EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 06.05.2024 | Hans Kundnani

Redefining peace

By claiming that the EU is turning into a 'war project' amid Russian aggression, many pro-Europeans are idealising its history as a 'peace project'

In March, European Council President Charles Michel wrote an op-ed, which ran in several European newspapers, in which he said the European Union must 'prepare for war'. It was typical of a new conventional wisdom among 'pro-Europeans' about the way that the EU either is changing or must change. But in describing how the EU is changing or must change in response to Russian aggression, they idealise its history as a 'peace project' – typical of how, even when they criticise the EU, 'pro-Europeans' tend to idealise it.

There now seems to be a consensus that the EU must 'move into war economy mode', as European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton put it. Mark Leonard even said it must go from being a peace project to a 'war project'. Of course, people like Breton and Leonard do not think that, even as the EU turns into a 'war project', Europeans are abandoning their commitment to peace. Rather, the (somewhat Orwellian) logic is that they must go to war in the name of peace.

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The problem with this idea of a shift from peace project to war project, even as the EU continues to think of itself as standing for peace, is that it idealises the history of the EU as a 'peace project'. In reality, Europeans never rejected war in general after World War II, but only war with each other. But in the 'pro-European' imagination, this rather specific rejection of military force against other EU member states has morphed into the idea that Europeans are uniquely peaceful.

When former French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman made his famous declaration in 1950 – the beginning of the idea of the EU as a peace project – France was fighting a brutal colonial war in Indochina. Similarly, when the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957,

France was fighting another brutal colonial war, this time in Algeria (and another in Cameroon, as Thomas Deltombe and others have documented). Even in the post-Cold War period, Europeans have been quite willing to deploy military force — and they have done so much more than, say, China. Yet, they continue to imagine that they are uniquely peaceful.

Who is in and who is out?

In so far as the EU stands for peace, it seems to me that, drawing on Tyler Stovall's idea of 'white freedom', we can think of it as a 'white peace' — peace with each other rather than with the rest of the world. In that sense, mobilising for war against Russia is not that much of a break with the EU's history as 'pro-Europeans' like Michel and Leonard claim. After all, the European project always had external enemies against which it defined itself. In the 1950s, the European Economic Community was imagined as a Christian civilisational bulwark against an 'Asiatic' Soviet Union.

It is true that, against the background of the war in Ukraine, the role of the EU itself in military conflict is now changing — for example through the creation of the so-called European Peace Facility (EPF), which was created in 2021 but was used to provide weapons to a third country for the first time only after the Russian invasion. However, the EPF is a rather technical change in how Europeans collectively deliver weapons. It changes the role of the EU institutions, but not the EU as a whole (that is, as a collective of 27 Member States) in relation to military power.

What is really changing is not so much that the EU is becoming a 'war project', but that it is defining more clearly who belongs and who doesn't.

In any case, European security continues to be delivered above all through NATO, whose role in European security has been strengthened by the war in Ukraine, rather than through the EU. Despite all the hype about a 'geopolitical Europe', the EU's role remains mainly economic, whether that is in terms of imposing sanctions or stimulating and supporting defence industry in EU Member States, which makes the current shift seem less significant.

Until February 2022, there was very little agreement within the EU about whether either Russia or Ukraine belonged to the EU. For example, at the G7 summit in Biarritz in 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron said that 'Russia fully belongs within a Europe of values'. Conversely, many doubted whether Ukraine belonged in the EU. During the last two years, however, a clear new consensus has emerged:

Ukraine is in and Russia is out.

The EU is changing and evolving as it always has — European integration is, after all, a process. But because 'pro-Europeans' idealise the history of the EU as a peace project, they mischaracterise the change. What is really changing is not so much that the EU is becoming a 'war project', but that it is defining more clearly who belongs and who doesn't.



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