



# Wars to come, Europeans to act

## A multimethod foresight study into Europe's military future

**Lotje Boswinkel and Tim Sweijs**

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### Executive summary

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Russia's war against Ukraine was for many European leaders a – cynics would say *another* – strategic wake-up call. The war has led to significant boosts to defence budgets across Europe to rebuild dilapidated military capabilities around the continent. It has prompted Finland and Sweden to find shelter under the collective defence umbrella provided by the transatlantic Alliance after close to seventy-five years of non-alignment. And in addition to NATO strengthening its defence and deterrence posture – increasing the number of high readiness forces to 300,000 – the war is also providing further impetus to ongoing efforts within the European Union to step up its role in this realm.

If one thing is clear, Europe will need to assume a greater role in maintaining peace and stability in its own region and neighbourhood. Its security is directly affected by conflict risks in Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa including the Sahel, the Middle East, South Asia, the Caribbean (where France, the UK, and the Netherlands have constituent countries and special municipalities), and, in the coming years, the Arctic and Outer Space. Crucially, even if recent events and commitments suggest differently, a sustained US interest in Europe is far from certain. In the long run, the US is expected to prioritise other geographic theatres at the expense of Europe and nearby regions – whether by necessity or choice.

Even with the current reinforcements of military postures across Europe, material and political constraints will not disappear. Therefore future-proof choices need to be made that address the principal security challenges and pinpoint necessary policy responses. There is an urgent need to think about necessary investments and capability portfolios in the long term, including but also beyond the current war in Ukraine. Decisions need to be future-proof. That is where this foresight study comes in.

The study reflects on the implications of the changes in our strategic environment and the resultant shift in priorities for European militaries. Using a multi-method approach, it explores where Europe is most likely to intervene militarily over the next ten years. To address this question, it anticipates where armed conflict and instability are most likely to occur in the decade to come and how European interests will be affected. Conflict- and instability-related risks that require some form of military response include but are not limited to large-scale war between states, persistent low-level conflict between warring groups, violent attacks by transnational groups, and one-sided violence by governments against minorities within their borders. And this is not mere speculation or doom say: these different forms of violence are already present in contemporary conflict theatres in Europe and its immediately adjacent regions today.

Future-proof choices need to be made that address the principal security challenges and pinpoint necessary policy responses

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## On foresight & methods

Because (good) policymaking is inherently about the future, foresight is useful if not indispensable. Even if it is extremely hard to predict the future, foresight (which is not the same as prediction) helps us better understand dynamics of change, generate new ideas and policy options, focus our attention on the long-term, and facilitate the adoption of future-oriented policymaking tools. Crucially, it helps policymakers overcome systemic biases and deal with the inherent uncertainty that comes with anticipating the future as it lays out policy options based on the uncertainties identified through foresight methods.

To that purpose, the study combines various quantitative and qualitative methods. Through a multi-method approach in which both quantitative and qualitative methods are combined, the credibility and validity of research increase as biases are countered; the scope or breadth of a study widened; and the understanding of a phenomenon enriched as a multiplicity of methods brings complementary insights. In foresight exercises like this one, such advantages associated with a multi-method approach are invaluable if not indispensable: with a subject as complex as the future, tunnel visions loom and biases creep in. Concretely, this study combines: 1) desk research and literature review of systemic trends; 2) predictive models for intrastate conflict; 3) a quantitative analysis of theory-based risk factors for interstate conflict; 4) a case study of systemic war outbreak; 5) a review of official documents; and 6) an expert survey.

Because (good) policymaking is inherently about the future, foresight is useful if not indispensable

## Setting the scene: four global trends

The next ten years of conflict are roughly to be shaped by four global trends: interstate strategic competition, especially between the major powers, intensifies; weapon technologies emerge, advance and proliferate; political and social volatility rock the stability of societies; and the effects of climate change take hold. The implications for insecurity are manifold, and so are the policy needs for European militaries (for an overview, see [Table 1](#)).

### Great power competition

As great powers are increasingly competing in the political, economic, and increasingly military domains, direct confrontation looms and great power war becomes once again thinkable. As they vie for influence, proxy conflicts spike and intrastate cleavages intensify, increasing the potential for civil war. Yet also smaller states may act increasingly brazenly, playing one great power against another as they seek to maximise their strategic benefits. Competition between major powers, whether direct or indirect, means that access to the global commons, including sealines of communication and space, is no longer a given. Territorial integrity is increasingly at risk, while intrastate conflicts are prone to becoming internationalised. Liberal democracy is contested as the superior model of governance and should continue to see subversive threats as the battle for narratives continues. The use of so-called hybrid conflict strategies will continue if not intensify, entailing the weaponisation of energy, food, refugees, information and more. For Europe, this means that its activities in Africa are contested, its access to resources disrupted, and its borders challenged. In Latin America, the Netherlands may see the other three countries within the Kingdom as well as the special municipalities located in the Caribbean Sea threatened by regional instabilities exacerbated by great power

competition playing out in this region. Europe's political cohesion will come under pressure as their populations' minds are fought over, their welfare systems strained when taking in refugees, and their budgets squeezed by sanctions, declining international trade and the slow-down of globalisation.

## New technologies

Against this backdrop of a more competitive global environment, technologies are advancing rapidly. Improvements in speed, range and precision beef up advanced militaries' striking power while more modest systems are available to a growing number of state and non-state actors. Weapon proliferation and advancements are paralleled by an erosion of international norms and treaties: today, fewer treaties regulate the development and deployment of systems, while appetite for transparency and confidence-building is at a new low. The risks and implications for conflict are evident: with more actors emboldened by military clout, capabilities improving and diversifying, and rules and norms eroding, the potential for miscalculation rises, the threshold for use lowers, while deterrence and escalation become harder to manage. Rapid changes in technological capabilities may incentivise risky bids to change the status quo, while those at (perceived) risk of losing military prowess may feel compelled to strike pre-emptively. What is more, the democratisation of violence enabled by the proliferation of weapon technology adds to an ever more volatile and diffuse military landscape. At the extreme, technological trends increase the risk of interstate war, but with ever more actors capable of acquiring or developing modest missiles, off-the-shelf drones or digital capabilities, the potential of intrastate conflict to break out can also be expected to increase.

## Political and social volatility

Even with attention shifting towards strategic competition and related technological developments, more traditional post-Cold War security challenges remain. With economic, demographic and environmental pressures mounting, political and social volatility is likely to persist if not exacerbate as governments find it increasingly difficult to meet their populations' demands. Polarisation along ethnic, religious, and ideological lines is rising, with digitalisation acting as an important accelerator, while freedom falters across the globe. This does not bode well for stability: especially the combination can be toxic, with civil war the most extreme outcome. For Europe, it means that its neighbourhood in the east and south continues to be volatile and potentially war-prone. A plot of countries that experienced democratic decline between 2018 and 2021 as well as high levels of political polarisation (see [Figure 1](#)) suggests that Mali, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Chad and Guinea are at the highest risk today. At the extreme, internal stability may be threatened to a level where also within the EU, such missions may be needed. Indeed, also a number of EU member states experience a both negative change in democracy score and high levels of political polarisation, most notably Austria, Cyprus and France.

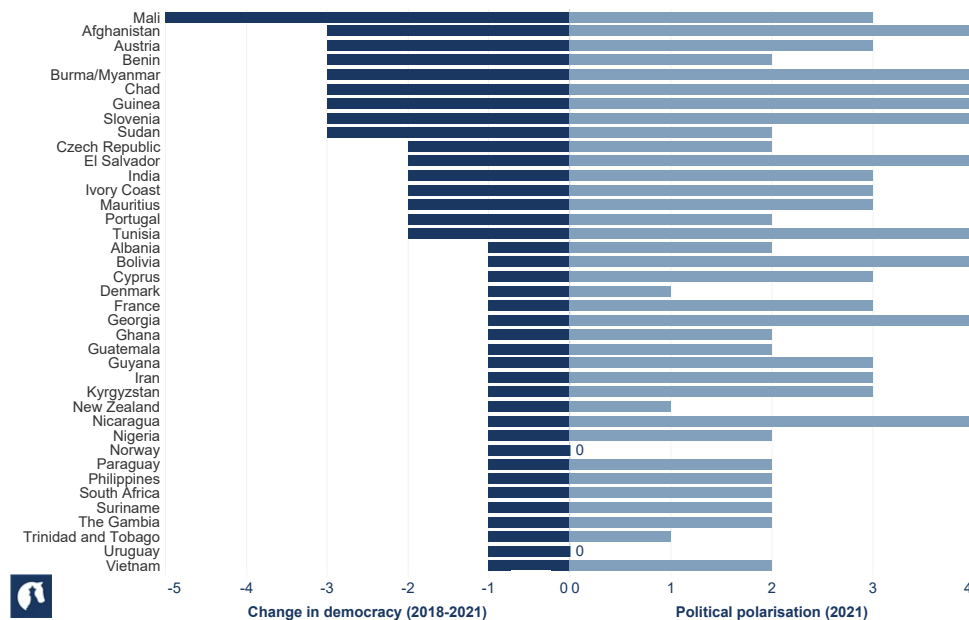
Rapid changes in technological capabilities may incentivise risky bids to change the status quo,

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## Figure 1. Countries experiencing both democratic decline and political polarisation



Political polarisation is a measure of antagonism between political groups, ranging from 'not at all' to 'large extent' (0-4) taken for 2021. Filtered for countries experiencing negative change in democracy score (0-9) between 2018-2021.



Source: VDem

Political polarisation has been reverse coded from its original representation by VDem so that the highest value level indicates the highest level of polarisation

## Climate change

Finally, climate change is heightening the risk of conflict. When converging with existing socio-political and environmental factors, climate change-induced scarcity of water, food and land resources may stoke intrastate conflict, especially when mitigation measures add to marginalisation and inequality. The risk of interstate scarcity-related war also heightens, for instance when a country's water management negatively affects a downstream neighbour. Migration and the resulting urbanisation caused by slow-onset climate change or rapid-onset hazards also add to social tensions as they exacerbate scarcity, feelings of relative deprivation and ethnic tensions. In places where climate change-induced livelihood insecurity coincides with state fragility, non-state armed groups may proliferate, stoking terrorism, guerrilla warfare and potentially civil war. Finally, climate change can fuel interstate conflict as melting ice opens a potential conflict frontier in the Arctic, and as tensions may rise over climate mitigation measures such as geoengineering. As [Figure 2](#) shows, climate-induced vulnerability exists across all continents but the likelihood of hazards to occur and the prospective adverse consequences on natural and human systems vary. Heatwave-induced vulnerability is highest in the Sahel, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India; droughts affect most of South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and China. Coastal flooding poses particular challenges to China, India, Vietnam as well as parts of Africa, most notably Mauritania and Mozambique. Meanwhile India, Indonesia and Vietnam are above-average vulnerable to riverine flooding, while tropical storms may affect most of the globe (with the wealthier countries less vulnerable).

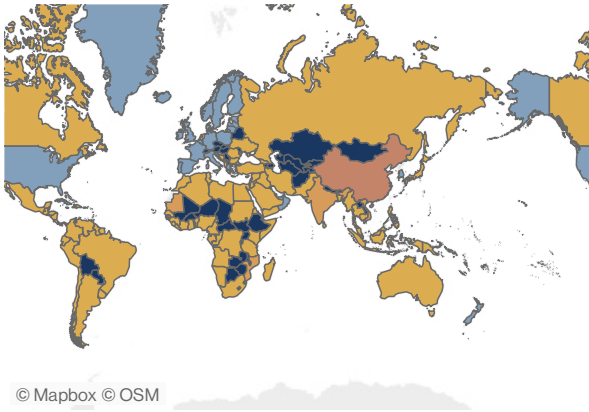
Climate change can fuel interstate conflict as melting ice opens a potential conflict frontier in the Arctic

## Figure 2. Climate hazard likelihood and potential insecurity risk

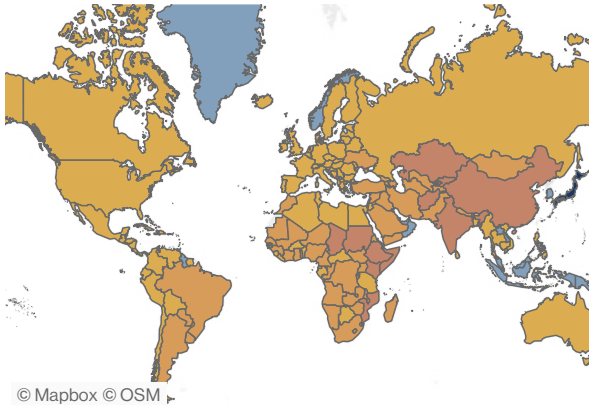
The relative risk to national security following the advent of a climate hazard (0-100)

High Medium-high Medium Medium-low Low

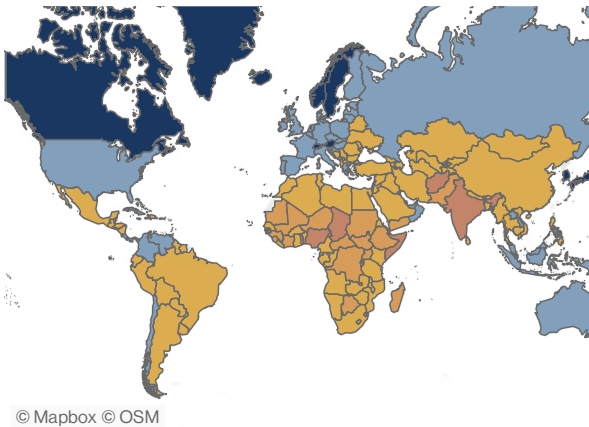
Coastal flooding



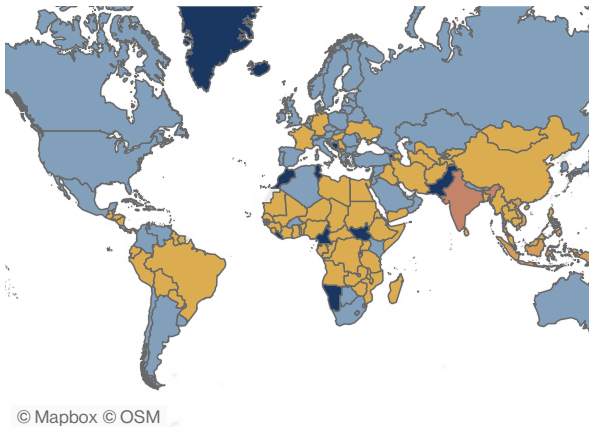
Droughts



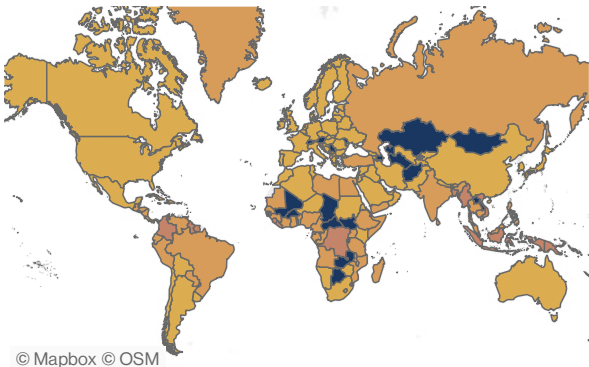
Heatwaves



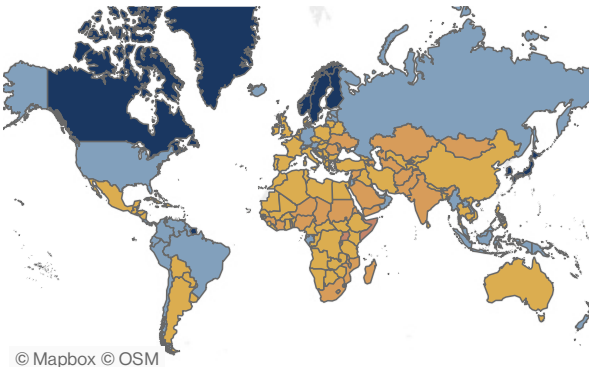
Riverine flooding



Tropical storms



Wildfires



Source: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS)

For more information on how climate related insecurity risks are calculated, please see: <https://hcss.nl/report/climate-security-assessment-a-methodology-and-assessment-of-the-nexus-between-climate-hazards-and-security-of-nations-and-regions/>

**Table 1. Trends, security implications, geographical manifestation, policy implications**

	Sub-trends	Security implications	Regions	Policy implications
<b>Strategic competition</b>	Great power rivalry; China's politico-military rise; Russian aggression and revisionism	Competition over spheres of influence, territory and resources; access to sealines of communication and space; hybrid conflicts	Eastern Europe (non-NATO/ EU territory); EU/NATO territory; the Indo-Pacific; the Arctic; Africa	Deterrence and assurance; counter-hybrid; sanctions and law enforcement; freedom of navigation and overflight; countering threats in space; high-intensity warfare
<b>Technological advancements and proliferation</b>	Proliferation and qualitative improvements in weapon technologies; introduction of non-kinetic and non-traditional technologies such as drones, cyber and AI; erosion of international norms and treaties	Lowering threshold for use of weapons; pre-emptive strikes; hybrid conflicts	EU/NATO territory; the Middle East; the Indo-Pacific; Central Asia; the Americas	Deterrence and assurance; sanctions and law enforcement; counter-hybrid; arms control and non-proliferation efforts; countering threats in space
<b>Political and social volatility</b>	Polarisation along ethnic, religious and ideological lines; erosion of democracy; state fragility; violent extremism; digitalisation; economic, demographic and environmental pressures	Civil war; polarisation; hybrid conflicts	The Middle East; North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Eastern Europe (non-NATO/ EU territory); EU/NATO territory	Peace enforcement and stabilisation; counterinsurgency and counterterrorism; military cooperation with non-NATO (or EU) partners
<b>Climate change</b>	Human-induced global warming causing rising temperatures, sea-level increases, extreme weather events; food, water, energy and health insecurity	Intergroup violence; conflict over resources; polarisation; migration; interstate competition in the Arctic	The Middle East; North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; the Arctic	Peace enforcement and stabilisation; disaster relief and humanitarian crisis management; counterinsurgency and counterterrorism (and potentially freedom of navigation; deterrence and assurance)

## A closer look: intrastate conflict

When it comes to intrastate conflict, the world can be divided roughly into zones of peace and zones of violence. Continuing a trend that emerged after the end of the Cold War, civil wars have become concentrated in a few regions of the world around hotspots of violence, including parts of Latin America, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Northern Africa, and South and South East Asia. According to short- and medium-term conflict risk forecasts (see [Figure 3](#)), this trend is set to continue. Strikingly, a declining share of conflicts remains confined within state borders as spill-over of conflict is only becoming ever more prevalent, in line with a longer-term trend.

In Latin America, the toxic mix of political instability, social unrest and drug-related criminality continues to cause conflict while cross-border spill-over effects run high. Drug-related violence inflicted by the state as well as between cartels in Mexico and other parts of the region continues unabated with spiking homicide rates as a result. Venezuela, a safe haven for Colombian guerrilla groups involved in drug trafficking, is torn by strong political instability caused by years of economic mismanagement and corruption, while plummeting oil prices in 2014 and fierce US sanctions have further ravaged the country. Dutch constituent countries and special municipalities in the Caribbean Sea are at risk here. Brazil meanwhile continues



## A declining share of conflicts remains confined within state borders

to grapple with criminality and structural social violence caused by economic deprivation and inequality as well as rapid industrialisation and related urbanisation. Resource-related conflicts including over land use and water management, especially surrounding the Amazon river, add to the continuation of violence. In the Sahel, but also in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, war appears ever more contagious, with countries such as Chad, Mali and Sudan at highest risk of conflict in the years to come. In the region, poor governance, democratic backsliding, foreign influencing, insecurity, extreme poverty and the worsening effects of climate change indeed prove fertile ground for terrorism and other forms of violence. Governments appear simply unable to get a grip over their societies. In the Middle East, a continuation of or relapse into conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen is to be expected as state fragility, violent extremism, sectarian politics and climate change-induced scarcity remain unresolved. Further eastward, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh grapple with government and development issues. India's heightening polarisation resulting from divisive political leadership and competitive caste politics, paired with unstable economic development, may prove a dangerous catalyst of violence. In Myanmar, a failed democratisation process and the violent reining in of civilian rule by its military apparatus, has plunged the country back into civil war. In the Philippines, conflict and violence are continuing as the state-pursued war on drugs rages on, Islamic militarism remains unresolved and grievances in the newly autonomous Bangsamoro region linger. Table 2 summarises the key sub-trends, resultant conflicts, regions of manifestation, and military mission needs.

### Figure 3. Five-year intrastate conflict forecast (2027)

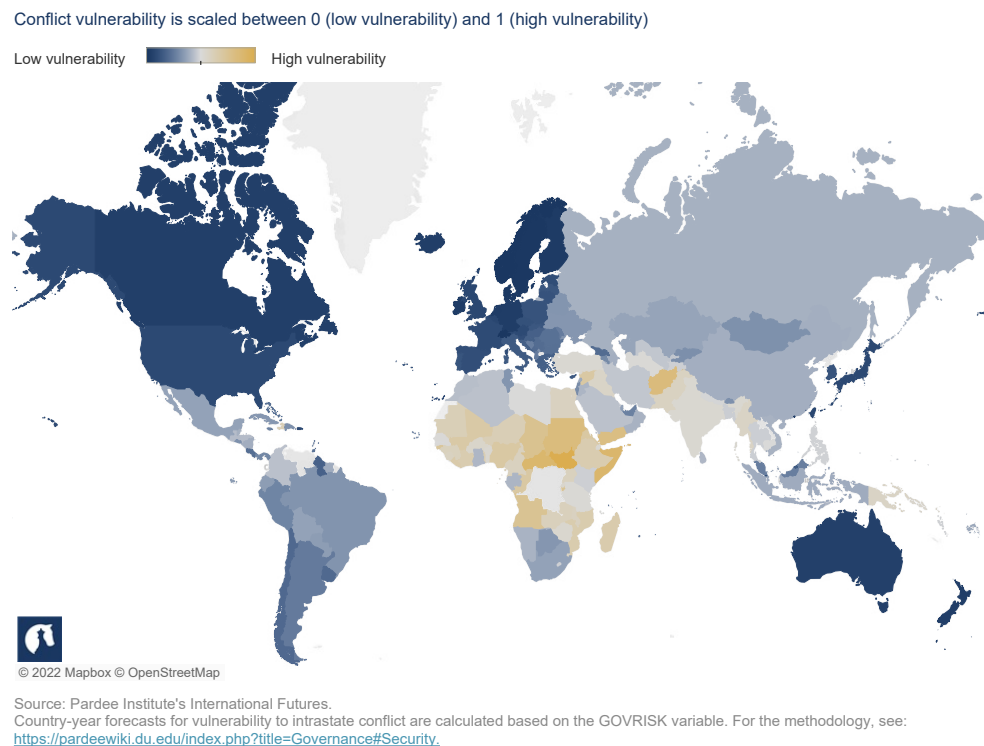


Table 2. Sub-trends, conflicts, regions, policy implications



	Sub-trends	Security implications	Regions	Policy implications
Intrastate conflict	Structural fragility	Violent extremism	The Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa	Peace enforcement and stabilisation
	Internationalisation and spill-over of conflict	Organised (transnational) crime	Latin America	Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism
	Resource scarcity	Democratic backsliding and internal polarisation	The Middle East	Military cooperation with non-NATO (or EU) partners
		Climate change-induced security threats and/or resource scarcity	Central-Asia	Disaster relief and humanitarian crisis response

## Zooming in on interstate war

Over the last two centuries, the majority of interstate wars occurred between so-called rivals: states that view one another as strategic competitors for whatever reason and typically have an unresolved conflict of interest. A total of thirty dangerous dyads appear – for which the outbreak of war will be especially consequential from a European perspective are assessed based on seven risk factors that are both theoretically and empirically related to the outbreak of interstate war: balance of power, power transition, nuclear deterrence, arms races, alliances, regime type similarity, and trade dependence (for an overview of the assessments, see [Table 3](#)). Their presence within a dyad either increases or decreases the risk that conflict breaks out. In a nutshell:

**Balance of power:** According to the balance-of-power logic, the relative military power parity between two states should *ceteris paribus* produce a certain degree of peace and stability. Higher power differentials instead lead to the heightened risk of escalation. Only three dangerous dyads are roughly, or close to, equal in military power: the US and China, Romania and Hungary, and Israel and Iran in 2032, according to projections. The share of highly unequal dyads is large.

**Power transition:** Following the power transition logic, a relative decline or increase in one state's power may entice it to initiate war as it either seeks to protect its ascent or prevent further decline. A 2032 forecast of power transitions relative to the balance of power suggests –unsurprisingly perhaps– that the US and China, Ethiopia and Sudan, China and Japan, Egypt and Ethiopia and finally Iran and Saudi Arabia, are at increased risk of conflict escalation.

**Nuclear deterrence:** Deterrence is particularly strong when *both* states in a dyad possess nuclear weapons. From this perspective, four dyads should therefore be relatively stable: Russia and the US; Russia and NATO; the United States and China; and China and India. All the other dyads are imbalanced and therefore potentially more risk-prone.

**Arms build-up:** The action-reaction dynamic inherent to arms build-ups may result in either a deliberate or inadvertent escalation to war. Dyads in which both countries are investing heavily in military capabilities are therefore at increased risk of war. Slightly over one-third of all dyads are projected to experience a two-sided arms build-up over the next three years, including Russia and Ukraine, Russia and NATO, Russia and Moldova, Turkey and Greece, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Egypt and Ethiopia, and Japan and North Korea. Dyads experiencing a one-sided build-up are also, yet at a somewhat more limited, risk of war escalation. This is the case for India and China, Vietnam and China, Egypt and Sudan, Burundi and Rwanda, and Sudan and Ethiopia.

**Alliances:** When a state has meaningful defence commitments from third states, potential attackers may be discouraged – and the dangerous dyad therefore less war-prone. The only dyads in which neither state has official meaningful defence commitments include Kosovo and Serbia; China and India; China and Vietnam; Israel and Iran; and Israel and Palestine. Dyads in which only one state has such commitments include Russia and Georgia; Russia and Ukraine; Russia and Moldova; the US and Venezuela; China and the US; China and Japan; China and Taiwan; Israel and Lebanon; Syria and the US; Iran and Saudi Arabia; and Afghanistan and Pakistan. In these dyads, only the state with meaningful defensive alliance commitments is at a lower risk of being attacked.

**Regime similarity:** Similarity in regime type has a stabilising influence on the relation between states. Only a handful of dyads share their regime type, including all five African dyads, China and Vietnam, Turkey and Syria, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. According to this logic, for these dyads, the risk of conflict outbreak is therefore lower. Conversely, dyads with different regime types are risky. They include more than half of all assessed dyads, including Russia and the US, NATO, Moldova and Georgia; China and the US, India, Japan, and Taiwan; Israel and Iran, Lebanon and Palestine; and Azerbaijan and Armenia. When states are neither very similar nor very different in their regime type, the effect on conflict risk is either mixed or neutral.

**Trade dependence:** Greater dependence in terms of trade discourages a potential attacker as the economic loss or so-called exit costs may be too large to sustain. Therefore, for dyads in which a mutual trade dependence exists, the risk of conflict may be lower. Conversely, for dyads with a one-sided trade dependence, the relatively independent state has less to lose as well as more to gain from initiating a conflict; imbalanced dyads in terms of trade dependency are thus at greater risk of conflict escalation. According to this logic, dyads at risk include China and Vietnam, China and Taiwan, Russia and Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, Russia and Georgia, and finally Turkey and Syria. Slightly imbalanced dyads include China and Japan, Russia and Hungary, and China and India. For all other dyads, both countries are relatively independent in terms of trade, and therefore the effect of their trade relation on conflict outbreak is neutral.

One-third of all dyads are projected to experience a two-sided arms build-up over the next three years



Table 3. Risk factor assessment for 30 dangerous dyads



		Balance of power	Power transition	Nuclear deterrence	Armament build-up	Defensive alliances	Regime similarity	Trade dependence
Russia	Georgia	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Imbalanced
Russia	United States	Not balanced	No power transition	Nuclear	One-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Russia	Ukraine	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	Two-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Neither very similar nor very different	Imbalanced
Russia	NATO	Not balanced	No power transition	Nuclear	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Different	N/A
Russia	Moldova	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	Two-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Imbalanced
Russia	Hungary	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Neither very similar nor very different	Somewhat imbalanced
Kosovo	Serbia	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	Two-sided build-up	No alliances	Neither very similar nor very different	Mutually independent
Turkey	Greece	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Romania	Hungary	Balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Neither very similar nor very different	Mutually dependent
Armenia	Azerbaijan	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
United States	Venezuela	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	No build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Imbalanced
Egypt	Ethiopia	Not balanced	Power transition	Non-nuclear	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Similar	Mutually independent
Egypt	Sudan	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	One-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Similar	Mutually independent
Burundi	Rwanda	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	One-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Similar	Mutually independent
Ethiopia	Sudan	Not balanced	Power transition	Non-nuclear	One-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Similar	Mutually independent
Rwanda	Uganda	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Similar	Somewhat imbalanced
China	United States	Balanced	Power transition	Nuclear	No build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Mutually dependent
China	India	Not balanced	No power transition	Nuclear	One-sided build-up	No alliances	Different	Somewhat imbalanced
China	Vietnam	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	No alliances	Similar	Imbalanced
China	Japan	Not balanced	Power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Somewhat imbalanced
China	Taiwan	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	No build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Imbalanced
South Korea	North Korea	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Japan	North Korea	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	Two-sided build-up	Two-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Syria	Turkey	Not balanced	No power transition	Non-nuclear	One-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Similar	Imbalanced
Israel	Iran	Balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	No alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Israel	Lebanon	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Israel	Palestine	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	N/A	No alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Syria	United States	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	No build-up	One-sided alliances	Different	Mutually independent
Iran	Saudi Arabia	Not balanced	Power transition	Non-nuclear	One-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Similar	Mutually independent
Afghanistan	Pakistan	Not balanced	No power transition	Imbalanced	One-sided build-up	One-sided alliances	Neither very similar nor very different	Somewhat imbalanced

## Thinking the unthinkable: systemic war

Unfortunately, not all intrastate wars remain confined within borders, and neither do all interstate wars remain contained between two states. At the most extreme, war contagion and spill-over of war lead to the collapse of an entire international or regional system. Even though systemic wars are rather rare (with a historical track record of eight), they have all-encompassing effects. As policymakers and military planners need to anticipate both wars that are most likely and wars that would be most impactful, systemic war needs to be included in a comprehensive study of future conflict.

The First World War shows that when escalation is badly managed and certain conditions are met, major power tensions may culminate into an all-out, systemic war. More generally, this is more likely when six structural features are present in the international system: when there is a disbalance between raw power and international standing among rising or declining great powers; when great powers vie for regional influence and territories; when a rigid alliance system is in place that allows for major power entrapment into conflict; when nationalist sentiments are on the rise in multiple countries, feeding war proneness among both the elite and population; and finally when smaller powers behave recklessly, feeding tensions between the great powers. Worryingly, in today's international system, four of the structural features are present, one is partially present, and only one is absent (for an overview and comparison with the period preceding the outbreak of the First World War, see [Table 4](#)). In short, there is a disbalance between raw material power and international standing, causing revisionist behaviour by China and Russia while the US seeks to maintain the status quo. States increasingly vie for influence and over territory, with the invasion of Ukraine as a key example but weapon transfers from the West to Ukraine also being part of this trend. Foreign policy is clearly becoming militarised, as is demonstrated by that same war and the increasingly belligerent naval presence of China in the South China Sea. Finally, domestic nationalist discourses are becoming more dominant across the world. When it comes to tighter alliance structures, today's track record is mixed, with some countries (Finland and Sweden in NATO and Australia in AUKUS) seeking alliance protection while others (India, South Africa) choosing to hedge at this point. Finally, reckless behaviour by smaller and middle powers remains relatively limited, even if some states, including those in the Gulf, are diversifying their military partnerships in a quest to reap the benefits from the transition into a multipolar world.

Policymakers and military planners need to anticipate both wars that are most likely and wars that would be most impactful

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Table 4. System features, comparison 1880-1914 and 2022



System feature	1880-1914: power(s) involved	1880-1914: example(s)	Assessment present situation:	2022: example(s)
<b>Disbalance between raw power and international standing</b>	Germany	Exclusion of Germany from colonial agreements	+	China seeks to recoup its role as the Middle Kingdom; the US pushes back  Russia seeks to reclaim its old role as self-perceived empire
<b>Competition over regional influence and territory</b>	All major powers	Alsace-Lorraine; Balkan Wars	+	Russia's invasion of Ukraine; Western weapon transfers to Ukraine; Chinese belligerence on Taiwan; influence campaigns in Africa
<b>Rigid alliance system</b>	All major powers	Triple Entente; Dual alliance	+/-	Tighter alliance structures and increased polarisation; Finland and Sweden joining NATO  But also: non-alignment movement (India, South Africa, Brazil, Nigeria, the UAE, Vietnam)
<b>Militarisation of foreign policy</b>	Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia	Austrian military threats against Serbia	+	Chinese maritime claims and aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea  A global increase in threats of use of force
<b>Domestic nationalism</b>	All major powers		+	China's official discourse on ethics, morality and kindness in the relation to Taiwan
<b>Reckless or opportunistic small power behaviour</b>	All major powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia in particular	Serbia pitting Russia and France against Austria-Hungary	-	Within NATO, small and middle powers such as Poland, the Baltics and Slovakia thus far thread carefully. Yet traditional US partners such as the UAE are strengthening their (military) ties with China.



## The official views

To anticipate where European militaries will be acting, it is wise to take into account official perceptions of threats and related policy responses as they indeed may shape realities. Official thinking is captured in strategic documents such as NATO's Strategic Concept, the EU's Strategic Compass and national security strategies. In a nutshell, strategic competition features as number one threat especially in US and NATO thinking, with the US' emphasis more on China and NATO's emphasis more on Russia. Meanwhile the EU, even if making significant steps towards aligning the Russian threat perception, also continues to place emphasis on the threats to European security emerging from instability in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Strait of Hormuz. See [Table 5](#) for a summary of the key components of the official threat perceptions.

Table 5. Official security perceptions: threats, missions, regions



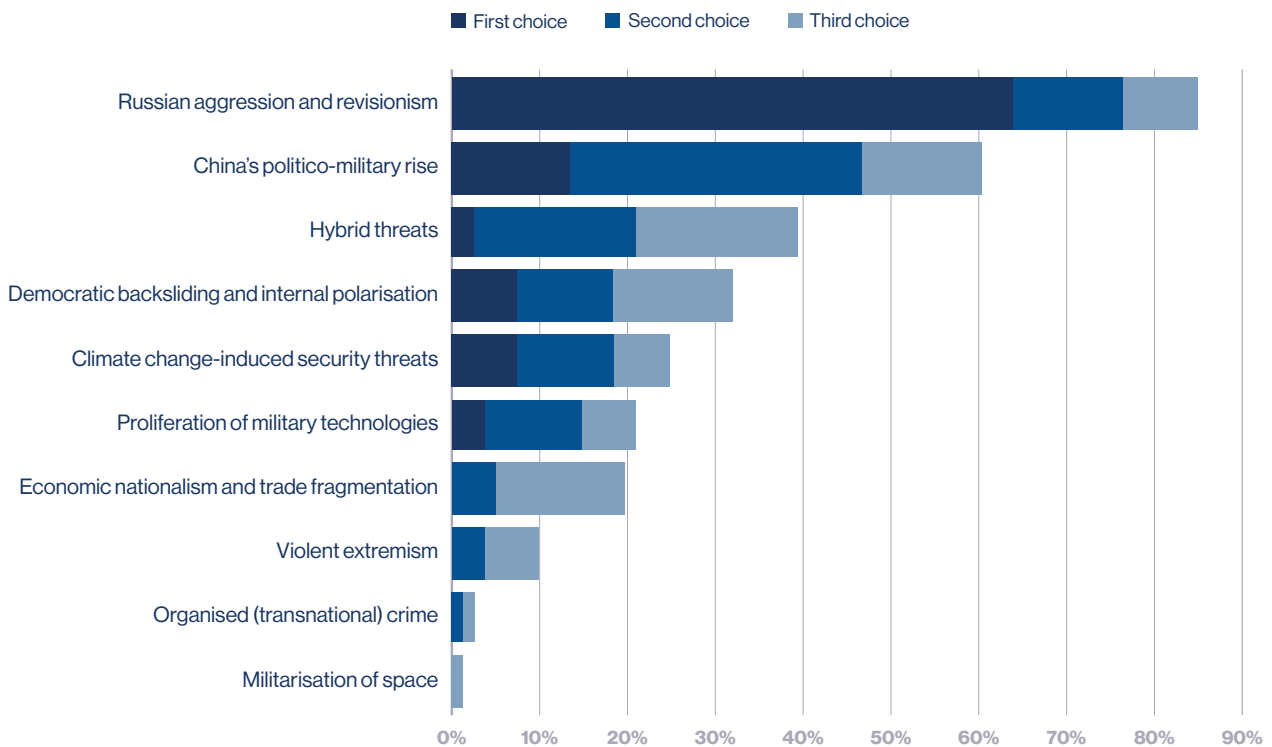
	Threats	Missions	Focus regions
The US	Changing distribution of power	Deterrence and assurance	Indo-Pacific and Europe
	Disruptive technologies	Military partnerships	
NATO	Russian aggression and revisionism	Deterrence and assurance	Eastern Europe (non-NATO/EU territory)
	Democratic backsliding	Military cooperation and training-type missions	
	Terrorism, conflict, fragility and instability		
The EU	Russian aggression and major geopolitical shifts	Crisis management	Europe
	Hybrid threats	Counter-hybrid	The Sahel, Horn of Africa and Strait of Hormuz
	Climate change	Military cooperation	
		Freedom of navigation and overflight	Indo-Pacific

## The expert views

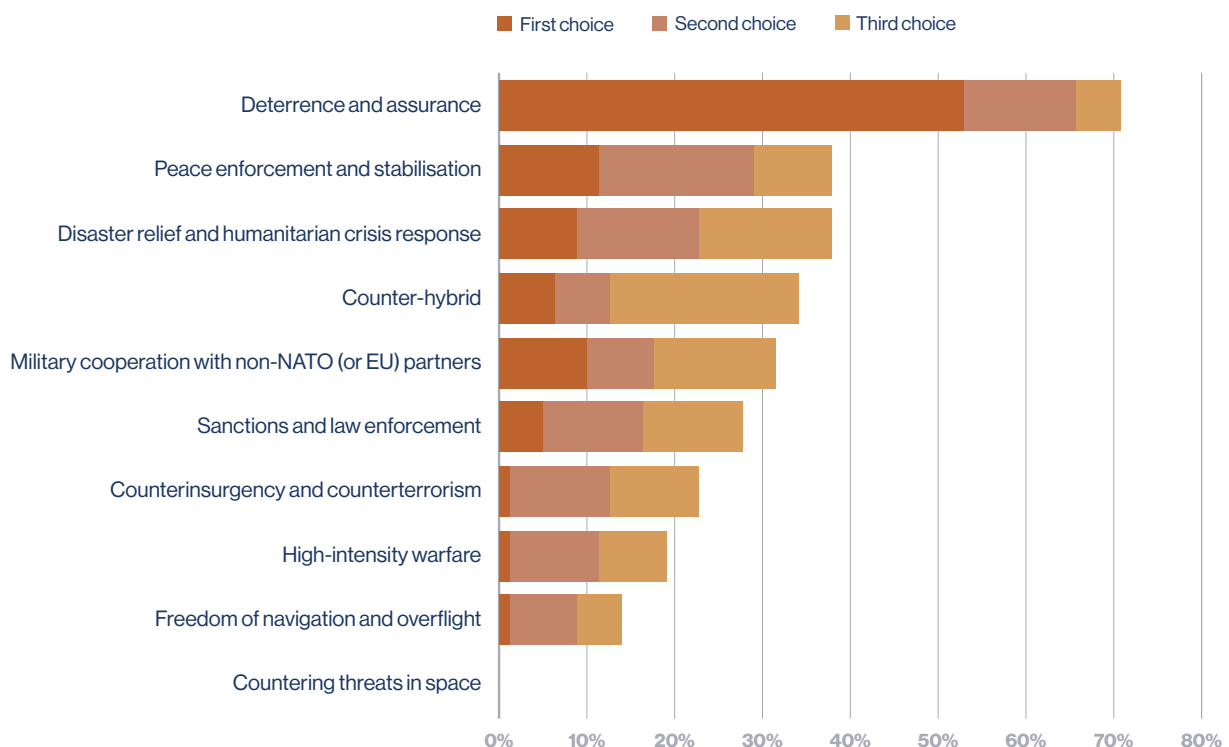
Finally, and in addition to official views captured in strategy documents, a total of 80 European experts have shared their insights on future threats and military missions. Carried out in spring 2022, Russia unsurprisingly comes out as the most important security risk (see [Figure 4](#)), followed by China's political-military rise, while deterrence and assurance missions are seen as the most important mission types (see [Figure 5](#)) for European security forces, with Eastern Europe and EU/NATO territory as the most vital regions. Experts foresee a clear (preferred) division of labour between NATO and the EU, with the former focusing on deterrence, assurance, and high-intensity warfare and the latter taking on disaster relief, humanitarian crisis response, counter hybrid and security cooperation (see [Figure 6](#)). Meanwhile ad-hoc coalitions are considered the preferred format for counterterrorism and -insurgency operations. Such a division of labour is not as clearly anticipated in strategic documents by said organisations. [Table 6](#) below offers a summary.

80 European experts have shared their insights on future threats and military missions

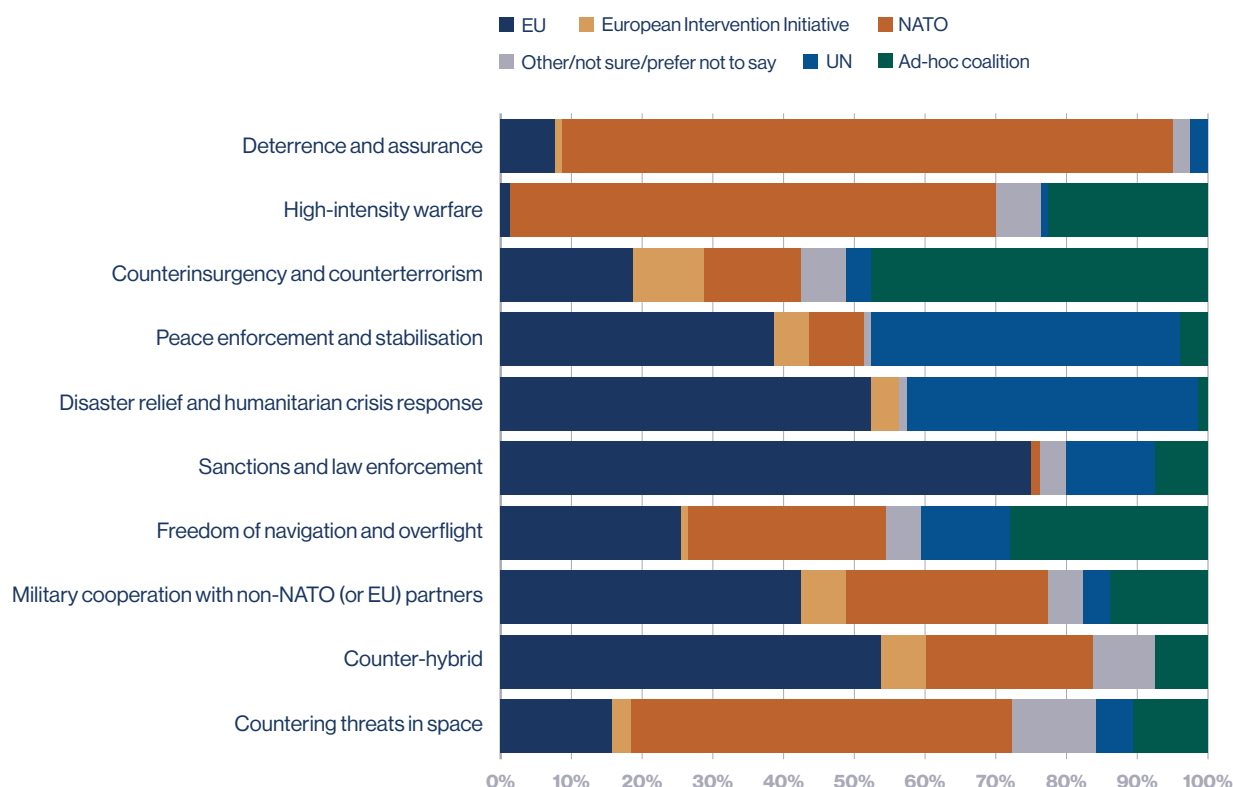
**Figure 4. Which are, in your opinion, the most important threats to European security over the next 10 years? Overview of threats that were listed as first, second or third choice.**



**Figure 5. Please rank the military mission types that European armed forces will be carrying out most frequently, either collectively or individually, over the next 10 years, from most likely to least likely. Overview of mission types that were listed as first, second or third choice.**



**Figure 6. From your perspective, what would be the preferred format to carry out each of the military mission types? Please choose the most preferred format per mission type.**



**Table 6. Expert survey: threats, missions, regions, task division**



	Future threats	Future missions	Most salient future regions	Task division
Expert survey	Great power competition	Deterrence and assurance	Eastern Europe	NATO: deterrence and assurance; high-intensity warfare; countering threats in space
	Hybrid threats	Peace enforcement and stabilisation	EU/NATO territory	
	Democratic backsliding	Disaster relief and humanitarian crisis response	North and Sub-Saharan Africa	EU: Disaster relief and humanitarian crisis response; sanctions and law enforcement; counter-hybrid; military cooperation with non-EU/NATO partners
	Technological competition	Counter-hybrid		
		Military cooperation with non-EU/NATO partners		Ad-hoc: counter-terrorism/insurgency



## Conclusions and recommendations

Synthesising the main insights on future war and instability from chapter 3 to 8, a total of five of higher level policy imperatives for European militaries emerge. Together, they set out the broader parameters within for more concrete policy steps – which follow in the second part of this conclusion.

**Watch out for War with a capital W.** The picture that emerges is by all means grim. Conflict between the major military powers is a defining feature of the current era, spurring a radical shift back to the traditional defence tasks of deterrence and assurance. For Europeans, this means a renewed focus on its backyard: Eastern Europe. But the challenges stemming from renewed strategic competition extend well beyond the European continent: as existing rules and norms are being challenged, the protection of sea lines of communication in the Indo-Pacific, the Strait of Hormuz, the Arctic and elsewhere will require attention, resources and capabilities. In addition, the return of great power competition intersects with and adds to regional rivalries such as in the Middle East, emboldening middle powers to advance their strategic interests and compete with one another – either just below or above the threshold of war.

**Escape entrapment.** If strategic competition is left unchecked and escalation management fails, a full-blown, systemic war may loom. Most of the structural features that have caused the international system to break down before are present today. The risk of systemic collapse is small yet cannot be underestimated given its impact. In this context, risky dyads are those in which great powers are involved on both sides, either directly or through defence commitments. Relevant dyads include Russia-US, Russia-NATO, China-US, China-Japan, China-Taiwan, North Korea-South Korea, and Japan-North Korea. The risk could be higher when the dyad involves a power transition: this is the case for China-US and China-Japan. Non-military means to counter systemic breakdown deserve rigorous examination and preventative measures need to be taken to avoid entrapment and alleviate pressures. So the increases in military budgets and strengthening of military postures need to be combined with sustained diplomatic efforts to keep the channels of communication open. Confidence-building efforts through bilateral and multilateral arrangements need to be pursued while room for manoeuvre for de-escalation is preserved.

**Prevent and contain interstate conflict.** Even if great powers manage to avert a systemic war, interstate conflict risk is nonetheless projected to increase given a confluence of global trends. Dangerous dyads in Europe and Europe's immediate neighbourhood are, in addition to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Russia-Moldova, Turkey-Greece, and Armenia-Azerbaijan. In Africa, Egypt-Ethiopia and Ethiopia-Sudan stand out, while in the Middle East the Iranian-Saudi relationship is projected to be unstable. Here too deterrent efforts need to be coupled with preventive measures aimed at preventing war outbreak and containing its spill over effects.

**Continue to address global instability factors.** Security challenges that occupied policy-makers and militaries in the post-Cold War era have not disappeared. The risks that come with state fragility, including polarisation, violent extremism and intergroup violence, are unlikely to abate. Indeed, new trends and developments further exacerbate such risks. In traditional societies, digitalisation and rapid modernisation can be highly destabilising, while the democratisation of military technology renders such risks increasingly violent. If anything, the reach and scale of these security challenges are expected to rise as the result of increased strategic

Conflict between the major military powers is a defining feature of the current era

competition over zones of influence, and the continuing transnationalisation of violent extremism, and digitalisation. Political and social volatility can be manipulated more effectively by outside actors while advances in communication technologies make discontent, radicalism and polarisation spread further and further. New technologies and battle-tested playbooks will enable hybrid conflict on steroids in the decade to come. A fierce battle of narratives is being fought and 'the West' is by no means on a winning streak. Importantly, such challenges are not constrained to foreign lands; European societies are by no means immune to radicalisation, polarisation and democratic decline.

Even if strategic and interstate competition has become policymakers' main worry, intrastate wars and other forms of political and social volatility will thus demand attention and resources. Efforts to tackle the structural drivers of vulnerability, escape conflict traps and make pillars of progress advance and not undermine societies need to be revamped. European militaries are thus expected to be stretched across domains, regions and mission types. Stabilisation, peace enforcement, disaster-relief, counter-hybrid, and military cooperation all feature high. The Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, but also the Middle East and Eastern Europe demand attention.

**Address the climate-security nexus.** Last, global warming leads to increasing insecurity over food, water, energy and health, causing people to flee and pitting communities, countries and regions against one another. The Middle East, North-Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arctic are the regions where the conflict risks will be most severe. Given their proximity and relevance to Europe, Europeans cannot look the other way. Disaster relief and humanitarian crisis management, peace enforcement and stabilisation, but also counterterrorism activities will therefore occupy their militaries.

## 1.1 Policy recommendations

Even if strategic alignment among European (and NATO) countries is taking place, allowing for better prioritisation, the challenges ahead are manifold and the implications for policy responses diffuse. As the world is growing increasingly complex and belligerent, an ever-larger variety of military capacities will be required and expected from European states in a growing number of regions. Even with deterrence and assurance missions becoming Europe's most important military activity, more typical post-Cold War security challenges are not necessarily going away, therewith sustaining the need for security force assistance, and counterinsurgency and peacekeeping missions in its neighbourhood. The rapidly crystallising effects of climate change add additional layers of fragility, while new technologies already spur a demand for counter-hybrid activities and soon/already also the need for counter-space threats capacity. Freedom of navigation and overflight are likely to be challenged by major, small and non-state powers alike, yet access to the global commons will remain fundamental to European security and prosperity. Finally, should deterrence missions fail, Europe may find itself dragged into high-intensity warfare, either in its direct neighbourhood or elsewhere. In such a scenario, alliance commitments may force Europe to act, also beyond its own region.

European militaries – currently racing to catch up in terms of capabilities, planning and strategy – will thus be stretched. Even with well-thought-through prioritisations, reality can catch up, and states will not always have the freedom to choose where to get involved. Policy recommendations therefore are:

An ever-larger variety of military capacities will be required and expected from European states in a growing number of regions

**1. Deter and assure.** Russia's belligerence pushes European militaries to focus on revamping their deterrence and assurance postures and capabilities. Europe should:

**1.1 Move forward and intensify efforts to implement NATO's New Force Model.** This includes enhancing NATO's presence on the eastern flank through replacing current battlegroups by brigade-sized units with prepositioned stocks for heavily armoured vehicles and as such complement the deterrence-by-punishment component of the Alliance's deterrence posture with a more robust deterrence-by-denial component. NATO needs to ensure the readiness of 100,000 troops in less than 10 days, 200,000 troops within 30 days and at least 500,000 troops in 1-6 months; with an Allied Reaction Force of 40,000 troops (replacing the NATO Response Force) to be deployable before a crisis occurs; Europeans should contribute equally to achieve set goals.

**1.2 Increase investments in defensive and offensive capabilities.** The new strategic environment requires increased European investments in its defence posture and as such bolster the European NATO pillar. European states should invest in deep strike as well as A2/AD capabilities, yet also rapidly fill current deficiencies such as in command-and-control capacity, combat service support, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). In addition, Europe needs to overcome ammunition as well as personnel shortages.

**1.3 Ensure alliance and EU cohesion.** Throughout the first months of the Russo-Ukrainian war, NATO has shown remarkable cohesion. Allies should not take it as a given that this will inevitably continue as the war continues, or when other security challenges arise. Therefore, allies should coordinate closely, fulfil their alliance commitments, and reaffirm and ensure the fulfilment of democratic principles on which NATO is founded. Concretely, this means that the rule of law needs defending across the alliance and within the EU, including in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Turkey.

**1.4 Increase the ability of NATO partners to fend for themselves.** Invest in military cooperation programmes such as the NATO Partnership for Peace or the European Peace Facility to bolster military capabilities of partner states and therewith discourage potentially revisionist behaviour by third states (a so-called porcupine strategy). Georgia, Moldova and naturally Ukraine should take priority.

**1.5 Re-examine the arms control-deterrence nexus.** Even if current times are barely optimal for arms control, deterrence ultimately depends on it. Increased time, efforts and resources need to be dedicated also to arms control, non-proliferation and confidence-building measures, including dialogues on doctrines and postures, information exchanges, hotlines, and pre-notifications. In particular, increased attention should be paid to how such measures relate to deterrence.

**1.6 Dedicate effort and resources to nuclear security and safety.** With nuclear deterrence once again taking a prominent position in NATO's revamped deterrence and assurance strategy, ensuring the safety and security of nuclear forces and arrangement is extremely important, to ensure the safety of civilians and set an example to nuclear powers elsewhere.

**1.7 Hold explorative discussions on European nuclear burden sharing.** Today's changing security landscape and perception thereof as well as the uncertainty with regard to a sustained US interest in European security spur the need to reinvigorate initial discussions on the role of French and British nuclear forces in Europe's collective security.

The new strategic environment requires increased European investments in its defence posture

Such discussions were first brought up by French president Emmanuel Macron in 2020 and could be carried forward.

**2. Get serious about European specialisation.** To efficiently deploy European capabilities and overcome current deficiencies such as in command-and-control capacity, combat service support, airlift, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, multinational defence cooperation should be advanced. Ultimately, European militaries should be able to carry out Libya-type operations independently from the United States. Concretely, Europe should:

**2.1 Further invest in and expand structured capability groups for collective defence purposes.** This can be done per region. For instance, the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force could be developed into a structured capability group for Northern Europe with participating countries contributing different capabilities.

**2.2 Establish functional structured capability groups,** for instance to allow for European crisis management autonomy. In addition to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5000 troops, a European intervention group with rapid decision-making procedures and the flexibility for the UK to participate in could be established to bring together specialised capabilities for higher-end operations; while stabilisation groups could pool sources for lower-end post-conflict operations.

**2.3 Advance integration between national armed forces.** For example, further integration of the Dutch and the German armies will be necessary to ensure availability and readiness of troops as the battlegroup in Lithuania is being transformed into a heavy brigade.

**3. Invest in a strong European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB).** Across Europe, military budgets have increased by roughly 40%. Dealing with time pressure to fill capability gaps rapidly, Europeans however will be inclined to spend uncoordinatedly and buy off-the-shelf products from non-European defence industries. This would increase Europe's capability fragmentation, erode its defence sector and undermine European defence integration writ large. Instead, Europeans should:

**3.1 Coordinate capability priorities** through existing frameworks to identify and plug capability gaps. Examples include the EU's Capability Development Plan (CDP) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) as well as NATO's Defence Planning Capability Review (DPCR) and related Capability Targets. National defence funding plans have often been insufficient for the implementation of these capability priorities, in part because NATO defence planning priorities have been misaligned with national ones. Given the complexity and severity of today's threat environment, cautious alignment between national and NATO/EU capability priorities is necessary.

**3.2 Coordinate procurement.** As Europeans are rushing to replenish their stocks and increase the quantity of their defence equipment, they should work together to avoid fragmentation, ensure interoperability, and increase their leverage vis-à-vis sellers. Collective procurement of additional PAC-3 missiles among European Patriot users is an example. The recently proposed a *Short Term Instrument for increasing collaboration of the Member States in the defence procurement phase* should be established. That said, coordinated procurement of complex systems and platforms is only feasible among close strategic partners (e.g. the Netherlands and Germany) as it depends on the synchronisation of development and procurement cycles.

A European intervention group with the flexibility for the UK to participate in could be established to bring together specialised capabilities for higher-end operations

**3.3 Create European Champions** capable of carrying out large scale defence projects along the production and procurement cycle, including research and development, production, after-sales services and upkeep/upgrade programmes. A strong industrial policy at the European (not national) level is key to avoid fragmentation and allow for European industries to deliver both quantitatively and qualitatively, for instance in the domain of aerospace, naval platforms, missile technology and missile defence. At the same time, ensure that small and medium size defence players – who are crucial to innovation – have access to funding programmes and the supply chains of the large system integrators. For instance, it could be wise to fund the development of capabilities by small coalitions consisting of one large producer supported by a limited set of smaller ones based on excellence – instead of very large coalitions of providers based on geographical spread.

**3.4 Strike a balance between renovation and innovation.** Industrial efforts should be carefully balanced to ensure that the military needs of both today and the future are met. To ensure the continuing existence of a European defence industry, the need to innovate cannot be overlooked. Increased government support for education and R&D is necessary. Concretely, European states should increase their R&D investment to at least 2% of military expenditures as recommended by the European Defence Agency.

**4. Share responsibilities and capabilities with allies and partners.** In an increasingly complex and dangerous world, Europe cannot do everything, everywhere. For example, deterring Russia in the Baltics and Eastern Europe requires different capabilities than deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. Choices need to be made, in consultation with allies and partners outside of Europe, and a division of labour is inevitable. European NATO partners should:

**4.1 Consult with non-European NATO partners on effective burden-sharing**, designating different tasks among alliance members to avoid a duplication of efforts or militaries being stretched too thin. In the short term, the balance between US and European boots on the ground in the east should be carefully considered. A permanent presence of (European) NATO countries in the Baltic States and Poland – which as of now NATO countries deployed there cannot furnish simply because of troop shortages – can help rebalance the European contribution to NATO's collective defence.

**4.2 Closely cooperate and coordinate with partners in the Indo-Pacific;** share and pool resources and infrastructure already present in the region; and designate zones of responsibility to secure sealines of communication, whereby Europe could focus on waters closer to Europe such as the Western Indian Ocean.

**4.3 Think beyond 2024.** In their strategic planning, Europeans should think ahead and carefully consider the potential that alliance commitments will not always be as robust as they appear today. The potential of a future US administration revising its defence posture in and commitment to Europe forced Europeans to take more responsibility for their own security. European states should strike a careful if not precarious balance between transatlanticism and Europeanism, showing their commitment to the alliance yet also building towards a future in which its existence may be jeopardised.

Concretely,  
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## 5. Prepare for a future in which access to resources, technology and space is not necessarily a given. Concretely, European militaries should:

**5.1 Prepare to take a more active role in securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs)** by ensuring the appropriate naval capabilities. Further analysis of future resources and supply chain vulnerabilities is needed to allow for an effective anticipation of future military capability needs. The Arctic is one such focus region, with the Joint Expeditionary Force as a potential structured capability group to assume responsibility here. For the securing of SLOCs further away from Europe (e.g. the Indo-Pacific), blue water naval capabilities should be pooled and shared – potentially within the EU given its collective interest – and potentially integrated into permanent structured capability groups.

**5.2 Step up efforts to secure access to space-based communication and increase resilience of its space capabilities.** Efforts within the EU to ensure space-based secure connectivity are slowly picking up and should be intensified: they include Galileo, Copernicus and the recently proposed Security Connectivity Initiative.

## 6. Continue developing capabilities to engage in hybrid conflict and hybrid war. Given the enormous humanitarian, economic, and military costs associated with interstate war, states are likely to continue competing under the threshold of large-scale violence, including in cyberspace or through the use of proxies.

**6.1 Enhance the resilience of vital infrastructure.** For instance, the coast guard and navy could assume a more active role in surveilling and protecting underseas communication cables in for instance the North Sea.

**6.2 Strengthen defensive and offensive cyber capabilities** to allow for in-band (within domain) responses -and therewith strengthen the potential for smaller states to deploy an “asymmetric deterrence” capability vis-à-vis larger states. It also requires enhanced abilities to detect and defend against cyberattacks to reduce vulnerability. For cyber deterrence to succeed, coordination among government agencies; state and private actors; and international partners is necessary.

**6.3 Bolster societal resilience** within Europe and elsewhere, to decrease vulnerability against foreign influencing and counter polarisation. Outside of the EU, the focus should be with NATO Europe's eastern and southern flanks, especially Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina; as well as Dutch constituent countries and special municipalities in the Caribbean Sea. Engage with the private sector and leverage legal instruments to reduce opportunities for meddling via social media and other online platforms. Invest in education on democratic principles. A role for the military could be to strengthen awareness of security risks across all domains.

## 7. Prepare for a hot and unstable world. Global warming is rapidly creating myriad security risks, and militaries – known for their vast carbon footprints – cannot stay behind in preparing for such challenges and work towards a cleaner organisation themselves.

**7.1 Invest in climate-related contingency preparedness** through incorporating climate risk scenarios in war games and exercises. Prepare for an increased role in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and other types of defence support to civil authorities.

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**7.2 Incentivise research and development to decrease militaries' carbon footprint.**

This entails moving towards carbon-free electricity for and net zero emissions from army installations as well as developing and investing in electrified vehicles fleets and more.

**7.3 Help address third countries deal with the impact of climate change, even if the direct impact costs are not directly affecting Europe,** to help mitigate potential conflict instigators. Additional funding for countries most at risk of climate-change-induced conflict can prove cost-effective in the future. Continue embedding climate security risks within development cooperation policy programmes, for instance by ensuring fair access to water and food resources through equitable governance arrangements.

**8. Lastly: it should be clear that meeting security threats requires more than kinetic capabilities. Instead, leverage all instruments of influence.** The effective implementation of a comprehensive toolbox and holistic approach to security is therefore essential and diplomatic and political instruments need to be brought to bear alongside robust defence capabilities. Note that defence organisations have a key role to play here too especially by taking early warning, conflict prevention, and military diplomacy seriously. Europeans should:

**8.1 Invest in the military, diplomatic and political capabilities** to mitigate interstate and intrastate conflict risk. Strengthen early warning capabilities and create a link with early action within ministries of defence and foreign affairs. Target Security Force Assistance accordingly. Develop the human capital (cadres of trained diplomats, military attaches, and conflict resolution professionals), the knowledge and expertise, the institutional infrastructure, and the networks with NGOs, to facilitate conflict prevention, mediation and conflict resolution.

Invest in climate-related contingency preparedness through incorporating climate risk scenarios in war games and exercises



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