Tamás Csiki Varga

Opportunities for the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency in the European Security and Defence Policy Framework

In the second half of 2024, Hungary will take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union, for the second time after 2011. At a time, when we can no longer take Europe's security for granted, defence issues are becoming more important and visible than ever before, and they also require greater resources dedicated. While no single country can maintain the security and stability of the continent alone, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been considered by member states part of the intergovernmental decision-making process of European integration, thus resolving the tensions between the need for cooperation and the sensitivities based on national interests and sovereignty. The paper briefly summarises the security and defence policy experience of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency, pointing out the similarities of the 'role' in the current period of preparation. At the same time, it provides a brief assessment of the security environment and European defence policy processes, showing where progress has been made and where more can be done to maintain common security and defence – along Hungarian interests.

The framework of two EU Presidencies: Similarities and differences between 2011 and 2024

The functional novelty of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency was that, following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, the role of the country holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union had significantly been reduced, compared to previous ones, and 'live testing' the new setup took place during the presidencies of the Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian trio. The reduction of the role was reflected on the one hand, in the fact that, with the creation of the post of President of the EU Council, the meetings of the heads of state and government are no longer chaired by the leader of the country holding the rotating presidency. On the other hand, with the creation of the post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the High Representative – who is also Vice-President of the Commission, as well as the President of the Council on External Relations and political head of the European External Action Service – has to some extent taken over the EU's external representative tasks. In other words, 'high visibility' roles had been transferred to a new player, while the Presidency's role of seeking consensus on a number of 'management', coordination and intergovernmental policy issues has been maintained.

The last of the four priorities of the Hungarian Presidency, under the motto 'Strong Europe', set out foreign and security policy objectives in the spirit of 'global responsibility'.[1]

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[1]   Government of Hungary 2010.

This primarily meant the conclusion of Croatia's accession to the EU, the continuation of the Eastern Partnership and practical support for the functioning of the European External Action Service, as well as furthering trade policy (like the negotiations on the EU – South Korea and EU–Japan free trade agreements).

EU enlargement on the Western Balkans was not only a Hungarian strategic goal but also a prestige issue – and was successfully concluded with Croatia by the closure of seven negotiation chapters on the afternoon of the last day of the Presidency, 30 June 2011. (Other candidates, Iceland and Turkey, did not bring about such dynamic success: while four negotiating chapters were opened with Iceland and two were closed, no substantial progress had been reached with Ankara.) The key element in taking the Eastern Partnership forward would have been a summit of heads of state and government, but this was 'postponed' to the Polish Presidency in the autumn of 2011, with Hungary as a 'co-host'. Eventually, the support for the work of EEAS, which is a typical task of the rotating presidency, included several 'crisis management' elements out of necessity: the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident (11 March 2011) and the escalation of the civil war in Libya (from February 2011) required coordinated action, including the intervention of Hungarian professional diplomacy and civilian crisis management experts.[2]

The 2024 Hungarian Presidency will run in a similarly turbulent period – even if there would be no new crisis born, which cannot be forecast now. In 2011, the Arab Spring uprooted the southern neighbourhood, in 2024 the continuing Russia–Ukraine war will further devastate the east, while the challenges in the south will not disappear. It is no coincidence that the common objectives of the Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian trio include international partnership, multilateral cooperation, a comprehensive approach to the security of the Union, the value-based protection of EU interests and the strengthening of the means of joint action in the field of security and defence.[3]

However, several factors will limit the Presidency's freedom of action in the second half of the year: the newly constituted Parliament following the European Parliament elections in June, and the Commission, expected to be renewed from November, will be less operational, the turnover of senior EU officials will slow down business, and negotiations will bring the political conflicts of values and interests to the surface, which can have repercussions in several policy areas.

Based on preliminary communication and the trio's joint programme, the priorities of the Hungarian Presidency Programme will include improving competitiveness, pursuing cohesion policy, addressing demographic challenges, taking forward the enlargement process (in particular in the Western Balkans), tackling irregular migration, and strengthening both border protection and defence policy.

Europe's security environment also faces a number of transnational, soft security challenges and threats which do not (or only to a limited extent) require a military response, but which, due to their nature and the capabilities required for responding, will not be addressed primarily by the CSDP, but by cooperation in the field of justice and

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[2]   Gazdag 2011: 79–81.
[3]   Council of the European Union 2023.

home affairs (homegrown terrorism, organised crime), immigration policy (mass migration, asylum policy) or trade and industrial policy (economic sovereignty, de-risking). Although these are also linked to the CSDP in a whole-of-government approach, and even though the complex relation with external actors also includes the security and military instruments in the toolbox of EU foreign policy, we will not discuss these elements specifically, but will look further at the issues of the EU's capability to act, and the security and defence policy instruments underpinning it. This will highlight the relevant processes and identify the focal points that will be relevant during the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency and determine how the EU27 can represent their interests in our crisis-ridden security environment.

Key defence policy developments between the two Presidencies

Despite the fact that the revision of the EU Security Strategy (2008) and the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) would have provided an opportunity to develop European defence cooperation, the 2008–2009 financial and economic crisis took the CSDP off the political agenda for years, and the European Council only returned to the issue in 2013 even despite the events of the Arab Spring.[4] The improving economic situation and the strategic shocks of 2014 and 2015 (Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, the rise of the Islamic State terrorist organisation, and the migration and refugee crisis) provided the political impetus for multinational action, which resulted in the adoption of the EU Global Strategy (2015). Redefining the strategic ambition, despite Brexit, allowed for pushing the CSDP forward to become more dynamic by establishing an institutional-procedural framework 'as usual', which Member States began to fill up with content in the following years.

The EU began to establish EU-level frameworks and mechanisms for joint capability development and for filling capability gaps. The joint decision to establish the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), with a special focus on the Crisis Response Operation Core (EUFOR CROC), the first projects to initiate the coordination of Member States' defence planning processes based on the results of the Coordinated Annual Defence Review (CARD) and supported by the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), and the resources dedicated to defence by the European Commission (European Defence Fund, EDF) have all pointed in this direction. These elements, if fully developed (together with relevant policy-making and military planning, as well as command and control), could indeed function in the future like a nation state's defence planning and military operation process. It is no coincidence that the creation of a 'European army' has been proposed on several occasions in European political discourse, including by French, German and even Hungarian actors, and that expert and political debates have developed on establishing European strategic autonomy.

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[4]   CSIKI 2014: 48–53.

The 2020 PESCO Strategic Review made recommendations for the period 2021–2025, partly to improve the effectiveness of existing PESCO projects and partly to enhance the effectiveness of the new short- and medium-term capability development initiatives to be established. PESCO will continue to be a tool enabling Member States to meet the EU's level of ambition in security and defence policy, including the provision of military capabilities for operations of the highest intensity and complexity. In the next phase up to 2025, PESCO projects should focus on building up this coherent, full spectrum force package. The review made several recommendations on capability development and joint commitments to deepen structured defence cooperation.[5] The impact of the review will live on during the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency. As the Strategic Compass had been adopted during the French Presidency (2022), decisions on the provision of identified military capability requirements and new initiatives could be one of the topics of the Hungarian Presidency.

In parallel, the CARD report, published for the first time in November 2020, identified 55 specific capability development areas where Member States could make meaningful progress. These covered 17 land, 14 air, 12 naval, 5 joint force and strategic, 4 space and 3 cyber theatre capabilities. In addition, 56 defence research and development opportunities were identified, as well as operational cooperation opportunities in the areas of force projection, non-kinetic engagement, and force protection, in addition to capability development. The 55 areas were grouped into six clusters to provide guidance for the coordination of national capability development and defence research and development plans, for example in the framework of PESCO and with the support of the EDF. The six key cluster areas identified are: a general-purpose tank type; individual military equipment; a surface patrol vessel type; anti-drone weapon systems and anti-access, area denial devices; space capabilities; and military mobility. These areas need to be supported by defence industrial R&D in artificial intelligence, cyber defence, new sensor technologies, new materials, energy-efficient propulsion systems, unmanned devices and robotics.[6] In its assessment of the 2022 CARD review, EDA identified essentially the same areas for development in terms of defence resource gaps and capability requirements, based on the lessons learnt from the Russia–Ukraine war, underlining the need for the European defence industry to play a leading role in both manufacturing and R&D.[7] This is important because these areas will remain at the heart of European capability development discussions during the 2024 Hungarian Presidency, as well.

The expansion of the EU's toolbox has also gradually increased the resources available in this area. In this respect, not only the resources of the European Defence Fund (around EUR 7 billion) have been mobilised, but also additional research and industrial policy resources that are relevant to defence or capability development (e.g. the Digital Europe Programme – around EUR 6.7 billion, the European Horizon Programme – around EUR

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[5]   Council of the European Union 2020.
[6]   European Defence Agency 2020.
[7]   European Commission 2022.

76 billion, the Space Programme – around EUR 13 billion).[8] It can therefore be assumed that this increase in resources will in the long term be more of an incentive for member states to increase their participation in European capability development projects. The increase in resources has become dynamic in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war: a further increase of €70 billion is expected from Member States by 2025.[9]

Finally, the adoption of the Strategic Compass in 2022 meant the operationalisation of the Global Strategy, which had previously been missing, and which was used to define the capability requirements of the EU's military operational vision for the new Headline Goal. The Headline Goal covers the next ten-year period, the strategic timeframe, of which the Hungarian EU Presidency will be almost in the middle.

As far as the European capability development goals are concerned, it can be roughly assessed that some logistical and land-based capabilities can be created or purchased by member states if needed – or if the capabilities needed to achieve the European level of ambition are created. However, there are still strategic enablers that are available only to the largest allies or only to the United States, and that other allies would therefore find it extremely difficult to replace or substitute. Critical dependencies continue to include strategic reconnaissance, surveillance, intelligence, and target acquisition capabilities; command, control and communications systems, including space assets; deployable operational commands above division level; deployable air force commands; theatre air defence and missile defence, including early warning systems; long-range bomber forces and significant numbers of fifth generation fighter aircraft. European states also have limited capabilities in long-range precision strike, including surface-to-surface cruise missiles; aerial refuelling; strategic and tactical airlift; and special operations aircraft. A conflict with a major regional power would seriously test the capabilities of European naval forces, and the ability to disembark the entry force (say an EU battlegroup) in a crisis management operation would also be questioned. Based on simulations and modelling, it can be estimated that EU member states would have the necessary capabilities to conduct a short-term rescue and evacuation operation and a humanitarian operation on their own, provided they mobilise all the assets at their disposal. However, after Brexit, the naval capabilities of the EU27 are already showing shortfalls for a humanitarian operation, and if these were parallel or long-term requirements, they would already be beyond European operational capabilities.[10]

Even in 2023, we see the EU's strategic capability to act limited to low-intensity operations in terms of available military capabilities. To provide higher intensity operational capabilities, we therefore have two options: either continue to rely on NATO, including to a decisive extent on U.S. military capabilities, or dynamically develop EU capabilities in the areas outlined above, and develop European national capabilities, with member states making more of them available to the EU.

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[8]   Nádudvari 2020: 8.
[9]   European Defence Agency 2022: 2.
[10] Sabatino et al. 2020.

Strengthening European strategic autonomy:
Ambitions and limits to collective capacity to act

The need to develop and reinforce an autonomous European (EU) capacity to act, or strategic autonomy, has been a key issue on the political (and expert) agenda for years, when it came to Europe's role in the changing international order. The French-influenced idea can be interpreted in a broad spectrum, ranging from the – rather unrealistic – quest to establish an autonomous international pole of power (thus strengthening the capacity to act independently of the United States) to more coherent and effective joint European action on specific strategic issues and, in institutional terms, in policy areas. Full strategic autonomy for Europe could only be achieved in the long term, within twenty to twenty-five years, but this ambitious goal is shared by few outside Paris, and the evolution of international power capabilities does not point in this direction. It would require the political support of all member states and a willingness to share elements of national sovereignty, in addition to adequate funding, to make the European Union more autonomous, including in the military field. Achieving a greater degree of strategic autonomy could be a realistic goal in the medium term (ten to fifteen years) and could be achieved with limited sharing of sovereignty, but it would require European states to be able to realistically define their international ambitions, to set priorities among their objectives and to implement the goals they set for themselves in a consistent manner. A key element in this is that the EU and NATO act in complementarity with each other's tasks, in cooperation and not in opposition.

In the short term there is no substitute for the central role of the United States in maintaining many dimensions of European security, even if these strategic processes are recognised. But strengthening European capabilities in the medium term would have a double benefit. On the one hand, it would increase Europe's capacity to act autonomously, also in the event of acting outside NATO's frameworks. On the other hand, it would enhance Europe's value as a partner in Washington's eyes, as it could mean a greater European role in transatlantic burden-sharing, and would represent a significant step forward in a relationship that is currently far from balanced – while reducing dependence on operational planning, action and military technology.

This is why one of the central elements of the debate surrounding strategic autonomy is the ability of the European Union's member states to defend themselves and to shape their security environment, for example by managing crises in neighbouring regions. The Union's level of international ambition has a political and a military dimension. The political dimension provides guidance on what each actor wants to achieve in the international space in terms of foreign and security policy; the military dimension determines the military means necessary to achieve this. There are several guidelines on the level of international ambition of the EU and its member states. The most important of these are the Global Strategy, the Strategic Compass, the Petersberg Tasks, the Illustrative Scenarios and the Headline Goal. The Global Strategy continues to set the policy objective at the most general level in the form of three specific goals:

- capability to respond to external conflicts and crises
- developing and supporting the capabilities of external partners
- the protection of the EU and its member states

This level of political ambition has been translated in recent years into military tasks, defining the types of operations that the EU should be able to conduct. The current level of military ambition remains the one defined in the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, essentially following on from and complementing the former Petersberg tasks: conflict prevention and peacekeeping; military crisis management (including peace enforcement); disarmament; military assistance and advice; post-conflict stabilisation; and humanitarian and rescue operations. In the framework of the CSDP, the EU envisages capabilities for the following operational scenarios:

- peace enforcement (within a radius of 4,000 km from Brussels)
- conflict prevention (within a radius of 6,000 km from Brussels)
- stabilisation and capacity building operations (within a radius of 8,000 km from Brussels)
- rescue and evacuation operations (within a radius of 10,000 kilometres from Brussels)
- humanitarian operations (within a radius of 15,000 kilometres from Brussels)[11]

It is clear that the defence planning, operational command and control and military capabilities required to achieve these are also lacking and highly uneven across European countries. During the Hungarian EU Presidency, the further development of military capabilities, in particular support for the European Defence Agency in the preparation of the Coordinated Annual Defence Review 2024, will be part of the remit.

Within the political debate on strategic autonomy, Hungary is interested in the narrow interpretation, primarily in the creation of a pragmatic capacity to act in crisis management. As a small country, first it must create and maintain the means of national power, and then build on these to strengthen the collective defence and solidarity framework, both in relation to NATO and the EU. The presence of the two organisations, their capacity for decision-making and action, and their cooperation based on the sharing of tasks, make them the ideal institutional environment for Hungary, as well as for other Central European countries. However, the diversity and parallelism of defence cooperation initiatives and the sometimes conflicting ambitions of the major players – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany – and the strategic uncertainty in Europe are forcing the small players to take the negotiations on European strategic autonomy seriously. In doing so, they must consider the possible transfer of elements of national sovereignty in decision-making (political integration), long-term strategic commitment in defence cooperation (technological dependence of force modernisation and joint capability development, joint operational planning and participation) and the provision of adequate resources (defence budget, equipment procurement, maintenance, logistics, human resources).

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[11] Barrie et al. 2018: 6–7.

Civilian crisis management in the Southern Neighbourhood

Civilian crisis management capabilities are an integral part of the EU CSDP, even if they have less visibility and receive less political attention than military ambition levels and capability gaps. The security environment in the EU, and in particular in the Southern Neighbourhood, is showing a progressively deteriorating trend: climate change and conflict-induced declining livelihoods (drinking water and food supplies), extreme weather conditions (droughts), even without civil wars, have increased the demand for EU civilian crisis management activities and this is likely to increase. In order to respond more effectively to non-military challenges, the EU's justice and home affairs policy actors and institutions must also be given a greater role, so that agencies such as Europol, which combats organised crime and smuggling, Frontex, which is responsible for border control and migration management, or Eurojust, which is responsible for monitoring migration flows, must complement and support the CSDP's specific areas of activity in addressing transnational challenges.

Member states will enhance the capacity to act in the civilian dimension of the CSDP by providing more resources – experts, training, equipment – and by simplifying and accelerating national operational decision-making processes. They will seek to make this process more efficient, flexible and responsive, following the Civilian Compact adopted in November 2018, by defining modular and scalable tasks and mandates on a case-by-case basis, simplifying and accelerating the planning of operations and increasing their budget.

In the light of this, the Hungarian Presidency should also be prepared to assist, where necessary, with the planning and launching of ongoing operations and possibly new ones. The further strengthening of civilian crisis management capabilities is in the interests of Hungarian security and defence policy in several key areas (Western Balkans, North Africa, Middle East) and in relation to several challenges (migration, border control, organised crime, etc.).

The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on the Hungarian Presidency

In our changing security policy and strategic environment, the European Union wishes to remain a dominant player, even though its power – and thus its ability to assert its interests – has been moving on a downward trend over the past decade. However, the economic and commercial strength of the Union, its relative development, its diplomatic and soft power capabilities, combined with the military capabilities of its member states, remain a major force in the hands of the community. The only question is to what extent the European Union will be able to take advantage of all this, while being hampered by several external and internal factors, often culminating in crisis situations affecting the Union as a whole.

The escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 has contributed to this situation, which has brought about decisive changes in many areas: Russian military aggression and nuclear deterrence have been brought to the fore in the threat perception

of many states in our region; in response, they have engaged in increased armament and, more broadly, force development; the NATO membership of Finland and (soon) Sweden has increased the overlap between NATO and EU membership; European states have joined a broad regime of economic–financial, trade and technological sanctions against Russia; and, at the same time, they have largely divested from imports of Russian energy resources. The effects of these steps will be felt in the longer term in various areas of European security and defence.

There is also a new quality to the humanitarian and military assistance provided to Ukraine, sometimes with the innovative use of EU instruments. While in the past the EU has provided a wide range of economic instruments and ample humanitarian aid to crisis-stricken countries in the neighbourhood, direct military support – in the form of military equipment, materiel, training and information sharing – is unprecedented. We have seen innovative solutions such as using European Peace Facility funds to buy military equipment or conducting EU training missions.

While there is a wide spectrum of opinions on the form and intensity of the war in 2024 and the role that Western support could play in this, it is safe to say that we cannot expect an orderly, stable peace under the Hungarian Presidency. Accordingly, there may be opportunities for Hungary to represent its interests at a high level, both in shaping and managing the political agenda for EU engagement and in shaping high-level EU–Ukraine (or other multilateral) meetings.

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