

Opinion **The FT View**

The EU's regrettable absence on Ukraine

Bloc must address its strategic weaknesses after being left out of talks

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



The main goal of this week's diplomacy should be to deter Russian aggression and to prevent conflict © AP

The Editorial Board YESTERDAY

The crisis over Ukraine has implications for the security of the whole of Europe. But, much to its [chagrin](#), the EU is not a direct participant in the diplomatic talks that are currently taking place. A week of diplomacy began with direct discussions between the US and Russia. It will continue with talks between Russia and Nato and then a dialogue at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

As the crisis has built, EU leaders have become increasingly vocal in expressing their discontent at their exclusion from the diplomatic top table. In a letter to European foreign ministers Josep Borrell, the EU's chief diplomat, even [suggested](#) that “our main goal should be to ensure EU involvement in the process”.

This is a strangely self-centred approach. The main goal of this week's diplomacy should be to deter Russian aggression and to prevent conflict. Inserting the EU into the discussion should be a secondary objective. Rather than complaining in public about their own irrelevance, European leaders — both in Brussels and in national capitals — should work harder in private to fix the problems that have pushed the EU to the sidelines of talks.

In an ideal world, the EU would indeed be a strong and influential voice in talks with Russia. The problem is that the EU currently lacks the military clout and diplomatic unity that would compel the Kremlin to pay attention.

into security remain limited to relatively small missions and initiatives.

In the past, the EU could blame opposition from Washington or London for the failure to develop a distinctive European role in defence and security. But the UK has now left the EU and the Biden administration would probably welcome a collective EU effort on defence. The problem clearly lies within the EU itself.

The bloc is politically divided. Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are naturally wary of Moscow and want a hawkish approach. But there have always been voices in the German establishment, particularly in German business, calling for rapprochement with Russia. Emmanuel Macron, France's president, also made a unilateral effort to reset relations with Russia, though it met with predictable failure.

To its credit, the EU did manage to agree on strong sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The European single market is an important strategic, as well as an economic, asset. But in the current crisis it is notable that it has been left to the Biden administration to threaten the Kremlin with "devastating" economic consequences. Europe has been much quieter on the subject of future sanctions.

Forming an EU consensus is always difficult. It may be even harder, in the event of a Russian assault on Ukraine, given the dependence of many EU countries — in particular Germany — on Russian gas. The EU has also long struggled to form a common approach to the crucial topic of energy security.

The current weakness of the EU on the Ukraine crisis is indeed regrettable. This is a perilous moment for Europeans and their security. A stronger and more united EU voice would help the west to deter Russia. It would be unfortunate if it required a severe security crisis — such as a Russian attack on Ukraine — to create the unity and urgency that the EU so badly needs.

