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# EUROPEAN SECURITY: THE BACKBONE OF THE EPC

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**EPC OBSERVATORY ANALYSIS**

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**A**mid the current ‘polycrisis’, improving security and stability in Europe is likely to represent the main coalescing factor bringing together countries with otherwise significantly diverging interests and values.

## Raison d’être

The European Political Community (EPC) was originally born around a single point of agreement: none of the participating states found Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine acceptable. This alone provided a modicum of cooperation around a very basic non-aggression principle, whose exact contours would soon prove highly fluid, as seen in the ensuing Azeri incursion into Nagorno-Karabakh. In the same context, it has also served as a forum for dialogue with significant non-EU security providers, such as the UK and Turkey.

It is no surprise then that the recently published [Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform](#) envisages the European Political Community (EPC) as a potential framework to keep together a Union where cohesion around shared values may, in the future, be diluted and reserved to a core group. Meanwhile, those who will not sign up to the whole set of values and obligations can still come together around “geopolitical convergence and political cooperation in policy areas of mutual importance and relevance, such as security, energy and the environment and climate policy”.

Therefore, any institutionalisation of the EPC, if it ever happens, ought to preserve security at its core and not come at the expense of this informality. That is to say it needs to acknowledge the value to participants of a community of interests (and of open and unrestricted dialogue to bridge over existing differences), seen as a welcome complement to the more normative and binding community of values within Euro-Atlantic structures.

To be sure, this common denominator is very low. Yet, under the current geopolitical circumstances, its relevance should not be underestimated. Dangerous times require a safe venue for constructive negotiation, de-escalation and averting conflict. In fact, the success of the EPC may very much depend on whether it manages to deliver just that. The unimpressive results of the Granada meeting against the background of renewed Kosovo-Serbia tensions,



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and the notable absence of the Azeri leader following Baku's military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh do not bode well. However, this new format, defined by its members' interests, has probably not exhausted its potential yet. The danger remains that, instead of serving as a de-escalation mechanism, it might be used as a platform to bypass the EU and NATO to negotiate a purely transactional peace in Ukraine, as war fatigue settles in and a new Trump term looms on the horizon.

## Few strings attached

There is significant consensus that the highest value of the EPC may be represented by its non-normative framework, under which difficult conversations can be had among top-level leaders - some of whom don't necessarily get to rub shoulders as often with their counterparts as EU and NATO members do. Minilaterals and bilaterals, as well as plenary meetings, benefit from a format that offers inclusiveness, without the absolute need for final agreements, conclusions or joint declarations. Hence, prioritising the EPC as a forum for ideas and trust-building (a precursor to action, which may subsequently be taken in other fora) seems more natural than looking at it as an operational body. A minimalist approach creates space to bring major geopolitical challenges down to the practical level, albeit only incrementally, at a time of abundant rhetoric, but limited enthusiasm from the EU for all-out engagement as a global strategic player.

Despite the obvious benefits of flexibility, avoiding the traps is equally daunting. Being well positioned to serve as a venue for [pan-European consultation on dealing with Russian aggression and for the eventual aftermath of the war in Ukraine](#) beyond the short term, the EPC can only preserve a common front, address and mitigate differences and eventually perhaps start a process of designing relations with post-war, post-imperialist Russia if it avoids the risk of sacrificing the values-based cohesion at the core of the EU and NATO in favour of outright transactionalism. Here is where the role of Euro-Atlantic member states is crucial.

The EU itself cannot be seen as dominating the EPC design, which seeks to avoid precisely the kind of constraints that come with EU membership. Yet if any decisions emerge subsequent to conversations around the European Political Community summits, they will likely be driven to a large extent by the European Union and NATO, the only collective organisations that have the resources and capacity to implement consequential security initiatives. Moreover, members of the two make up a majority of the EPC participants and as such they can (and should!) use their influence to make sure they hold their peers to democratic standards and international norms in accordance to Euro-Atlantic values.

The informal venue of the EPC summits may be used as a space for freer conversations that could generate fresh ideas, which do away with some of the path dependencies that have so far not led to any breakthroughs as regards bilateral tensions and frozen conflicts. Yet, it is highly unlikely that the parties to these conflicts would be inclined to conclude any ambitious agreements, absent incentives and guarantees from the major players, such as the EU and

NATO. It should also be noted that of late, those who have manifested the highest interest to be heard outside the established formats have mostly been challengers to international democratic norms and values; they are likely to use the European Political Community as a platform to redefine what it means to be European, away from EU values, not just wider than the EU-27.

## Getting Europe's act together

Key EU states like France or Germany see the European Political Community as a venue for potentially advancing discussions around the European security architecture, a subject that has recently started to generate more interest even among those who were not originally partial to the idea of developing a more advanced concept of European defence. The EPC could be a venue for deepening the thinking around it, be it only in terms of expanding joint purchases and giving a boost to the European defence industry.

While EU-level cooperation builds on already existing trust among the 27, the central role that foreign policy alignment has acquired within the EU enlargement process testifies to the fact that EU/NATO partners are instrumental in European stability and security. The attractiveness of the EPC format may well derive from the possibility of it serving as a confidence-building mechanism.

This will not be without challenges. Even within the EU itself, Central and Eastern Europeans are reluctant to the whole idea of the European Political Community because it leaves out the one actor they perceive as being the most reliable for the provision of European security – the United States. CEE is likely to see a strictly *European* Political Community as useless, if not outright unwelcome, a conduit for a French version of a multi-speed Europe which disrupts both enlargement and deeper integration and excludes the United States from the continental strategic arena. As discussions around a possible peace deal in Ukraine intensify, worries that Paris may be inclined to compromise with Russia at the expense of regional security also multiply.

Countries like Poland or Romania welcome efforts by European states to invest in their collective security, especially in view of a potential Trump term starting in 2025. Nevertheless, they view with suspicion any major form of institutionalisation that could diminish the role of NATO. Dialogue with the US on security in Europe remains crucial for now, and the transatlantic relationship vital to the continent. [The prominent role of the UK](#), a major security player making a comeback into Europe through this platform is seen as testifying to that.

At the upcoming EPC summit in the UK, the British Prime-Minister has a good opportunity to alleviate fears of unwelcome parallelisms, while sealing the character of the EPC as a non-EU, non-NATO forum for taking gradual steps toward more Europe-wide cooperation, in a way that is compatible with Euro-Atlantic values and foreign policy interests.

## Form first, content after

At a time when a lot is at stake in European security and the international system is under significant pressure, the need for dialogue seems to secure the EPC survival as a place for informal conversations. Despite the [minilateral initiatives](#) that have emerged - such as in energy or infrastructure/ connectivity, clearly the EPC is not destined to micromanage sectoral cooperation. It will probably continue to be mainly [a venue for strategic dialogue and political crisis management](#). Its overall purpose may remain rather blurry, developing and shifting organically for a good while. Nevertheless, gradual consolidation and structuring of European identity and solidarity (an aspirational, civilisational endeavour) may not be a small feat in times of crisis, if indeed that is the direction in which the EPC manages to move, while avoiding a dilution of Euro-Atlantic values-based cohesion around strategic objectives. Until then, a few areas of action have emerged either as joint sectoral priorities, or potential avenues to cultivate in the future, which could feature on the UK summit agenda:

- The Ukraine-Moldova security complex, the sustainability of the Solidarity Lanes, options for the provision of security guarantees.
- Maritime security, especially in light of the recent escalations in the Black Sea (drones accidentally falling in Romania and Bulgaria, drifting mines, threats to civilian vessels).
- De-confliction: conflict and bilateral dispute resolution, crisis prevention (Serbia-Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, secessionist rhetoric and actions in Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the context of a gridlocked OSCE, but also advancing discussions on conflicts outside Europe, such as China-Taiwan, Gaza, Russia's disruptive presence in Africa, etc. Following the decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in December last year, the EPC could provide an opportunity to discuss steps toward the resolution of the protracted, frozen conflict in Transnistria.
- Countering malign foreign influence, hybrid threats and threats to democracy and free elections (given that 2024 is a super-electoral year in Europe and worldwide!), strengthening information infrastructure and working to compensate for the lack of trust leading to limited intelligence sharing across the region.
- Areas of security beyond the strictly military and with an emphasis on a geoeconomic agenda that builds resilience, including against malign foreign influence and coercion: energy security (already a separate pillar of the EPC); trade and food security, supply chain resilience, in light of the crisis over Ukrainian grain exports, but also of disruptions in the Red Sea; potential financial instability affecting the global market; climate-driven instability.
- Areas of resilience that are likely to garner widespread interest for cooperation among participants, either because not all have access to international cooperation on these issues, or because of their saliency and immediacy:

- Cyber security - perhaps in the form of joint exercises, where NATO could also play a role;
- Countering terrorism;
- Managing irregular migration,
- Nuclear safety;
- Critical infrastructure protection;
- Civilian crisis management and disaster relief;
- Critical raw materials supply chains - where joint action may also focus the interest of European industry and improve coordination.

The multitude of current security challenges offers as many opportunities for the EPC to be relevant. Yet, after a modest summit in Granada, the UK domestic political context seems to offer a rather unfavourable background to the next meeting. The possibility that the whole idea of a European Political Community could fizzle out is still very much present. On the other hand, as shown above, Prime Minister Sunak has a good opportunity to inject it with new significance. Rather than various forms of institutionalisation, the make-or-break factor may be a meaningful agenda with tangible results and the capacity to gather leaders around them. By focusing on European cooperative security in a de-institutionalised way, the EPC could yet avoid becoming another quasi-failed multilateral organisation.