Minsk Dialogue
Мінскі дыялог
Минский диалог

COMMENT

10.03.2025

Originally published by Caliber.az

EU's Bold Claims for Strategic Autonomy:

Will actions match the words?

Yauheni Preiherman

Another extraordinary EU summit took place, where bold statements were made about a "stronger and more sovereign European defence." However, geopolitical relevance and strategic autonomy cannot be reduced solely to military and defence-industrial components.

On 6 March, a special meeting of the European Council took place in Brussels. This is effectively the EU's main body, where the heads of state and government of member states meet. It is here that all the major and strategically significant decisions of the European Union are made, including in foreign policy and security matters, which fall within the intergovernmental (rather than supranational) competences of the EU. It is also here that the full spectrum of views and priorities across the 27 member states becomes most apparent.

This time, the meeting was almost exclusively dedicated to military issues. The leaders of EU member states and the leadership of Brussels institutions discussed two main topics: First, how the European Union intends to support Ukraine after Washington announced the suspension of all American aid; Second, how the EU plans to move from words to action in developing its own defence capabilities.

Routine emergency

The format of the special European Council meeting essentially implied an extraordinary summit. It was triggered by a series of recent news from Washington and became, in essence, an emergency following the scandalous meeting between the Presidents of the United States and Ukraine last week. It became known that the administration of Donald Trump had decided to completely suspend military aid to Kyiv, including the supply of previously allocated weapons and the provision of intelligence data. This move further complicates the situation for the European allies of the United States, who are now, at least temporarily, shouldering the entire burden of supporting Ukraine, both on the battlefield and financially. The situation is indeed an emergency, requiring appropriate decisions from the EU leadership.

Indeed, lately, Europe has seen so many extraordinary negotiations, consultations, summits, and meetings that they are starting to blend into an endless routine. Just two weeks after the Munich Security Conference, where U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance shocked the European mainstream with his revelations about democracy, two multilateral summits were held in Paris and one in London. Since the beginning of 2025, various formal and informal high-level meetings in different formats and configurations will likely add up to several dozen.

As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to view these events as truly extraordinary, let alone significant. However, it is hard not to agree with European Council President António Costa that Europe is experiencing a "defining moment" in its history. The question is only how much the decisions being made by EU leaders right now truly match the scale of the historical challenges and reflect Europe's strategic interests.

"A peace project at war (with itself)"

Describing the discussions currently taking place in Brussels, Politico reminded readers that after World War II, the European Union was conceived as a project of peace, even as an institutional antidote to war on the European continent. Now, however, all thoughts and discussions of its political leadership are directed toward preparing for war. It is clear that, in theory, this is intended to strengthen the EU's defence capabilities and thereby prevent a larger military conflict. In these approaches, EU leaders are no different from their counterparts in any other part of the world: everywhere, in the face of rising tensions, strengthening one's own defence capabilities is seen as the main way to deter potential adversaries. However, in any case, these shifts in discourse within the European Union are symbolic and reflect the essence of the historical moment.

What does set the EU apart from many other actors on the international stage is its complexity. No matter how much Brussels bureaucrats or certain heads of state might wish it, the European Union remains an intergovernmental union. This is particularly important in matters of foreign

policy and security policy, where all decisions, under the current Treaty on European Union, must be made by consensus among all 27 member states.

Yet, the 6 March summit once again demonstrated that sooner or later the EU will face serious upheavals due to this institutional structure. Either the principle of consensus in foreign policy and defence matters will have to be abandoned, or, more likely, the entire framework of the European Union will begin to change significantly. In the latter case, more and more decisions will be made in a format of like-minded states and "coalitions of the willing." This path leads to what is known as "multi-speed integration," which, amid the transformation of the entire system of international relations, could even result in some countries exiting the EU.

At the very least, the special meeting of the European Council demonstrated that the time and resources for long negotiations to find compromises among all 27 member states in a situation of permanent emergency are becoming increasingly scarce. As a result of the discussions on supporting Ukraine, conclusions were drawn that were not signed by the leadership of Hungary. It may seem that only one country opposed, and the rest reached a consensus. But for the institutional structure of the EU, this is a huge problem.

This problem is simply insurmountable under the current basic EU treaty. Especially considering that Budapest's position on key European security issues is increasingly shared by other member states, even though their leadership still tries to maintain the mainstream position publicly. Given that the views of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government on most issues align with the vision of the new U.S. administration — still the EU's primary ally — this problem becomes even more acute.

"A more sovereign Europe of defence"

The main discussions at the special European Council meeting focused on how the EU plans to finally transition from endless declarations about its strategic and military-political autonomy from the U.S. to truly concrete actions in this direction. Following the summit, António Costa stated that after a series of "brainstorms," the European Union has finally begun "moving decisively towards a strong and more sovereign Europe of defence." The phrasing is somewhat strange, but it seems to emphasize the complexity of the task facing a united Europe.

As journalists from Politico rightly point out, the response to the question of the EU's ability to embark on an independent strategic journey remains deafeningly silent. On camera, politicians and Brussels bureaucrats, of course, make numerous bold statements and compete in eloquence. And such statements will only increase. Moreover, at the 6 March summit, these declarations were indeed backed by some specifics in the form of proposals for financing the European military-industrial complex. Even more ideas are expected to emerge after the forthcoming publication of the working document, "The Future of European Defence."

However, in reality, neither the proposals already made nor those that may emerge in the coming weeks are capable of making the EU strategically autonomous by themselves. Strategic autonomy cannot be reduced solely to military or defence-industrial components. It requires internal unity and high-level diplomacy built on it. This, in turn, demands not only a deep understanding of the changes occurring in the world but also the acceptance of one's own limitations and weaknesses.

In other words, the true strategic autonomy of the European Union can only become a reality if there is a fundamental transformation of the Union's policies and those of its key member states to align with the realities of the modern world. And such a transformation begins not with guns or metal, but with a change in mindset and an understanding of one's own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, which go far beyond the percentage of defence spending.

Yauheni Preiherman

Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations