defence policy.