

# EUROPE'S HOUR OF RECKONING?

*The hour of reckoning is when one confronts past mistakes and decides what to do next. Russia's war in Ukraine reveals numerous European mistakes in the past and accelerates the development of a new foreign policy paradigm. The article examines the emerging policy paradigm and how it organizes the politics of EU foreign policy. Moreover, the article argues that the emerging paradigm is closely connected to, if not dependent on, the ongoing processes of reckoning, that is, to the degree that past mistakes are acknowledged. Finally, the article argues that the twin processes of reckoning and paradigm change make a determining factor for the future of Europe.*

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**T**he announcement of EU deliveries of weapons to Ukraine is a historical first, “a watershed moment”, taking place 19 years after the EU’s first military mission in 2003.<sup>1</sup> The decision reflects a new worldview and a changing politics of EU foreign policy. Thus, European politicians, officials, and policy pundits speak foreign relations in a new language, a change in rhetoric that connotes a policy paradigm shift. It has been in the making for a decade, if not more, and is more encompassing than first impressions might suggest, spanning sectors such as economic relations, defense, technology, infrastructure, energy, and institutional affairs. The vocabulary includes terms such as “strategic autonomy”, “European sovereignty”, and “strategic compass”, but also more traditional notions such as “civilization” and the ancient term “Trojan horses”. Notably, EU top officials talk about “a geopolitical (European) Commission” and “the language of power.”<sup>2</sup>

In this brief article, I assess the future of Europe by critically reviewing of the paradigm shift, focusing on the degree to which we are witnessing a time in which Europe confronts past mistakes. A brief definition of a policy paradigm spells out what I will be looking at: “a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing.”<sup>3</sup> In the present context of examining processes of reckoning, the latter part of the definition focusing on the nature of problems is an aspect of special interest.

### *Strategic Autonomy and European Sovereignty*

The ideas of strategic autonomy and European (strategic) sovereignty are conceptual twins, each pursued in political discourse and each attracting book-length interpretations.<sup>4</sup> As policy paradigm concepts, their ambiguity is perfect for political discourse and sufficiently vague to remain relevant, also when circumstances change. The idea of strategic autonomy is not exactly new. For a decade, if not longer, it has been part of the shared language that EU member states employ to outline the EU’s aspirations.<sup>5</sup> At some point, the governments even found time to specify the idea.

<sup>1</sup> Statement by President von der Leyen on further measures to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (27 February 2022). [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_22\\_1441](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_1441)

<sup>2</sup> Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme, (27 November 2019). [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech\\_19\\_6408](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408); Josep Borell, “Europe Must Learn Quickly to Speak the Language of Power,” (29 October 2020). [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/several-outlets-europe-must-learn-quickly-speak-language-power\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/several-outlets-europe-must-learn-quickly-speak-language-power_en)

<sup>3</sup> Peter A. Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain,” *Comparative politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1993), p. 279.

<sup>4</sup> Nathalie Tocci, “European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It,” *Report, Istituto Affari Internazionali*, (March 2021); Daniel Fiott, “European Sovereignty: Strategy and Interdependence” *Paris, France: EU Institute for Security Studies*, (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Council Conclusions 2013-2022; see also European Council, “A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024”.

According to them, strategic autonomy is the “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible.”<sup>6</sup> The rationale for the new paradigm is no secret. In Autumn 2018, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker talked about the hour of European sovereignty,<sup>7</sup> and the otherwise less-than-bold German chancellor, Angela Merkel, concluded that “The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over ... I’ve experienced that in the last few days. We Europeans have to take fate into our own hands.”<sup>8</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron is in a somewhat easier position. He can build on a long French tradition of praising European autonomy, being critical of American hegemony, and occasionally declaring NATO to be brain dead. Macron coined the term European sovereignty yet uses the terms interchangeably. The idea of autonomy continues to function as a marker of the direction of action. Thus, it appears both in the French EU Council Presidency 2022 program and the programmatic statement of the current German three-party government. While such statements signal support for the trajectory of collective EU strategic narratives, it is risky to conclude that statements subscribe to, for instance, the following definition: strategic autonomy “refers to the ability of European states to set their own priorities and make their own decisions in matters of foreign policy, security and defense, and have the means to implement these decisions alone, or with partners if they so choose.”<sup>9</sup> It is equally important to have in mind that although such a definition frames a space for action and sets a general direction, it also enables a wide spectrum of policy options.

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As mentioned, the terms are used interchangeably, and definitions can be pragmatic, as demonstrated by the Wilson Center: “While no single definition of European sovereignty exists, it loosely refers to recent calls for a strong, united Europe capable

<sup>6</sup> Council Conclusions (2016).

<sup>7</sup> President Jean-Claude Juncker’s State of the Union Address 2018. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_18\\_5808](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_18_5808)

<sup>8</sup> International Business Times UK, “Angela Merkel: Europe must take its fate in its own hands” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQCCUkAoOPU>

<sup>9</sup> Pauli Järvenpää, Claudia Major and Sven Sakkov “European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword,” *International Centre for Defence and Security* (28 October 2019).

of independently addressing military and economic challenges.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, some prefer to engage in hair-splitting distinctions. Commentators are very eager to interpret the significance of the terms and make far-reaching conclusions. Mujtaba Rahman puts a great effort in describing the differences in the conceptual focus in Macron’s Sorbonne 2017 speech, in which he introduced the idea of European sovereignty, and an interview given three years later, where he talked about the concept of strategic autonomy.<sup>11</sup> Rahman concludes that “European sovereignty has lost its biggest champion.”<sup>12</sup> One year on, others claimed that strategic autonomy has lost traction and highlighted how the European sovereignty is back in vogue.<sup>13</sup> In this context, commentators do not shy away from making bold claims about the continued relevance of the terms. Within one month, one commentator opined that Ukraine became the graveyard for Macron’s vision for European autonomy.<sup>14</sup> whereas others concluded that Russia’s war in Ukraine provides Macron with a new beginning for EU autonomy.<sup>15</sup> It thus seems clear that there is no intrinsic meaning of the two terms, no Holy Grail to search for. What *is* possible and *is* relevant is to examine how the terms play a role in organizing the politics of EU foreign policy.

### *Strategic Compass*

The EU is a frequent consumer of concepts such as strategy and strategic. Of relevance in the present context is the trajectory from the European Security Strategy (2003) to the EU Global Strategy (2016) and, this year, the Strategic Compass (2022). While the first and last of these key documents focus on security and defense, the EU Global Strategy has a wider focus.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, its “global” nature refers more to a focus across policy fields and issue areas than to geographical reach. Adopting the EU Global Strategy is a textbook example of Weberian action theory in practice. Policy planners ask two questions: i) “What is the situation we are in?”; ii) “In this situation, what are our options”; and, “What ought to be done?”. In the broad picture, security and defense was just one of the policy fields, and four years down the road, it was felt that security and defense deserve a special attention. Hence, the

<sup>10</sup> Jason C. Moyer, “Accelerating European Sovereignty with France’s EU Presidency” <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/accelerating-european-sovereignty-frances-eu-presidency>

<sup>11</sup> “La doctrine Macron: une conversation avec le Président français,” *Le Grand Continent*, (16 November 2020).

<sup>12</sup> “European Sovereignty Has Lost Its Biggest Champion,” *Politico*, (April 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Nicolai von Ondarza and Marco Overhaus, “Strategische Souveränität neu denken. Narrative und Prioritäten für Europa nach dem Angriff Russlands auf die Ukraine,” *SWP-Aktuell*, (11 April 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Bart M. J. Szczyzyk, “Macron’s vision for European autonomy crashed and burned in Ukraine”, *Foreign Policy*, (April 8, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Geordio Leali and Barbara Moens, “Ukraine war gives Macron’s drive for EU autonomy new impetus.” *Politico*, (March 9, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> EU HR/VP, “The European Union in a Changing Global Environment a More Connected, Contested and Complex World,” [https://ec.europa.eu/docs/strategic\\_review/eu-strategic-review\\_strategic\\_review\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/docs/strategic_review/eu-strategic-review_strategic_review_en.pdf); EU HR/VP, “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy,” (June 2016), [https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf)

rationale of the Strategic Compass focusing on three issues: i) an assessment of the (dynamic) strategic environment in which the EU is situated (in nature akin to the 2015 assessment); ii) an analysis of the threats and challenges that the EU faces; and, iii) an action plan thus transcending strategy (in terms of setting direction). The Council highlights that “[t]he Compass gives the European Union an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU’s security and defence policy by 2030.”<sup>17</sup> While the process of producing the Strategic Compass began during the German presidency, it was completed during the French presidency, allowing Macron to claim that the document will “define a strategic European sovereignty.”<sup>18</sup>

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*“Russia’s war in Ukraine works as a catalyst for entering steep learning curves.”*

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### ***European Civilization***

The notion of civilization used to be part of the EU’s language on foreign affairs; then it almost disappeared, only to recently experience a renaissance. During the last five years, French President Macron have not missed any opportunity to bring back a discourse on European civilization, stating that “I believe very deeply that this is our project and must be undertaken as a project of European civilization.”<sup>19</sup> However, at a time of predominant occidentalist perceptions of the West, including Europe, European civilization is a hard sell, and initial public reception included critical interpretations.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, understandings of the term civilization tend to be situated in the shadows of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, highlight European chauvinism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and civilization in the singular or present civilizations as homogeneous entities. On the other hand, a recent article on Germany’s Russia policy is introduced by the following: “Why Ukraine is about defending elementary civilizational values, why German Russia policy bordered on complicity with the aggressor, and why diplomacy and politics are not the same: a reckoning.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “A Strategic Compass for a Stronger EU Security and Defence in the next Decade.” *Consilium*, (21 March 2022), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>

<sup>18</sup> EURActiv, (January 10, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Initiative pour l’Europe – Discours d’Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique. 2017; Ambassadors’ conference, (August 27, 2019); letter (March 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Rosa Balfour, “Against a European Civilization: Narratives about the European Union”. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/04/06/against-european-civilization-narratives-about-european-union-pub-84229>

<sup>21</sup> “Wider die Begünstigung des Putinismus,” *Internationale Politik*, (March/April 2022). Richard Herzinger, “Wider die Begünstigung des Putinismus,” *Internationale Politik*, (March/April 2022).

### *An Hour of Reckoning?*

Adopting a new policy paradigm and its key concepts can be seen as an end in itself. Policy makers tend to provide reasons for their actions, and policy paradigms function as one of the legitimization strategies. If a paradigm connects to the imagination of key audiences, it will be received favorably and function as an important source of legitimacy. In other words, it provides “beliefs about how political communities are governed, ideals about the goals that should be sought by political communities, and principles providing broad guidelines for achieving those goals.”<sup>22</sup> The need for or rationale of a new paradigm could be that the previous paradigm(s) proved insufficient to address contemporary challenges. Moreover, new political visions might require a policy change, and in such a context, the mistake is not in the past but in the present, that is, continuing to subscribe to an obsolete paradigm.

A second and related mistake is to reject the problem that the new paradigm addresses. An advisor at the EEAS, Bruno Dupre, emphasizes time and again how the last decade created new realities, for which reason EU policy makers are bound to face new challenges.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the rejection of the problem comes in many versions. One example is former German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who believes in a continued American commitment to Europe. For this reason, she argues that “[i]llusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider.”<sup>24</sup> In this assessment, she is not alone. It is a widespread perception among East-Central European governments; they acknowledge a dependence on U.S. defense and, therefore, tend to be critical of initiatives that could potentially reduce American commitments. However, they seek compatibility by signing up to the EU policy paradigm while ensuring, in concrete ways, enduring American commitments. A second example is academic critics who reject the problem and highlight, in general, abstract terms, the benefits of interdependence or subscribe to Kramp-Karrenbauer’s analysis.<sup>25</sup> These critics have difficulty acknowledging past mistakes and are bound to be critical of the new paradigm.

A third mistake is to believe that the concepts are etched in stone. The opposite is the case, as they are frequently connected to new realities and changing challenges. For example, Christine Lagarde said the following in a speech regarding the

<sup>22</sup> Paul Schumaker, *From Ideologies to Public Philosophies: An Introduction to Political Theory* (Blackwell, 2008): p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Bruno Dupre, “Can the Current Crisis Represent also an Opportunity to Reaffirm the EU as a Global Leader?” *Diploweb.com: La revue géopolitique*, (6 November 2020).

<sup>24</sup> *Politico*, (November 2, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Youngs, “The EU’s Strategic Autonomy Trap,” *Carnegie Europe*, (March 2021); Benjamin Tallis, “Strategic Autonomy Is a Dangerous Myth,” (3 September 2021). <https://www.coe-civ.eu/the-coe/civilian-crisis-management-contexts/details/strategic-autonomy-is-a-dangerous-myth>

new (macroeconomic) reality: “The economic fallout from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may mark a defining moment for globalisation in the 21st century. Russia’s unprovoked aggression has triggered a fundamental reassessment of economic relations and dependencies in our globalised economy.”<sup>26</sup> Russia’s war in Ukraine has a similar function for strategic sovereignty, which we should rethink according to a SWP Comment.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, yet at a single commodity level, Carnegie Europe highlights how “it is worth understanding how and why semiconductor sovereignty transcends economic interdependence and strategic partnerships.”<sup>28</sup>

A fourth mistake is to preserve the obstacles that, at times, make it very difficult for EU governments to collectively be autonomous, that is, the ability to make their own decisions on foreign policy issues, including security and defense. One well-known example is the limited diversification of energy supply that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for some EU countries to support energy sanctions on Russia. A second example is the so-called Chinese Trojan horses in the EU. According to EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn, Europe must beware of Chinese Trojan horses. These horses can be found in both EU member states and membership candidate states. In both cases, the term refers to political spillovers from Chinese economic investments in Europe, for instance, in critical infrastructures or ports. During a visit to Greece in November 2019, Chinese president Xi Jinping said: “I have seen in the port today that the [BRI] is not a slogan or tale, but a successful practice and brilliant reality.”<sup>29</sup> However, the brilliant reality he had in mind might not be the physical expansion of the port but the political spill-over from the investment by the China COSCO Shipping company. Thus, in 2017, the Greek government vetoed an EU policy statement on human rights in China, calling the tabled statement “unproductive criticism”.<sup>30</sup> Since then, the brilliant reality faded. The current Greek government has a different take and joined other EU governments in criticizing China’s human rights record, specifically regarding the Uighur minority.<sup>31</sup> However, if one Trojan horse disappears, another pops up. In the context of China’s Hong Kong security laws, the EU again aimed at critique, yet was blocked by Hungary.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Trojan horse problem has wider applications, as China also uses its financial clout in membership candidate states. Countries in the Western Balkans

<sup>26</sup> Christine Lagarde, “A New Global Map: European Resilience in a Changing World,” <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key/date/2022/html/ecb.sp220422~c43af3db20.en.html>

<sup>27</sup> Von Ondarza and Overhaus (2022).

<sup>28</sup> “The Geopolitics of Chips: Transatlantic Relations and the Case of Taiwan” *Carnegie Europe* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_QTpH37-5Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_QTpH37-5Y)

<sup>29</sup> “Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of Greece Visit the Piraeus Port of China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO).” (12 Dec. 2019), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cepl/pol/zgyw/t1715684.htm>

<sup>30</sup> *Reuters* (June 18, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> “Piraeus Port Deal Intensifies Greece’s Unease over China Links,” *FT*, (19 October 2021).

<sup>32</sup> “China in Hungary: Real Threat or False Alarm?,” *CEPA*, (19 April 2021). <https://cepa.org/china-in-hungary-real-threat-or-false-alarm/>

have taken note of the limited EU appetite for enlargement and search for alternative foreign economic and military relations. One example is Serbia buying Chinese arms, including surface-to-air missile systems.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the Trojan horse can be found at some universities, such as UCD Dublin, where the Confucius Institute is connected to a mute UCD response to the war in Ukraine.<sup>34</sup>

The fifth mistake is rejecting learning and subscribing to path dependencies that have lost traction. Indeed, the absence of learning is among the main mistakes of the past. While most EU member states (and thus also the EU) did not make much of Russia's occupation of parts of Moldova or Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and occupation of the Donbass region prompted the EU to adopt (limited) sanctions and a handful of principles for their lifting. After a few years, the policy was challenged by several leaders in the EU, who pointed out that sanctions are costly, that principles (in the view of then German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sigmar Gabriel) could be bended and that policy towards Russia, according to President Macron, should be reset. Karin Kneissl, the Austrian Foreign Minister, invited President Putin to her wedding in 2018 and then joined oil giant Rosneft's board of directors.<sup>35</sup> There are many Italian "friends of Russia" even during Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> Corporate Europe has always had its own preferences concerning the EU's foreign relations, subscribing to the "change through trade" axiom, possibly better known in its German version "*Wandel durch Handel*". Germany Inc. might also be the best-known part of corporate Europe yet is fairly representative.<sup>37</sup>

Russia's war in Ukraine works as a catalyst for entering steep learning curves. For example, Frank-Walter Steinmeier bitterly acknowledged: "We have been holding on to bridges that Russia no longer believed in and that our partners warned us about." He thus admits having been paternalizing a policy failure. The war in Ukraine also prompted others to change their stance. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said: "We have to enhance our open strategic autonomy, something France has been urging for a long time." When asked "whether the Netherlands and other countries such as the

<sup>33</sup> Dusan Stojanovic. "China Makes Semi-Secret Delivery of Missiles to Serbia." *Military.com*, (11 Apr. 2022), <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/04/11/china-makes-semi-secret-delivery-of-missiles-serbia.html>

<sup>34</sup> Noel Baker. "Professor Resigns from Senior Role over UCD Response to Invasion of Ukraine." *Irish Examiner*, (1 Mar. 2022), <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40819389.html>

<sup>35</sup> Kate Connolly. "Ex-Austrian Minister Who Danced with Putin at Wedding Lands Russian Oil Job." *The Guardian*, (2 June 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/02/former-austrian-minister-given-seat-on-board-of-russias-rosneft>

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Roberts. "Italy and Russia: A Love Affair That Hasn't Quite Ended." *POLITICO*, (5 Apr. 2022), <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-russia-love-affair-no-end/>

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig, and Nette Nöstlinger. "How Germany Inc. Played Russian Roulette - and Lost." *POLITICO*, (18 Apr. 2022), <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-inc-played-russian-roulette-and-lost-ukraine-war-energy-gas-trade/>

Nordics are shifting position on the concept, Rutte replied: ‘Yes, we are.’”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion and Wider Perspectives

Europe's hour of reckoning begins with a simple recognition of the current main dependencies on, for instance, the U.S. (defense), Russia (energy) and China (technology and more).<sup>39</sup> While the recognition might be simple, it should be underpinned by reflections on the nature of interdependence, including uneven patterns of vulnerability and sensitivity. The policy paradigm shift organizes the changing politics of EU policy making, specifically medium-/long-term ideas about reducing dependencies and managing interdependencies. In simple terms, the alternative to autonomy is to accommodate conditions under which the EU will be constrained in its ability to shape its future. In less simple terms, the challenge is to shape the EU's future through balancing strategic autonomy and complex interdependencies.

Europe's reckoning continues with a complete review of the EU's relations with all major states and the most important multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, which is currently said to experience its League of Nations moment. The Egmont think-tank summarizes its review with an appreciation of the EU's strategy: “In a multi-polar world, the EU strategy of dealing with other powers as partner, competitor, and rival all at once, is the right one. Great powers traditionally compartmentalize their relations: they cooperate where they can, but push back when they must.”<sup>40</sup> While the rationale of not ending up in a simple friend-and-foe situation is understandable, one can argue that the strategy was actually the one chosen for the EU's Russia policy in 2014-2022, and that did not work out well. Hence, while the general logic of the strategy is clear, it is also clear that debates on the concrete configuration of the three “characters” – partner, competitor, rival – are bound to trigger a rich politics of EU foreign policy.

Europe's reckoning could become the catalyst that would help the emerging policy paradigm to avoid the fate of becoming a collection of ideas and dead letters with limited impact on policies and administrative programs. Research can point to many previous cases where policy entrepreneurs could not connect policy paradigms and policies, thereby leaving both less influential than if they were part of a package. The new language has its limits and does not necessarily change the EU or the world. The language employed is deliberately a language of politics. It comprises vague

<sup>38</sup> *Politico* (March 9, 2022).

<sup>39</sup> “2021 Strategic Foresight Report, The EU's capacity and freedom to act”. *European Union* (2021).

<sup>40</sup> Bart Dessein, et al. “Putin Is Creating the Multipolar World He (Thought He) Wanted.” *Egmont Institute*, (7 Mar. 2022), <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/putin-is-creating-the-multipolar-world-he-thought-he-wanted/>

concepts and ideas, and some of these might be inconsequential or contradictory. Likewise, it remains to be seen if the current policy on Russia will be generalized, that is, if it will be applied to other revisionist countries. Will strategic considerations overrule the economic attractiveness of selling, for instance, submarines, missiles, airplanes, or aircraft carriers? In 2014, it took France some time to understand the political costs of delivering two warships to Russia would entail, especially in the context the country's invasion of Ukraine. Likewise, the German government routinely points to a principle of not sending military armaments to conflict zones. Yet, the principle seems to be one of the principles that functions similarly to a lighthouse: "Now it is on, now it is not."