

Threats and Challenges to European Security and the Need for Well-informed Parliamentarians

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1. INTRODUCTION

Eurobarometer and other opinion polls at the national or European level show that Europeans are increasingly concerned not only about economic security (level of unemployment, social benefits), social cohesion and identity issues, political radicalization, and the rise of extremist and/or anti-establishment political parties, but also about physical security (external and internal).¹

The need for success stories at the EU level is stronger than ever. As mentioned in a recent study, “the focus must be on those game changing areas that matter most to European citizens or where they most agree that European action is needed and where member states cannot, can no longer or do not wish to deliver alone”.²

Defense and security appear to be areas where there is increasing need for European action, as well as increasing demand and support from citizens for initiatives and capacity building at the European level. Given the changing nature of security, with external and internal threats becoming more complex, versatile, hybrid, and cross-border (including as a result of digitalization and technological advances), it is becoming clear that the external and internal dimensions of security are increasingly interconnected and cannot be effectively dealt with in isolation or at the level of member states alone.³

To successfully address those challenges at the European level, substantial structural reforms in the broader security sector are necessary. In this context, the role of national parliaments, as well as of the European Parliament, will be critical. Raising awareness of the need to increase resilience and preparedness, staying well informed, and having a sound understanding of security issues (including threat assessments and possible solutions) will allow parliamentarians and other decision- and opinion-makers to make an important contribution in the shaping of effective national and European policies in the area of defense and security. Indeed, one of the most important obstacles to implementing some of the necessary reforms is the deeply held perceptions at the level of national officials, decision-makers, and publics. The role

About the Author



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of parliamentarians is crucial in convincing their constituencies that changes are necessary.

This paper presents the perceptions of European citizens, as well as the views of experts and decision-makers on risks to European security. It provides a concise, broad overview of the main threats to European security, as well as steps and initiatives that could be undertaken at the European level for dealing with those threats.

2. EUROPEAN PERCEPTIONS AND FEARS ABOUT SECURITY

Europe has been a continent marred by violence and war for several centuries. It has managed to transform itself into a continent of peace and prosperity since 1945, despite being at the epicenter of the Cold War. There has been a small number of significant outbreaks of violent conflict on European territory since then, with the deadliest ones being the Yugoslav civil war and the conflict in Ukraine, but the general perception has rightly been that of a peaceful and secure region. In the past decades European citizens' attention has focused more on economic and social concerns, but in the last few years fear about physical security has gained ground. This change has been

1 European Commission. (2017). [Public Opinion: Europeans' attitudes towards security.](#)

2 European Political Strategy Centre. (2019). [Delivering on European Common Goods. Strengthening Member States' Capacity to Act in the 21st Century.](#)

3 Ibid.

2 demonstrated in Eurobarometer surveys about perceptions and fears about security in 2011, 2015, and 2017. As mentioned in the 2017 survey analysis, people in the EU continue to have a strong feeling of security in the places in which they live and in their country in general, with around nine in ten saying that their neighborhood or their city are secure places to live in. However, the proportion of those who think that the EU is a secure place to live in has fallen significantly: 68% say so in 2017 compared with 79% in 2015.⁴

According to the 2017 survey among EU citizens,⁵ challenges to the internal security of the EU seen as important were: terrorism (95 percent), organized crime (93 percent), natural and human-made disasters (89 percent), and cybercrime (87 percent).⁶

Polls and focus groups portraying the views of experts and stakeholders show that different groups of policymakers, experts, and members of the public have similar perceptions and concerns regarding security. For example, according to the 2019 edition of the Global Risks Landscape produced by the World Economic Forum⁷ based on a survey among stakeholders from its network⁸, the most probable risks are extreme weather events, natural and human-made disasters, cyber-attacks, and migration. The Global Risks Landscape shows not only the perceived likelihood of global risks but also their potential impact according to survey respondents (see Figure 1).

Based on a pan-European survey comprising interviews with policymakers and members of the analytical community as well as research into policy documents, academic discourse, and media analysis, the European Council on Foreign Relations lists cyber-attacks, terrorism, uncontrolled migration, state collapse or civil war in the EU's neighborhood, and external meddling in domestic politics as the highest threats to European security (see Figure 2).

Finally, according to the European Political Strategy Centre, which analyses the threat perception of ten EU member states, the most important threats to European security are terrorism, cyber-threats, hybrid threats, uncontrolled migration, energy vulnerability, climate change and natural disasters, threats to critical infrastructure, regional conflicts, and failing states (see Figure 3).⁹

To sum up, there is an agreement on the kinds of security threats and risks on the global, European, and national level, even if their likelihood is sometimes perceived differently.

3. MAIN THREATS

Some of the threats to European security appeared in all of the above-mentioned threat assessments and surveys are presented below (in no order of priority).

i. External Threats: Great-Power Competition, Regional Conflicts, and Weak/Failed States

Europe's neighborhood has been plagued by multiple, extended, complex, and often interconnected disputes. The conflicts in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014 demonstrated that the EU's most significant neighbor, Russia, is prepared to use hard power to achieve its objectives. The Arab revolts caught Europe by surprise and its contribution to regional crisis-management efforts since has been far from satisfactory. The emergence of fragile, unstable, dysfunctional or failed states in Europe's southern neighborhood can have important destabilizing consequences not only there but also in adjacent regions. In some cases, ungoverned territories in the region may constitute safe havens for a wide variety of criminal activities, with only local or limited regional impact. But in other cases—as shown with Libya and migration, or Syria and Iraq (at least for specific periods of time) and the

4 European Commission. (2017). [Public Opinion: Europeans' attitudes towards security](#).

5 Ibid.

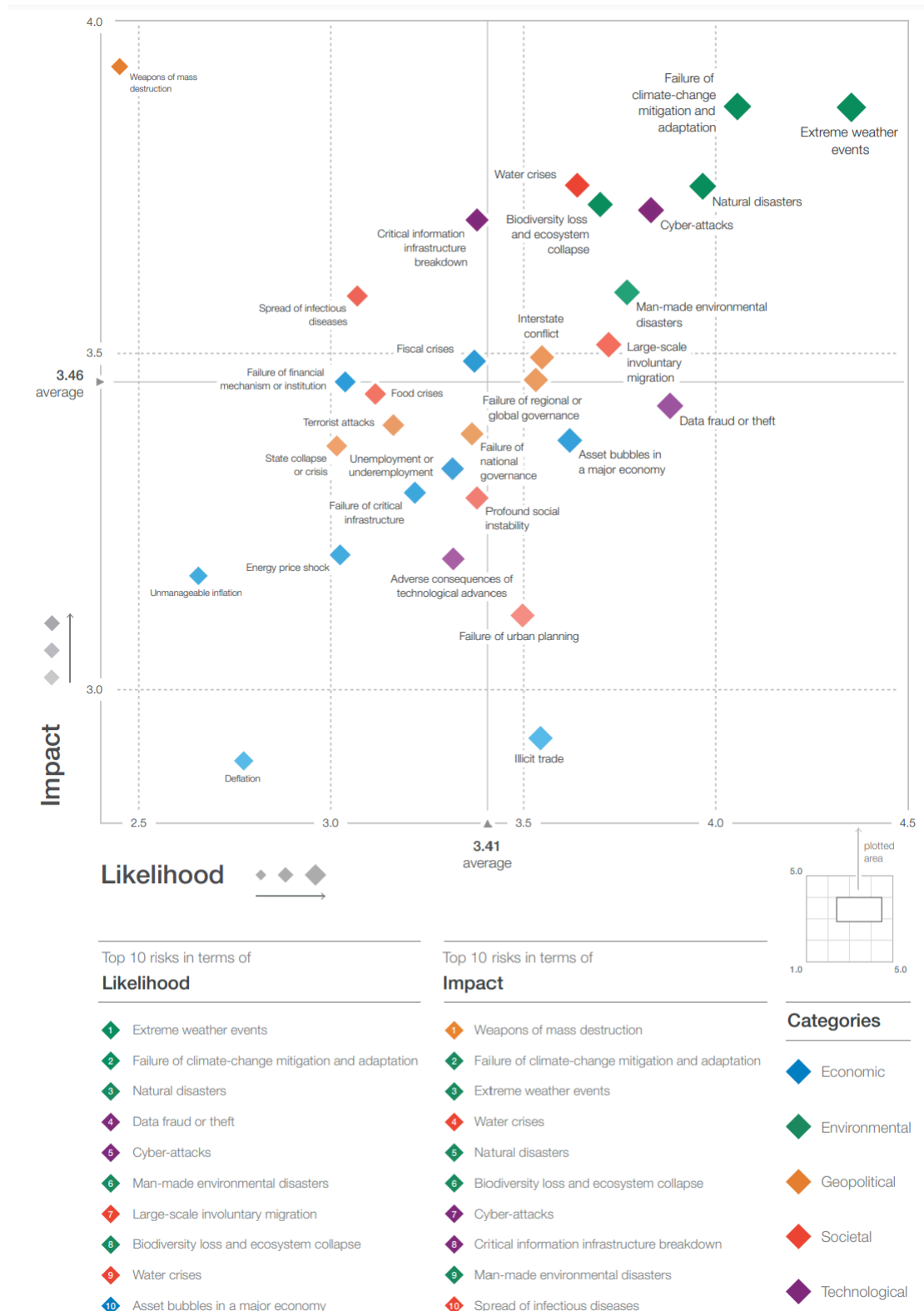
6 The survey was carried out by TNS Political & Social network in the 28 member states of the European Union between 13 and 26 June 2017. Around 28,093 EU citizens from different social and demographic categories were interviewed face-to-face at home and in their native language on behalf of the Directorate-General for Communication. For more information on the collection of data, please consult page 2 of the European Commission's Report on Public Opinion: European's attitudes towards security.

7 World Economic Forum. (2019). [The Global Risks Report 2019](#). Geneva.

8 This data was collected by the World Economic Forum through a survey among its network of business, government, civil society and thought leaders between the 6th September and 22nd October 2018. For more information on the collection of data by the World Economic Forum, please consult Appendix B of the Global Risks Report 2019.

9 European Political Strategy Centre. (2019). [Delivering on European Common Goods. Strengthening Member States' Capacity to Act in the 21st Century](#).

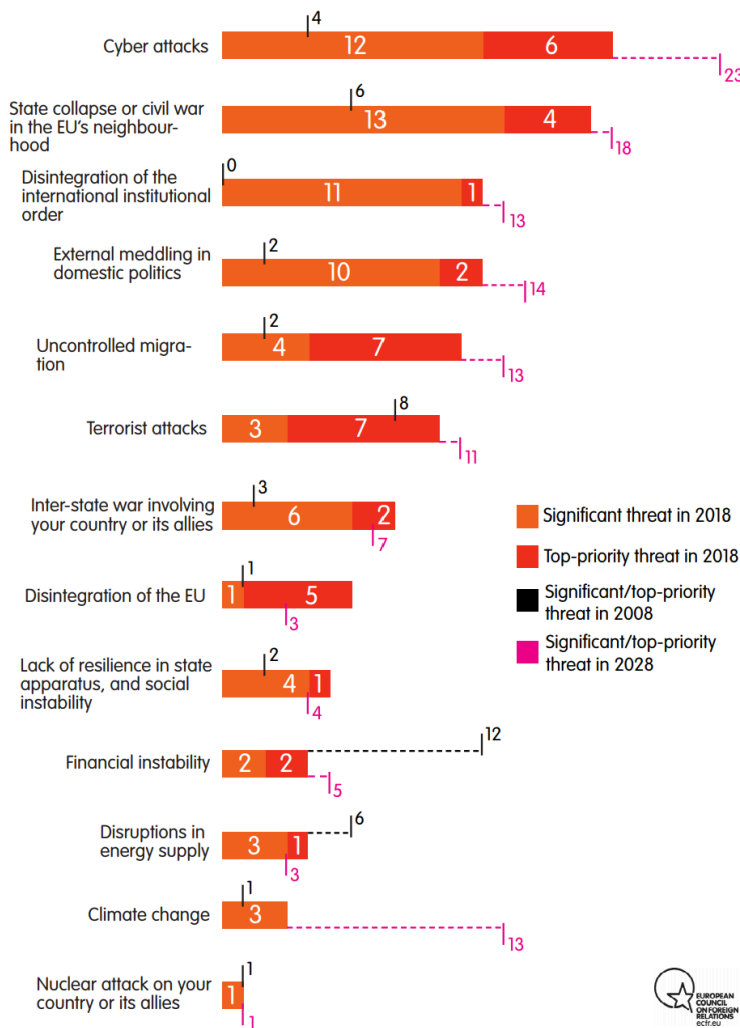
Figure 1 | The Global Risks Landscape 2019



Source: [World Economic Forum Global Risks Perception Survey 2018–2019](#)

Note: Survey respondents were asked to assess the likelihood of the individual global risk on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 representing a risk that is very unlikely to happen and 5 a risk that is very likely to occur. They also assess the impact on each global risk on a scale of 1 to 5 (1: minimal impact, 2: minor impact, 3: moderate impact, 4: severe impact and 5: catastrophic impact). See Appendix B for more details. To ensure legibility, the names of the global risks are abbreviated; see Appendix A for the full name and description.

4 Figure 2 | Current perceptions of threats (number of EU countries)



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations. (2019). [The Nightmare of the Dark: The Security Fears that keep Europeans awake at Night](#).

emergence of the Islamic State, as well as with refugee flows or Somalia and piracy problems—the impact can be much wider.

ii. Hybrid Threats

Although there are several slightly different definitions of hybrid threats, there is general agreement that they combine conventional and unconventional, military and non-military activities that can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific political objectives.¹⁰

Hybrid campaigns are multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures, using conventional and unconventional tools and tactics. They are designed to be difficult to detect or attribute. These threats target critical vulnerabilities and seek to create confusion to hinder swift and effective decision-making. Hybrid threats can range from cyberattacks (see below) on critical information systems, through the disruption of critical services such as energy supplies or financial services, to the undermining of public trust in government institutions or the deepening of social divisions. There is also considerable concern about fake news and external interference in electoral processes. Countering hybrid threats requires action mainly from EU member states, as well as closer cooperation between the EU, its member states, partner countries, and NATO.

iii. Damage to Critical Infrastructure

Critical infrastructure is an asset or system that is essential for the maintenance of vital societal functions.¹¹ The destruction or disruption of a critical infrastructure through natural disasters, terrorism, criminal activity, or malicious behavior, may have a significant negative impact on the security of the EU and the well-being of its citizens. Reducing the vulnerabilities of critical infrastructure and increasing their resilience is becoming one of the major objectives of the EU (for example, through the European Programme for Critical Infrastructure Protection).¹²

iv. Pandemics

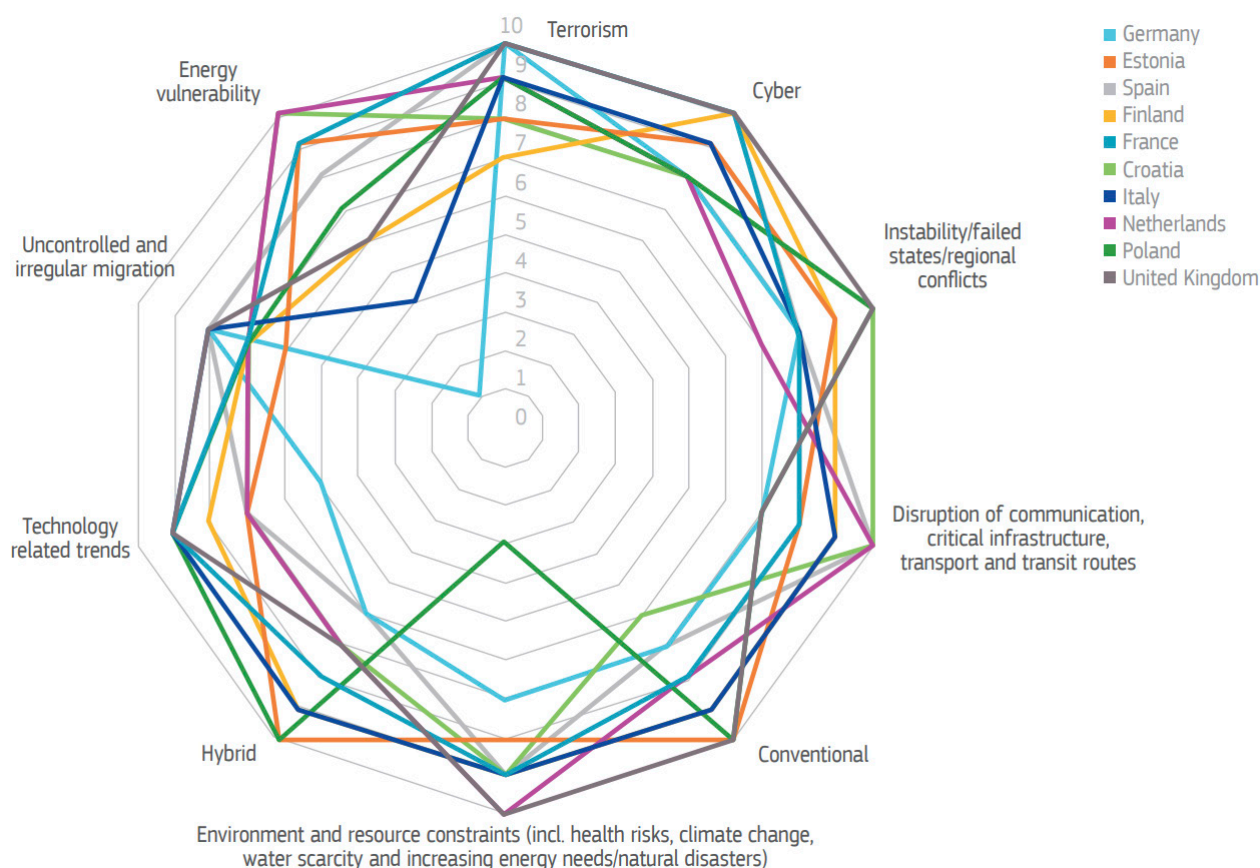
Prior to the large increase in international travel, pandemics were often well contained as travel was either difficult or limited due to terrain or distance. As the global community becomes increasingly connected, the risks of infection are greater, and so are the risks associated with spillover of a virus, such as H7N9 (Avian Influenza) from animals to humans. Pandemics have secondary effects as they not only affect human health but can also cause severe economic, political, and social disruptions. In 2017, scientists and public health organizations warned that the next global pandemic is imminent, and that no country is

10 European Union External Action. (2018). [A Europe that Protects: Countering Hybrid Threats](#).

11 The U.S. defines critical infrastructure to include the following sectors: chemical, commercial facilities, critical manufacturing, dams, defence industrial base, emergency services, energy, financial services, food and agriculture, government facilities, healthcare and public health, information technology, nuclear reactors, materials and waste transportation systems, water and wastewater systems (Presidential Policy Directive 21: Critical Infrastructure Security and Resilience).

12 European Commission. (n.d.). [Critical infrastructure](#).

Figure 3 | The same key threats on Member States' security radars



Source: European Political Strategy Centre. (2019). [Joining Forces: The Way Towards the European Defence Union](#). EPSC Brief.

sufficiently prepared to confront the coming waves of illness. If the next pandemic is anything like the 1918 Spanish Flu that killed 30 million people in six months, the global population will face unprecedented uncertainty.¹³

v. Population Movements

There is concern about population movements from the southern Neighborhood to EU countries. Any scenario will have to take into account the fact that Europe will be significantly short of labor (although estimates about the labor market and Europe's economies may be substantially affected by the Fourth Industrial Revolution) by several million within the next 25 years, due to the ageing of populations and negative demographic growth in most European countries, with France and the United Kingdom the main exceptions. Demographic pressures are producing relentless urbanization, social, and economic strains as well as a steady stream of migrants seeking jobs and social services, a process that starts well to the south of the Maghreb, for example, and affects

societies on both sides of the Mediterranean. The number of migrants and refugees is expected to further increase as a result of various conflicts and climate change.

Therefore, migration flows due to economic, environmental, or security reasons will remain for the foreseeable future a critical challenge for Europe, which will need to develop an efficient long-term migration-management policy.

vi. Terrorism

As a result of several attacks during the last few years, especially in 2015-2017, terrorism is a cause for significant concern for the citizens of many European countries. The return of foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, and fears of refugee flows serving as a "back door" for terrorists, contribute to increased alarm about the threat to European security. However, most attacks have been perpetrated by terrorists radicalized in their home European country and without necessarily having travelled to conflict zones such as Syria

13 Global Risk Insights. (2018). [Predicting the next global pandemic](#).

6 or Iraq. There has also been no systematic use of migration routes by terrorists. According to Manuel Navarrete, director of Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre, "the reinforced cooperation between EU countries, sharing information, has helped to prevent attacks, stop them or limit their impact".¹⁴

vii. Natural and Human-made Disasters

The main causes of concern in this category include flooding, extreme weather, forest fires, earthquakes, industrial accidents, and the low-probability but high-impact scenario of a nuclear or radiological accident. According to the EU, from 1980 to 2016, economic losses caused by weather and climate-related extremes in the European Economic Area member countries amounted to approximately €436 billion (in 2016 values).¹⁵ Average annual economic losses varied between €7.4 billion over the period 1980-1989, €13.3 billion for 1990-1999, and €13.9 billion for 2000-2009. Between 2010 and 2016, average annual losses were around €12.8 billion. In the EU, the costliest climate extremes in the period analyzed include the 2002 flood in Central Europe (over €20 billion), the 2003 drought and heat wave (almost €15 billion), and the 1999 winter storm and October 2000 flood in Italy and France (€13 billion).

viii. Organized Crime

Organized crime is a threat to European citizens, businesses, state institutions, and the economy. There is also increasing concern about a rise in 'multi-criminality', with organized crime groups, terrorism, and drug-trafficking and people-smuggling networks being increasingly interconnected. The nexus between organized crime and transnational terrorist groups enables criminals to expand their geographical reach and bolster their capabilities thanks to improved access to funding and weapons. Criminals easily operate across borders, which creates a need for consistent European-level action. In a borderless union, security can no longer be understood as the sum of member state national security. Terrorists,

cyber-criminals, organized crime groups, drug and people traffickers operate across borders, taking advantage of regulatory and legal fragmentation and deficiencies in information-sharing between member states. Seven out of ten organized crime groups are typically active in more than three countries.¹⁶

Specific categories of organized crime include trafficking in human beings, for whatever purpose – for example, sexual or labor exploitation – and the sexual exploitation of children, including child pornography and cybercrime. Organized crime groups make considerable profits. Trafficking illegal drugs is a €230 billion-a-year business.¹⁷

Modern organized crime requires a multi-disciplinary approach to effectively prevent and counter it. The EU is continuously trying to adapt its response in relation to the growing complexity of the situation. This is also reflected in the development of specialized EU agencies, such as Europol, Eurojust and CEPOL (the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training).

ix. Cyber Threats

Europe is forced to confront a growing cyber threat against physical assets. Non-states hackers and purportedly foreign governments are increasingly targeting industrial control systems and networks—power grids, chemical plants, aviation systems, transportation networks, telecommunications systems, financial networks, and even nuclear facilities.¹⁸ Large-scale attacks against information systems and various other forms of cybercrime, such as online identity theft or online child abuse, are subject to rapidly evolving technological developments. The EU's responses to such crimes are equally innovative and flexible, ranging from support for cross-border cyber-investigations and training of police to legislative measures. A dedicated European Cybercrime Centre within Europol started operation in 2013. Figure 4 presents the views of the European Union's Agency for Cybersecurity on the cyber threat landscape.

14 Europol. (2018). [EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report \(TE-SAT\)](#).

15 European Environment Agency. (2019). [Economic losses from climate-related extremes in Europe](#).

European Commission. (2017). [Overview of natural and man-made disaster risks the European Union may face](#).

16 European Political Strategy Centre. (2019). [Delivering on European Common Goods. Strengthening Member States' Capacity to Act in the 21st Century](#).

17 European Commission. (n.d.). [Organised crime and Human Trafficking](#).

18 Fireeye, Marsh & McLennan. (2018). [2017 Cyber Risk Report - Cyber Threats: A perfect storm about to hit Europe?](#)

Figure 4 | Overview and comparison of the current threat landscape 2018 with the one of 2017

Top Threats 2017	Assessed Trends 2017	Top Threats 2018	Assessed Trends 2018	Change in ranking
1. Malware	➡	1. Malware	➡	➡
2. Web Based Attacks	⬆	2. Web Based Attacks	⬆	➡
3. Web Application Attacks	⬆	3. Web Application Attacks	➡	➡
4. Phishing	⬆	4. Phishing	⬆	➡
5. Spam	⬆	5. Denial of Service	⬆	⬆
6. Denial of Service	⬆	6. Spam	➡	⬇
7. Ransomware	⬆	7. Botnets	⬆	⬆
8. Botnets	⬆	8. Data Breaches	⬆	⬆
9. Insider threat	➡	9. Insider Threat	⬇	➡
10. Physical manipulation/ damage/ theft/loss	➡	10. Physical manipulation/ damage/ theft/loss	➡	➡
11. Data Breaches	⬆	11. Information Leakage	⬆	⬆
12. Identity Theft	⬆	12. Identity Theft	⬆	➡
13. Information Leakage	⬆	13. Cryptojacking	⬆	NEW
14. Exploit Kits	⬇	14. Ransomware	⬇	⬇
15. Cyber Espionage	⬆	15. Cyber Espionage	⬇	➡
Legend: Trends: ⬇ Declining, ➡ Stable, ⬆ Increasing Ranking: ⬆ Going up, ➡ Same, ⬇ Going down				

Source: ENISA. (2019). [ENISA Threat Landscape Report 2018](#).

x. The Energy-Security Nexus

Although predictions about Europe's future energy needs vary widely, making planning more difficult, there is still concern about dependency on a limited number of external suppliers, especially in the gas sector. The energy relationship with Russia and the construction of new pipelines (Nord Stream 2, Turk Stream) will remain controversial issues, but as the EU moves toward an Energy Union, with infrastructure being built and regulations being put in place, physical availability and price are becoming issues of relatively secondary importance (although affordability remains an issue for many European citizens). Preventing a repeat of the 2006 and 2009 crisis situations remains high on the agenda, but European countries have now

more options (including imports of U.S. shale gas, which, however, will be more expensive).

As a result of the energy transition there will be winners and losers at the global and regional level, and the key challenges for the future will be the emerging technological dependency, the control of specific raw materials (cobaltium, lithium, etc.) and of technological know-how (especially in renewable energy storage), with the leaders potentially acquiring an important economic and geopolitical advantage. In addition to possible state threats to Europe's energy security, there are also potential non-state ones (terrorism, cyber, accidents) as digitization and decentralization lead to increased vulnerability. There is also concern about state-sponsored cyberattacks on

8 energy infrastructure, especially in combination with other security developments. NATO and the OECD are working on the issue, and the European Commission has produced a strategy on cybersecurity and energy but clearly it needs to do more in this area.

xi. Black Swan Events

A Black Swan event is an event that was unprecedented and unexpected at the time it occurred and has an extreme impact.¹⁹ One can think of several low-probability but potentially high- or very-high-impact developments affecting European security: the transformation of one or more EU states into weak or failed states, the collapse of the EU, a war with Russia, the fall of a meteor, a solar flare, a major wave of mass migration, an incident of catastrophic terrorism (including the use of nuclear/radiological, biological, and chemical weapons), a war between the United States and China, or even a nuclear war between non-European countries somehow implicating the EU.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the EU has occasionally demonstrated significant resilience (a fact not sufficiently acknowledged), it will need to work much harder to protect itself from external and internal threats. If it wishes to remain an important regional and global actor, and an actor safeguarding the security of its citizens, it urgently needs to realistically define its strategic ambition and reform some of its relevant institutions. In terms of capacity building, it might be useful if the EU could do the following.

- Upgrade training and education for senior politicians from member states and officials from European institutions through frequent simulation exercises, field trips, targeted brainstorming sessions, and executive seminars to discuss strategic approaches to key issues. This would help the EU to develop a critical mass of decision-makers with crisis-management training and long-term strategic vision.
- Promote the systematic use of red team/

blue team analysis²⁰ to prevent groupthink, minimize the risk of single-dimension approaches to complex issues, and encourage interdisciplinary approaches and interagency cooperation.

At the EU level, adopting the concept of indivisible security, approaching external and internal drivers of fragility as interlocking and mutually reinforcing, bridging the internal-external gap, and bolstering resilience should be important priorities. A change from a sectoral and compartmentalized approach in crisis management to a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional one is necessary. Institutional improvements that could be instrumental in facilitating this, including the following:

- Establishing a European Security Council (generally modeled after the U.S. National Security Council but adopted to address Europe's special needs and circumstances), chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to examine threats, challenges, problems, and crises in a comprehensive manner and to coordinate policies and responses. Its competences and modus operandi should be carefully designed to maximize added value and minimize friction with other agencies already active in the same policy areas.
- An advisory panel with the participation of selected eminent figures from national governments (such as former heads of state or foreign and defense ministers), the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council (no more than 15) to act in a purely advisory role, but with an extra weight and an official status.
- A European Intelligence Agency would be an important tool for the EU's foreign, security and internal security policies. It could also make a significant contribution in coordinating national agencies in counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization efforts, as well as in dealing with some of the other threats discussed above. The establishment of a European Public Prosecutor's office might also be instrumental in this context.

19 Taleb, N. N. (2008). *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Penguin: London.

20 Red team-blue team is a simulation and training exercise where members of an organization are divided into teams to compete in combative exercises. The objective is to test working strategies and hypotheses, identify vulnerabilities and train personnel.

- Joint education and training for military and police officers from EU member-states is extremely important as it increases coordination and capabilities, and contributes to the creation of a European security culture and esprit de corps. Initiatives such as the European Security and Defence College and CEPOL (for police training and education) should be strongly supported.
- External border protection is an area of great potential for increased cooperation in view of continuing migration and refugee flows. The EU needs to safeguard its external borders from all kinds of security risks. The establishment of a European Border Guard/Coast Guard Agency is an important first step in this direction, but further strengthening this new agency should be a high priority.

The EU Global Strategy provides its own set of recommendations for strengthening EU capabilities in defense and security (see Box 1).

5. CONCLUSION

Europe's security will be challenged in multiple ways by internal and external threats from state and non-state actors, physical phenomena, or technological changes and accidents. Terrorism, hybrid threats, and organized crime know no borders. Some of the other threats and challenges presented above can be dealt with efficiently only at the EU level. This calls for tighter institutional links between external action and the internal areas of freedom, security, and justice.

It is important, therefore, to raise awareness in Europe's parliaments and among policymakers, and push for more coordination between key national and European agencies. Efforts to increase resilience and risk-mitigation capacities as well as to achieve greater cooperation and coordination will be facilitated by the widest possible support among European citizens for various initiatives to strengthen European capabilities in security and defense. It can be argued that national parliamentarians are best suited for the role

Box 1: Global Security Strategy

First, European security hinges on better and shared assessments of internal and external threats and challenges. Europeans must improve the monitoring and control of flows which have security implications. This requires investing in Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, including Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems, satellite communications, and autonomous access to space and permanent earth observation. As regards counter-terrorism, Member States must implement legislation concerning firearms and explosives, Passenger Name Records (PNRs), as well as invest in detection capabilities and the cross-border tracing of weapons.

Second, Europeans must invest in digital capabilities to secure data, networks and critical infrastructure within the European digital space. We must develop capabilities in trusted digital services and products and in cyber technologies to enhance our resilience. We will encourage greater investments and skills across Member States through cooperative research and development, training, exercises and procurement programmes.

Third, regarding high-end military capabilities, Member States need all major equipment to respond to external crises and keep Europe safe. This means having full-spectrum land, air, space and maritime capabilities, including strategic enablers. To acquire and maintain many of these capabilities, Member States will need to move towards defence cooperation as the norm.

European Union Global Strategy. (2016). [Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy.](#)

of educating public opinion and for pressuring governments to take necessary actions. By closely cooperating with their colleagues in the European Parliament, they can also make a significant contribution in avoiding unintended, negative impacts that newly introduced security measures might have on human rights and civil liberties.



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The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) was founded on 11 October 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. The Institute's main objective is to promote an understanding of the problems of international politics through studies, research, meetings and publications, with the aim of increasing the opportunities of all countries to move in the direction of supranational organization, democratic freedom and social justice (IAI Bylaws, Article 1). Its main research areas include: EU Institutions

and Politics, the EU's Global Role, Turkey and the Neighborhood, International Political Economy, Mediterranean and Middle East, Transatlantic Relations, Security and Defence, Italian Foreign Policy, Energy. A non-profit organization, the IAI is funded by individual and corporate members, public and private organizations, major international foundations, and by a standing grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



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