Sieps

Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies

Göran von Sydow and Valentin Kreilinger (eds)

Who calls the shots?

Institutional and political dynamics in European defence

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SIEPS 2026:1op

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– SIEPS 2026:1op –

Report No. 1op
April 2026

Published by the Swedish Institute for
European Policy Studies

This publication is available at www.sieps.se
The opinions expressed in this publication
are those of the authors.

Printed by EO Grafiska AB
Stockholm, April 2026

ISSN 1651-8942
ISBN 978-91-89498-21-1

Preface

The European security environment is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, continued instability in Europe's neighbourhood, and growing uncertainty about the future of transatlantic security guarantees have intensified pressure on the European Union and its member states to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. At the same time, ambitions for a more autonomous and capable European security actor have become increasingly prominent.

The present volume examines the institutional and political dynamics shaping this development. The contributions analyse key aspects such as differentiated integration, the expanding role of EU institutions, the enduring centrality of member states, and questions about democratic accountability. They also highlight the opportunities and limitations inherent in current institutional practices.

Taken together, the chapters offer complementary perspectives on the conditions under which European defence cooperation is deepening. They provide a concise yet nuanced account of the EU's gradual emergence as a security and defence actor in an increasingly uncertain strategic environment.

By publishing this report, we hope to shed light on the various choices facing Europe in a period marked by significant challenges.

Göran von Sydow

Director

About the authors

Calle Håkansson is an Associate Research Fellow with the Europe Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), as well as a researcher at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). His research primarily focuses on European security and defence policy, with particular emphasis on the EU's development in this field, defence industrial issues, and EU–NATO relations. Calle's research has been published in leading academic journals and by renowned think tanks, including the *Journal of European Integration, European Security, Defence Studies*, and by the European Council on Foreign Relations. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Malmö University.

Valentin Kreilinger is a Senior Researcher in Political Science at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS) specialising in EU politics and institutions. His main research interests are the evolution of the EU's political system, reform and enlargement of the EU, differentiated integration, EU economic governance, and the role of national parliaments in the EU. He also works on German EU policies and Franco-German relations. Valentin holds a PhD in Political Science from the Hertie School in Berlin.

Nicolai von Ondarza is Head of the EU/Europe Research Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin and an Associate Fellow at Chatham House. His research focuses on EU politics and institutions, EU–UK relations as well as democracy in Europe. As part of his work, he has consulted the German government, the Bundestag, the UK government, the European Parliament, and the European Commission. Nicolai holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg.

Roderick Parkes is a researcher specialising in European security, geopolitics, and strategic foresight. He has worked with institutions such as the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the EU Institute for Security Studies, and now the NATO Defence College. He is also an associate fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). His work includes projects on geopolitical competition, defence policy, and societal resilience. With a background in political science, he combines research with advisory roles, aiming to bring practical insights to policymakers. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Bonn.

Pernille Rieker is Director of the ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo and a part-time research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). Her research focuses on European integration, differentiated integration, and European foreign, security, and defence policy, with particular expertise on French, Nordic, and EU–Norway relations. She has published widely in leading academic journals and edited volumes and is the author and editor of several books on European security and strategic autonomy. Pernille regularly engages with policymakers on European security, resilience, and defence cooperation. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Oslo.

Göran von Sydow is Director of the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS). His main research interests are in the fields of European integration, party politics, Euroscepticism, and democracy. He has also undertaken research in Europeanisation, in particular concerning Sweden and the EU. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Stockholm University.

List of abbreviations

ASAP – Act in Support of Ammunition Production
CARD – Coordinated Annual Review on Defence
CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP – Common Security and Defence Policy
DG – Directorate-General (European Commission department)
DG DEFIS – Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space
DG ECHO – Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG HOME – Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
EC – European Commission
ECF – European Competitiveness Fund
EDA – European Defence Agency
EDF – European Defence Fund
EDIP – European Defence Industry Programme
EDIRPA – European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act
EDIS – European Defence Industrial Strategy
EEA – European Economic Area
EEAS – European External Action Service
EI2 – European Intervention Initiative
EPC – European Political Community
EPF – European Peace Facility
ESSI – European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI)
EU – European Union
EUDIS – EU Defence Innovation Scheme
EUGS – European Union Global Strategy
FAC – Foreign Affairs Council
FCAS – Future Combat Air System
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
HR/VP – High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission
JEF – Joint Expeditionary Force
MFF – Multiannual Financial Framework
MGCS – Main Ground Combat System
MPCC – Military Planning and Conduct Capability
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NORDEFCO – Nordic Defence Cooperation

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PESCO – Permanent Structured Cooperation
PSC – Political and Security Committee
QMV – Qualified Majority Voting
REARM Europe – ReArm Europe Plan
REPO Task Force – Russian Elites, Proxies, and Oligarchs Task Force
SAFE – Security Action for Europe
SME – Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
SURE – Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency
SWIFT – Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
TEU – Treaty on European Union
TFEU – Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UAV – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UK – United Kingdom
US – United States
WEU – Western European Union

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Executive summary

In the first chapter, *Göran von Sydow* and *Valentin Kreilinger* set the scene by explaining what they mean by 'calling the shots' and why we should care about the institutional and political dynamics in European defence. They raise cross-cutting issues that are particularly relevant to the volume and contextualise the topic within the current political and academic debate, as well as the evolution of European integration.

The second chapter by *Pernille Rieker* analyses the evolving architecture of European defence through the lens of differentiated integration and variable geometry. Russia's war against Ukraine and growing uncertainty about the durability of transatlantic security guarantees have accelerated European defence cooperation across multiple institutional levels. Rather than converging around a single institutional model, European defence has developed through overlapping EU and non-EU frameworks, coalitions of the willing, and flexible cooperation formats that include both member states and closely associated partners. The chapter argues that differentiated integration in security and defence does not undermine European unity. Instead, it represents a functional response to urgent security challenges, thus enabling collective action where uniform integration would be politically or operationally unfeasible. By treating integration as a continuum, Rieker shows how EU instruments such as PESCO, the European Defence Fund, joint procurement initiatives and the European Peace Facility interact with NATO, minilateral groupings and ad hoc coalitions. Recent initiatives, notably the Preparedness Union and the Readiness 2030 framework, have increased coherence in the EU's defence role while remaining embedded in a broader European and transatlantic security order. The chapter further shows how third-country participation, particularly by Norway and the United Kingdom, enhances Europe's capacity to act while highlighting the limits of association short of full membership.

The volume continues with an essay by *Calle Håkansson* (chapter 3), which analyses the evolving role of the European Commission in the EU's security and defence policy, with a focus on the defence-industrial domain. While defence has traditionally remained an intergovernmental prerogative, this piece argues that the Commission has progressively expanded its influence by mobilising its competences in industrial

policy, internal market regulation and financial governance, as well as by leveraging the worsening security situation in Europe to broaden its mandate within the policy field. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and growing uncertainty in the transatlantic relationship have accelerated this development, enabling the Commission to assume a more prominent agenda-setting and steering role. The chapter conceptualises this transformation as a move towards a financial mode of governance within a hybrid institutional order, characterised by persistent tensions between supranational ambition and member state control. The piece concludes that the Commission has become a central enabling actor, although the durability of this shift remains contingent on sustained political support from member states.

The fourth chapter, by *Nicolai von Ondarza*, turns to the intergovernmental sphere of EU defence policy-making: The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been designed as, and largely remains, an intergovernmental policy area. Rooted in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the CSDP's treaty set-up ringfences it off from the Community method, anchoring decisions in unanimity among governments in the European Council and Council of the EU. There are also elements of 'new intergovernmentalism' such as the creation of the European Defence Agency (EDA) and an increasing agenda-setting role of the Commission. The chapter explores how three factors drove EU defence policy towards its current intergovernmental, Council-dominated structure: Defence being a core state power, the path dependency of CSDP as focused on crisis management and the existence of an alternative in NATO. This domination of the Council and national governments is then dissected in EU decision-making on defence policy, on financing and resources and where this is challenged by the Commission and the EDA. Based on this analysis, the resilience of these intergovernmental structures is likely even under the current pressures the EU faces. To enhance its capacity to act, it should adapt them in two ways: On the one hand, a separate Council of Defence should be set up to mark the shift from crisis management operations to (supporting) territorial defence. On the other, decision-making should be adapted to interface more firmly with new supranational elements, such as the Commissioner for Defence and Space.

In the following contribution (chapter 5), *Valentin Kreilinger* takes a critical perspective on how the growing political importance of defence, coupled with the enormous budgetary resources now dedicated to it, raises the question of democratic control. This essay first outlines how

parliamentary involvement by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Western European Union (WEU) occurred from 1955 to 2011, during and after the Cold War. While the European Parliament and national parliaments have distinct roles in the political systems of the EU and its member states, their involvement in defence is limited, as the case of the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) loan scheme shows. Arguing that this is a cause for concern in terms of democratic accountability, Kreilinger puts forward proposals to strengthen parliamentary involvement in the context of European rearmament after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The prospect of shrinking budgetary resources for other policy areas creates an even greater risk of inadequate democratic representation. Therefore, parliamentary involvement must increase together with defence spending. The essay concludes that intensified, meaningful scrutiny of defence policy is required at the European, national and interparliamentary levels.

Last but not least, following the survey of individual institutions, the sixth chapter by *Roderick Parkes* searches for the shared routines and architectural blueprints now shaping the Union's defence integration. It finds evidence of templates such as 'bellicose state-building' as well as procedural habits – the familiar engines in a time of uncertainty – that prioritise bureaucratic momentum over strategic creativity. By examining four dynamics of integration, this analysis exposes the flaws in these path-dependent methods and proposes alternative architectures that better leverage the Union's diverse strengths for resilience and deterrence.

These contributions provide different perspectives and make different prescriptions about the institutional and political dynamics of European defence. While many point to the difficulties of a union of 27 engaging in tiring discussions about internal issues and burdensome negotiations, others argue that such reflections are necessary for the EU to function. In this volume, all authors provide original and thoughtful perspectives on what is certainly a defining process for the EU.

1 Institutional and political dynamics of European defence

Göran von Sydow and Valentin Kreilinger

European defence is undergoing a far-reaching transformation. For decades, Europe relied heavily on transatlantic security guarantees. Today, the EU and its member states face growing pressure to take greater responsibility for their own security. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, persistent instability in Europe's neighbourhood, and uncertainty about the future of the security commitments by the United States (US) have fundamentally reshaped the strategic environment. At the same time, European leaders are increasingly vocal about the need for the EU to become a more autonomous and capable security actor. French President Emmanuel Macron's repeated calls for 'strategic autonomy' capture this shift in European strategic thinking alongside initiatives that have implemented it, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) scheme.

However, the reality is marked by deep contradictions: Expectations for the EU's role in defence have risen sharply, but its ability to act decisively is limited by institutional, political, and capability constraints. This discrepancy between aims and reality was famously described by Christopher Hill as the 'capability-expectations gap' (Hill 1993). The concept remains highly relevant in the contemporary European security landscape. Despite important institutional developments – such as the Lisbon Treaty, the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and higher defence spending among member states – European defence integration is still very much a 'work in progress' (Engberg 2021).

This opening contribution examines the state of European defence in early 2026, focusing on the institutional context, the factors that enable or hinder progress, and possible future directions. The central argument is that defence, just like European integration itself, is defined by a tension between *unity* and *ambition*. While geopolitical pressures and a strong political convergence among many member states in face of these

pressures create favourable conditions for further deepening cooperation, institutional limitations, political fragmentation, and enduring sovereignty concerns continue to hold progress back. Understanding the institutional dimension of European defence is therefore essential for assessing both the EU's current capabilities and its future potential.

1.1 The state of European defence and its historical evolution

The geopolitical environment confronting Europe in early 2026 is characterised by increased strategic competition, regional instability, and uncertainty about the reliability of traditional security arrangements. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has brought large-scale conventional warfare back to Europe, forcing EU countries to fundamentally rethink their defence strategies and readiness. The conflict has exposed critical gaps in European military capabilities – from ammunition stockpiles and air and missile defence to strategic airlift and intelligence gathering (Engberg 2026; European Commission 2025).

At the same time, transatlantic relations have become more complex and less predictable. Although NATO continues to serve as the cornerstone of European defence, the recent developments in the US have sparked worries about the reliability of US security commitments, especially if US strategic focus were to pivot entirely towards other regions, such as the Indo-Pacific (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2025).

These developments have fuelled calls for European strategic autonomy, which is generally understood to mean the EU's ability to act independently when necessary while still maintaining cooperation with non-EU allies. Strategic autonomy does not imply isolation from NATO or the US but rather aims to strengthen Europe's ability to act as a credible and capable security provider. However, achieving strategic autonomy requires addressing longstanding structural weaknesses in European defence cooperation.

Efforts to establish a European defence capability date back to the early years of European integration. The Pleven Plan of 1950 proposed the creation of a European Defence Community (EDC), which would have established a federal European army. Although the plan was ultimately rejected by the French National Assembly in 1954, it marked the first major attempt to institutionalise European defence cooperation (Mérand 2008, 2).

Following the failure of the EDC, European defence integration proceeded incrementally and outside the framework of supranational institutions. Defence remained firmly under national control, reflecting the sensitivity of sovereignty in this domain. NATO became the key venue for European defence, with integration in the EU focusing on economic and political cooperation (Mérand 2008).

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of new security challenges renewed the interest in European defence cooperation. The Maastricht Treaty established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1993, which provided a formal framework for coordinating foreign and security policy (Menon et al. 1992). Subsequent institutional developments, including the creation of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in 1999, expanded the EU's role in crisis management and military operations (Howorth 2007).

The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2009, represented another milestone in European defence integration. It introduced new institutional mechanisms, including the mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7) TEU) that had previously been covered by the West European Union (WEU), and the legal framework for Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which was put into motion in 2017 to facilitate deeper defence cooperation among willing and capable member states (Wolfstädter and Kreilinger 2017). The mutual assistance clause received renewed attention in early 2026 when German Chancellor Friedrich Merz stated that it was 'not a substitute for NATO' and that '[w]e must now spell out how we intend to organise this at European level' (Federal Government of Germany 2026), and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said 'time has come to bring Europe's mutual defence clause to life. Mutual defence is not optional for the EU. It is an obligation' (European Commission 2026b). In the context of Ukraine's future EU membership, security guarantees after a peace deal and discussions about a 'membership-lite' for Ukraine, the question of Article 42(7) and how it would cover the country, is of high importance. This is a particularly relevant point in the context of Ukraine seemingly remaining outside of NATO (Engberg 2026). During the Eastern enlargement from 1999 onwards, NATO membership preceded EU membership.

Despite these steps towards deeper integration, European defence integration still faces major institutional and political hurdles. Defence policy remains firmly in the hands of individual member states, while

EU institutions have limited authority in most of this domain.[1] As a result, progress has been slow and uneven, reflecting the tension between national sovereignty and collective security interests. Core state powers – the essential and sovereign functions of a state such as the military, border control, and security – are traditionally guarded against supranational integration. While often deemed 'high politics' and subject to intergovernmental control, these powers have increasingly been integrated in the EU through regulation (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). Yet, developments over the past few years have been much more significant than previous periods: Many of the plans suggested in the Strategic Compass from 2022 are being progressively processed within the EU (European Union 2022), not least in the field of defence-industrial planning as well as the broader fields of security.[2] There are also discussions about how to strengthen the supranational elements of decision-making as well as moving towards an extended use of qualified majority voting (QMV); re-opening the treaties to deal more systematically with these matters seems not to be the most pressing issue for policymakers today (Zander 2025).

1.2 Opportunities and constraints for European defence

The current geopolitical landscape offers real **opportunities** to push forward both European defence cooperation and deeper integration:

First, there is a strong and widespread *sense of urgency* among European leaders. Russia's war in Ukraine and questions about US security commitments have changed threat perceptions across Europe. These developments have created unprecedented political momentum for strengthening European defence capabilities and cooperation to rearm Europe (Engberg 2026).

Second, public opinion *supports* a stronger European role in defence. Recent Eurobarometer surveys indicate that European citizens perceive security threats more acutely and expect the EU to play an active role in protecting European interests. Public support for defence cooperation and increased defence spending has grown since 2022 (European Commission 2024).

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[1] See Chapter 4, 'A matter of core state power: The intergovernmental sphere of EU defence policy-making', by Nicolai von Ondarza.

[2] See Chapter 3, 'New defence-industrial ambitions: The European Commission in EU security and defence', by Calle Håkansson.

Third, at the institutional level, the EU itself is stepping up and providing *leadership*. Under President Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission has championed new defence initiatives, like the EDF and joint procurement schemes such as SAFE, even using common borrowing to fund them. These moves highlight the Commission's expanding role in defence, including the creation of a dedicated defence portfolio.[3]

Fourth, while not, as yet, being a defence union per se, the EU's *repertoire is broad*. Beyond the above-mentioned elements it is worth pointing out, among other initiatives, the agenda put forward in the area of preparedness as presented in the so-called Niinistö report (Niinistö 2024), which ranges from building defence-industrial capacities to 'total defence'.

History shows that *crises* often drive European integration forward (Lehne 2022; Riddervold et al. 2021). European integration is a process, and the EU has repeatedly used moments of crisis to justify bold institutional changes and deeper cooperation. The current security challenges could do the same for European defence.

Despite the favourable conditions outlined above, important **constraints** continue to impede decisive advances to European defence, particularly inside the EU framework:

One major obstacle is the legal and institutional framework established by the *EU treaties*, which creates a mismatch with political expectations (Horn 2025). Defence remains first and foremost a national competence, and EU institutions have limited authority to compel member states to cooperate. Participation in defence initiatives is voluntary.[4] Whenever unanimity is required in decision-making on defence policy, this gives individual member states veto power, thereby limiting the Union's ability to act decisively.

Budgetary constraints also pose a significant challenge. Although defence spending has risen in all member states, financial resources remain small compared to the capability gaps. National defence budgets are subject to competing domestic priorities,[5] and member states often prioritise

[3] See Chapter 3 by Calle Håkansson.

[4] See Chapter 6, 'EU defence architecture: Yesterday's answers to tomorrow's problems'?, by Roderick Parkes.

[5] See Chapter 5, 'Backbenchers don't really fight back yet: Parliaments in EU defence policy', by Valentin Kreilinger.

domestic procurement over joint initiatives. Additionally, industrial production capacities are limited and cannot be expanded rapidly (Engberg 2026).

Political fragmentation further complicates progress. While the geopolitical context has fostered some convergence in threat perceptions, member states continue to have divergent defence priorities and strategic cultures. These differences hinder the development of coherent common policies. Sovereignty concerns and domestic political considerations often undermine willingness to delegate authority to EU-level institutions.[6]

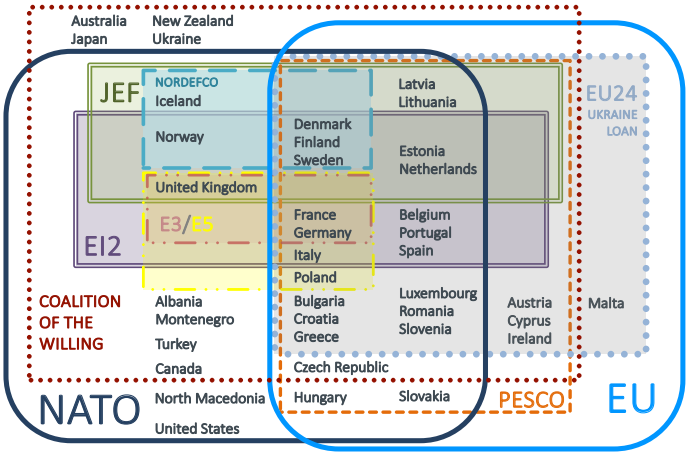
These constraints create a structural tension in European defence policy: While many member states recognise the need for greater cooperation, most of them have been reluctant to cede control over defence policy. This *limits the EU's ability* to translate its ambition for 'strategic autonomy' into action. The risks associated with a 'duplication' of tasks primarily done in NATO and the main tasks for the EU remain a longstanding concern in this context. Member states with a strong preference for maintaining a strong transatlantic link are more sensitive to ideas about increasing European autonomy, while many others – in particular after the events taking place in early 2026 concerning Greenland – voice a need for a more independent Europe that relies less on external actors for its security. There are nonetheless still many outstanding issues as to *how* this can be achieved. Much will depend on functional and material aspects. However, in the context of this volume we will primarily focus on the role of institutions. The simple reason for this is that the institutional and organisational set-up will also determine potential political outcomes. Furthermore, as will be elaborated in this volume, there are different institutional choices to be made that will have an impact on the overall political system(s).

1.3 Institutional dimensions of European defence, now and in the future

A thorough understanding of the organisational and institutional dimensions of European defence is crucial for assessing its potential future development. Within the EU and beyond, institutions shape the incentives for cooperation among member states and can provide mechanisms for coordinating defence policies and creating joint capabilities.

[6] See Chapter 4 by Nicolai von Ondarza.

Figure 1: **Important cooperation formats of European defence**



Source: Valentin Kreilinger, February 2026 (1st edition with the EU, NATO, and PESCO published in 2017).

However, institutional progress in EU defence policy has been constrained by concerns about sovereignty and duplication with NATO. Many EU member states have long viewed NATO as the only framework for collective defence and have been reluctant to build parallel structures within the EU (Ojanen 2006). This has changed in the two decades following the 2003 Berlin Plus agreement on the relationship between the EU and NATO. Yet, in January 2026, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte underlined that 'if anyone thinks [...] that the European Union, or Europe as a whole, can defend itself without the US, keep on dreaming. You can't. We can't' (NATO 2026).

The European defence landscape combines multiple overlapping frameworks, including NATO, the EU, and various ad hoc coalitions and minilateral formats.[7] This complex institutional environment reflects both the opportunities and challenges of European defence cooperation (see Figure 1).

As a result, the organisational structure of European defence is characterised by flexibility and differentiation. This flexibility enables progress while accommodating diverse national preferences. At the

[7] See Chapter 2, 'Unity without uniformity: Differentiated integration and European defence', by Pernille Rieker, and Chapter 6 by Roderick Parkes.

same time, countries outside the EU, such as Norway and the United Kingdom (UK), found themselves partly disconnected from decisions by the EU on defence and security in the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and seek to engage with the EU's initiatives in this area.[8] NATO is composed of 32 members, while the EU has 27 member states; 23 countries are part of both organisations. EU initiatives such as PESCO or the EDF, not shown in the figure, enable groups of EU member states to advance cooperation on certain capabilities without requiring everyone's participation. SAFE, not shown in the figure, is a loan scheme for EU member states, backed by the EU budget with common borrowing on the financial markets. These EU frameworks allow for third-country involvement, depending on certain conditions and limitations. The EU24 loan for Ukraine is designed to help fund Ukraine's budgetary needs for 2026 and 2027, also based on joint debt. The Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine has emerged as the most recent and very flexible framework for supporting Ukraine and elaborating security guarantees for the time after a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine. Both the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) are instances of multinational defence cooperation to strengthen the participants' capability to act jointly and swiftly. The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) aims to increase the Nordic countries' defence capabilities and strengthen their ability to take joint action in case of a crisis in their neighbourhood. Finally, E3 and E5 have emerged as cooperation formats between the largest European countries. Friedrich Merz referred to these formats at the 2026 Munich Security Conference: 'Where we need to be agile, we move forward in small groups – with the E3, i.e. Germany, France and the United Kingdom, but also with Italy and Poland as European playmakers' (Federal Government of Germany 2026).

Moreover, EU defence policy has moved away from a previously purely intergovernmental set-up to quasi-binding commitments and some supranational governance, which changes its nature and affects core state powers.[9] These new EU competences and huge levels of funding amount to a new dynamic that underscores the need for stronger democratic oversight by both the European Parliament and national parliaments.[10]

[8] See Chapter 2 by Pernille Rieker.
[9] See Chapter 3 by Calle Håkansson.
[10] See Chapter 5 by Valentin Kreilinger.

The future of European defence could unfold along three distinct but not mutually exclusive organisational and institutional pathways. These options are presented as ideal types. Although decision-makers refer to them, they are not blueprints that can be followed step-by-step. The practical implementation of a stronger European defence will almost definitely contain overlapping elements of all three ideal types.

One option is the development of a **stronger European pillar within NATO**. In 1955, the West European Union (WEU) was created as the European pillar of NATO, building on the Brussels Treaty of 1948. This approach would strengthen European capabilities while keeping NATO as the core organisation for collective defence in Europe (Ojanen 2006). It would improve burden-sharing and bolster Europe's strategic autonomy within the transatlantic framework. To many, a stronger European pillar within NATO remains the most politically feasible and strategically sound option in the short term. This reflects the public thinking of key decision-makers at the Munich Security Conference in early 2026: Friedrich Merz defined European mutual assistance as a self-sustaining, strong European pillar within NATO, and Emmanuel Macron said that 'Europe will be a good ally and partner for the United States of America. Because it will be a partner taking its fair share of the burden' (Presidency of the French Republic 2026). Ursula von der Leyen argued that a 'strong Europe makes for a stronger transatlantic alliance' (European Commission 2026b), and Keir Starmer emphasised the need to 'build a stronger Europe and a more European NATO, underpinned by deeper links between the UK and the EU' as well as 'more burden-sharing in Europe' (Prime Minister's Office 2026). The 'European pillar in NATO' approach aligns with the preferences of most member states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, which continue to view NATO and the US security guarantee as indispensable. Strengthening European capabilities within NATO would enhance burden-sharing and reduce European dependence on US military assets without undermining NATO cohesion from the European side of the Atlantic. However, the feasibility of this pathway ultimately depends on the US.

Another option involves the use of **ad hoc coalitions of willing and capable European states**. These coalitions allow for rapid and flexible cooperation, particularly in crisis situations. Many such formats exist already.[11] Ad hoc coalitions of willing European states will remain an

[11] See Chapter 2 by Pernille Rieker and Chapter 6 by Roderick Parkes.

important feature of the defence landscape. Such coalitions provide flexibility and responsiveness, particularly in crisis situations where rapid decision-making is essential. The Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine (see above, Figure 1) is the example to which decision-makers have repeatedly referred: According to Emmanuel Macron, '[t]he big change during this year is the Coalition of the Willing' (Presidency of the French Republic 2026), while Ursula von der Leyen argued that 'we have to be creative. Take the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force [...]. Or take the Coalition of the Willing [...]. These examples tell us that this can work' (European Commission 2026b). Keir Starmer said that 'we can coordinate in great effect' and mentioned creating the Coalition of the Willing. However, reliance on ad hoc arrangements also carries risks, including fragmentation, duplication, and less institutional coherence. Ursula von der Leyen declared that 'what we need to do now, is formalise the ad hoc beginnings of new security collaborations' (European Commission 2026b). The relationships with EU and NATO could be complicated. Their benefit lies in an easy inclusion of non-EU countries such as the UK, Norway, and Turkey.

A third option is **deeper cooperation within EU-institutional structures**. This approach would strengthen EU defence institutions and enhance the Union's ability to coordinate defence policies and capabilities. Frameworks such as PESCO, the EDF, and coordinated procurement mechanisms will then play an increasingly important role. These initiatives address structural weaknesses in Europe's defence industrial base and promote interoperability and efficiency (European Commission 2025). The EU is already playing an increasing financial role, which was recently praised by Emmanuel Macron: 'We [...] have common borrowing programmes on defence. It's a very good thing [...]. It's a wonderful innovation' (Presidency of the French Republic 2026). Ursula von der Leyen stressed that 'with our SAFE programme, we are investing in the capabilities we need. [...] We have remained relentless and creative in the way we maintain our support for Ukraine. This includes [...] our EUR 90 billion loan' (European Commission 2026b). Over time, these mechanisms could significantly enhance Europe's capacity to act independently when necessary. However, this pathway would require overcoming significant political reluctance and institutional hurdles.

The future trajectory of European defence is likely to combine elements of NATO alignment, flexible coalitions, and institutional development in the EU. In this context, differentiated integration is particularly relevant, as it allows willing and capable member states to advance cooperation while

preserving overall institutional coherence. Differentiation has become an essential mechanism for overcoming political fragmentation, as the use of enhanced cooperation for the EU24 loan to Ukraine in December 2025 has shown (Bissinger et al. 2026). The tool of enhanced cooperation is also available for security and defence policy more narrowly defined (Cremona 2009).

Thinking outside the box, Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius recently proposed the establishment of a European Security Council (ESC), an idea that was first put forward by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 (European Commission 2026). Kubilius argues that an ESC could help address inefficiencies; he stresses that member states are in the lead, with the Commission in a supportive role. Whereas an ESC may not be the answer to more efficient decision-making, the proposal highlights the need to adapt decision-making to the current security challenges (Engberg 2026). Potential models for the ESC include a format of or within the European Council, a new EU institution, a revived WEU 2.0 framework, or an informal forum (Scazzieri 2026).

Ultimately, the future institutional architecture of European defence will depend on political will, threat perceptions, and the evolution of the geopolitical environment. Institutional innovations alone cannot overcome political divisions, but they can facilitate cooperation and enable incremental progress.

European defence in 2026 is, as this section has shown, characterised by both opportunities and constraints. Geopolitical pressures, public support, and institutional leadership create favourable conditions for deeper integration and cooperation. At the same time, legal, financial, and political constraints limit progress.

1.4 Outline of the volume

These lines of thought, presented here in a simplified way, represent elements of the broad thinking on European defence. The ongoing debate is the starting point for the following five chapters in this volume, which take a much deeper look into the issue. All five contributors take different perspectives on the institutional and political dynamics of European defence:

Pernille Rieker's contribution (Chapter 2) analyses the evolution of European defence through differentiated integration and flexible cooperation formats. She argues that overlapping EU and non-EU frameworks, such as PESCO and the EDF with third countries' participation, enable effective collective action in response to Russia's war against Ukraine and growing transatlantic uncertainty. Rieker concludes that differentiated integration strengthens rather than weakens European unity and is further enhanced by third-country participation, especially from Norway and the UK.

After that the following three chapters turn to the EU's institutional triangle.

The third chapter by *Calle Håkansson* examines the expanding role of the European Commission in EU security and defence, particularly in the defence-industrial sector. He argues that the Commission has extended its influence by using its competences in industrial policy and regulation, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Håkansson concludes that the Commission has become a key actor, although its long-term role depends on continued political support from member states.

In the following contribution (Chapter 4), *Nicolai von Ondarza* focuses on the intergovernmental nature of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). He explains that defence remains dominated by member states and the Council due to its status as a core state power and the continued importance of NATO. Von Ondarza argues that while intergovernmental structures are resilient, reforms such as the creation of a Defence Council and improved coordination with supranational actors could strengthen the EU's effectiveness in the policy area.

The fifth chapter by *Valentin Kreilinger* addresses the issue of democratic accountability in European defence policy. He argues that higher defence spending and initiatives like the SAFE loan scheme have not been matched by sufficient parliamentary oversight. Kreilinger concludes that stronger involvement from the European Parliament and national parliaments is necessary to ensure democratic legitimacy.

In the concluding essay (Chapter 6), *Roderick Parkes* analyses the institutional patterns shaping EU defence policy. He finds that integration often follows path-dependent routines and bureaucratic habits that limit strategic innovation. Parkes argues that alternative institutional approaches are needed that better leverage the Union's diverse strengths

for resilience and deterrence. The EU's experimental, non-linear approach has driven integration, but its avoidance of open democratic debate is risky.

Some of these views and proposals may resonate with readers more than others. Their political viability varies, as does the extent to which they will be welcomed by decision-makers. There are difficulties and bottlenecks that slow down the EU, and the editors and authors of this collection are well aware of them. Nevertheless, this volume considers where these limits could be pushed. Each of the chapters presents an original argument and an important contribution to the debate on 'Who calls the shots in European defence?', which is only just beginning.

The future of European defence will depend on how member states and EU institutions balance ambition and unity. Institutional developments will play a central role in shaping Europe's capacity to act as a credible and effective security and defence actor. While much of this will be determined both by external factors and by concrete actions, the institutional choices will be important, as they will determine the overall capacity for Europe and the EU to navigate in a very troubling global context.

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2 Unity without uniformity: Differentiated integration and European defence

Pernille Rieker

Russia's war against Ukraine and growing uncertainty about transatlantic security guarantees have reinforced the EU's role as a security and defence actor. In recent years, we have seen a rapid development of security and defence mechanisms at the EU level, in NATO, as well as at the member state level. To give a correct interpretation of the situation in European defence, we need to take all these mechanisms into account. Ultimately, European defence is a function of how well these different mechanisms, levels and institutions work together to produce both collective and common defence. European security defence integration increasingly takes place through differentiated integration, where different actors, including coalitions of willing states – both inside and outside the EU – drive processes forward. Building on an argument presented in earlier work (Rieker and Giske 2024), this chapter argues that differentiated integration, including external formats that enable close cooperation between NATO and the EU as well as participation by non-member states such as Norway and the United Kingdom (UK), does not necessarily undermine European unity. On the contrary, this flexibility could very well strengthen Europe's overall capacity to act, build resilience against both military and hybrid threats, and at the same time balance considerations of legitimacy and inclusiveness in the emerging defence architecture.

A frequently raised counterargument to this perspective is that increased flexibility in European defence cooperation risks creating asymmetries, blurred lines of responsibility and, ultimately, a reduced capacity to act collectively as Europeans. From this viewpoint, differentiated integration may challenge the balance between rights and obligations within the EU by allowing selective participation without full political or legal commitment. Critics often draw parallels to the Brexit process, where the EU explicitly rejected any form of 'cherry-picking' to safeguard the integrity of the Union's legal and political order, particularly in relation

to the internal market (Schimmelfennig 2018). Applied to defence, this argument suggests that flexibility could weaken cohesion, dilute solidarity and undermine the EU's ability to act as a unified security actor.

This chapter takes this concern seriously but argues that it does not hold when applied to European security and defence. Rather than undermining European unity, differentiated integration in this domain has emerged as a functional response to urgent security challenges, enabling collective action where uniform integration would be politically or operationally infeasible.

2.1 Strategic autonomy through differentiated integration

Integration is here treated as a continuum, involving different degrees of vertical and horizontal interaction and uniformity, which allow inclusion of both EU and non-EU processes that contribute to Europe's collective security capacity (Rieker and Giske 2024). This European multi-actorness highlights that European security governance involves a constellation of actors: EU institutions, member states, associated non-members, and alliances and defence organisations (notably NATO). Rather than competing, these actors often complement each other through flexible task-sharing. Differentiated integration, then, is both an empirical condition and a governance logic – allowing varying speeds and depths of integration depending on state preferences, capacities and perceived threats.

Strategic autonomy, in this perspective, is not necessarily synonymous with full independence from the United States (US). Instead, it denotes the capacity to act collectively and responsibly in security and defence – across the full spectrum of hybrid, economic and military domains – while remaining embedded in partnerships with like-minded actors. Whether or not such a development will entail a disentanglement of the US depends on how the US develops – in other words, whether it will remain 'like-minded' or not. Differentiated integration enables willing states to cooperate more deeply, while keeping the system open and legitimate through inclusive frameworks that link members and non-members.

The geopolitical transformation triggered by Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine has accelerated Europe's security awakening. For the first time since the Cold War, EU institutions, member states and associated partners (i.e. European allies that are not EU-members, such as Norway

and the UK) are simultaneously strengthening defence cooperation at multiple levels. The 2024 US elections, Donald Trump's return to the White House and the subsequent threatening policies towards certain allies, have further heightened European concerns about the credibility of the transatlantic security guarantee, fuelling renewed debates about Europe's capacity to act autonomously. Strategic autonomy – a term that long remained largely controversial – has now become widely accepted (Krastev and Leonard 2025; Ewers-Peters 2025).

The ongoing reconfiguration of European defence does not, however, follow a single institutional path. It unfolds through a variable geometry of overlapping frameworks – some under the EU umbrella (e.g. PESCO, EDF, ASAP, EDIRPA, EDIP and SAFE), others outside it (e.g. JEF, EI2, NORDEFCO, ESSI, EPC, various ad hoc coalitions of the willing).[12] This pattern reflects what we have previously conceptualised as 'European strategic autonomy through differentiated integration', a process that involves multiple actors and governance levels, combining formal EU instruments with informal, flexible and often cross-institutional cooperation formats (Rieker and Giske 2024).

To get the full overview of the variable geometry of the current situation in European security and defence, we will distinguish between EU-level initiatives and those taken outside the EU-level but still crucial for European security and defence.

2.2 EU-level initiatives: The Preparedness Union and Readiness 2030 framework

The EU has made significant progress in building a common defence capacity. While the idea of a European defence union dates to the early stages of the integration process, it was not formalised as an objective until the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Indeed, it was only after the Balkan wars, towards the end of the 1990s, that the first substantial initiatives of a European security and defence policy were launched. This process was initiated by a bilateral summit between France and the UK, which led to the signing of the St Malo Declaration in 1998. Since then, however, development towards an EU defence policy has advanced slowly and often by moving two steps forward and then one back (Howorth 2014). It was the shift in Russia's foreign policy – particularly its increasingly

[12] For the full names behind these abbreviations, please refer to the List of abbreviations at the beginning of this volume. In the following, each abbreviation is introduced together with its full name.

aggressive posture towards the West and Ukraine – that provided renewed momentum. Since Brexit, it has been France who has played a decisive role in speeding up the process in response to a changing security context. Many of the ideas presented in his famous Sorbonne speech in September 2017 have now been implemented (Macron 2017). The Commission has, particularly under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, been instrumental in keeping up the momentum.

While important progress was made between 2017 and 2022, with Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the development of a Strategic Compass, the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine was a game-changer. Since 2022, the EU's role in defence and security has undergone a fundamental transformation. What was once a fragmented set of initiatives aimed at crisis management and capacity building has evolved into a coherent strategic framework. This shift has now been consolidated under the White Paper on European Defence – 'Readiness 2030' (European Commission and High Representative 2025) and the Preparedness Union Strategy (European Commission 2025a), presented in March and July 2025. Together, these two initiatives now form the strategic and institutional umbrella for Europe's collective efforts to build a resilient, industrially capable and strategically autonomous defence architecture.

Even though the Preparedness Union Strategy was presented after the White Paper on Defence, it still serves as the umbrella framework, integrating civil, economic, technological and military preparedness into a single strategic logic. It builds on the recommendations from the Niinistö report (2024) which recognises that Europe's security is no longer defined solely by traditional defence, but also by its ability to anticipate, absorb and recover from crises – be they military, cyber, energy-related or societal. It thus builds on earlier lessons from the pandemic and hybrid warfare, extending the logic of the 'Health Union' into a fully-fledged architecture for societal resilience. It links the EU's internal and external security dimensions by aligning defence initiatives with policies on civil protection, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure and supply-chain security. It also strengthens coordination between different Directorate Generals (DG) such as DG DEFIS, DG HOME, DG ECHO and the European Defence Agency (EDA), thus emphasising 'resilience' as a core principle across all EU policies (European Commission 2025a).

Within this broader framework, Readiness 2030 functions as the defence pillar of the Preparedness Union. It defines the EU's ambition to become 'ready, capable, and resilient by 2030', setting out concrete goals for force readiness, joint procurement and industrial scaling. Readiness 2030 integrates earlier instruments – such as PESCO, EDF, the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and the European Peace Facility (EPF) – into a single operational strategy built around capability development, defence-industrial cooperation and strategic readiness.

A central feature of Readiness 2030 is the SAFE facility, a new lending instrument of up to €150 billion designed to support common procurement, industrial upscaling and stockpiling. SAFE will operate alongside the EDF and EPF as key financial enablers of this new architecture (European Commission and High Representative 2025).

2.3 The four operational pillars of Europe's defence architecture

Under the broader strategic and institutional framework provided by the Preparedness Union and Readiness 2030, Europe's evolving defence architecture can be analytically structured around four key operational pillars: *institutional integration, industrial innovation, joint procurement* and *external engagement*. While these pillars are presented as analytically distinct, they are designed to operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, supported by a set of financial instruments that increasingly cut across traditional policy boundaries.

I. Institutional integration: capability cooperation and interoperability

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) constitutes the institutional backbone of EU defence integration. Formally launched in 2017, PESCO enables groups of member states to jointly develop and deploy military capabilities on the basis of binding political commitments (Council of the EU 2017). As of 2025, PESCO encompasses 75 active projects across land, air, sea, space and cyber domains (European Defence Agency 2025). These projects include major initiatives on military mobility, cyber-defence training and space-based surveillance, reflecting a broader shift towards interoperability and force-multiplying capabilities. PESCO has also developed a growing external dimension. Non-EU partners such

as the US, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Ukraine and the UK participate in selected projects. Norway's participation builds on its Administrative Arrangement with the EDA, granting access to cooperative frameworks, eligibility for EDF-linked collaboration and observer status in PESCO-related discussions. This makes Norway one of the most closely associated third countries in European defence cooperation (Becker et al. 2025).

II. Industrial innovation: defence technology and the industrial base

If PESCO forms the institutional backbone, the European Defence Fund (EDF) represents the core instrument of the EU's industrial and technological pillar. With an initial budget of €8 billion for the 2021–2027 period, EDF supports collaborative research and the development of advanced defence technologies. By 2025, the Commission had allocated €1.06 billion to EDF projects, bringing total commitments to €5.4 billion (European Commission 2025b). The 2025 work programme includes 33 calls covering all operational domains, with particular emphasis on digitalisation, space resilience, and the integration of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the EU Defence Innovation Scheme (EUDIS).

Beyond EDF as a stand-alone instrument, the Commission has proposed integrating defence-industrial support into a broader European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) (European Commission 2025c). Rather than constituting a separate defence pillar, the ECF is conceived as a horizontal financial framework designed to align defence, space and dual-use technologies across multiple operational pillars. Its objective is to consolidate EU financial instruments supporting critical technologies, thereby ensuring that Europe's security ambitions are underpinned by a globally competitive and resilient industrial base.

III. Joint procurement: scaling production and collective acquisition

In parallel with industrial innovation, the EU has taken decisive steps to facilitate joint procurement, which marks a significant evolution in its defence role. The European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) – both adopted in 2023 – represent the EU's first concrete legal frameworks for coordinated procurement (European Commission 2022; EPRS 2024). EDIRPA provides €300 million in co-financing for multinational procurement consortia, while ASAP focuses on rapidly expanding ammunition and equipment production for Ukraine and European stockpiles. These initiatives form

the foundation of the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP), proposed in 2024 to consolidate and expand the EU's defence-industrial base (European Commission 2024). EDIP is explicitly aligned with Readiness 2030 and aims to establish a more permanent mechanism for coordinated production, supply-chain resilience, and long-term defence planning.

This joint procurement pillar has been further reinforced by the introduction of SAFE (Security Action for Europe). While SAFE does not constitute a procurement mechanism in itself, it plays a critical enabling role by lowering financial barriers to collective procurement and accelerating industrial scaling. Together with EDIP, EDIRPA and ASAP, SAFE strengthens the operational and financial coherence of the EU's procurement efforts. These instruments are also expected to be further aligned within the proposed ECF, reinforcing financial integration across the industrial and procurement pillars.

IV. External engagement: security assistance beyond the Union

Finally, the European Peace Facility (EPF) remains the EU's principal off-budget instrument for external security assistance. As of April 2025, the EPF had mobilised approximately €14 billion in military support to Ukraine, alongside growing allocations for Moldova and Georgia (EPRS 2025a). The total EPF package for 2021–2027 now exceeds €17 billion, making it a cornerstone of the EU's response to Russian aggression and a central tool for defence-related engagement with partner countries (EPRS 2025b).

Taken together, the Preparedness Union and Readiness 2030 provide the overarching strategic and institutional framework for Europe's evolving defence policy. They bring greater coherence to what was previously a fragmented landscape by linking industrial capacity, military readiness, procurement coordination and societal resilience into a more unified system. The four operational pillars translate this vision into practice through capability cooperation, industrial investment, joint procurement and external assistance.

While all four pillars are formally presented as mutually reinforcing, their relative importance is likely to vary over time. Industrial investment and joint procurement are emerging as particularly critical for delivering short- to medium-term results, while institutional integration and external engagement shape longer-term strategic effects. Although the

EU remains far from a collective defence organisation in the NATO sense, it has increasingly become a defence enabler, coordinator and strategic actor.

In this role, the EU's defence ambitions do not compete with NATO; rather, they reinforce it. By enhancing Europe's capacity for capability development, procurement coordination and industrial production, the EU is strengthening the European pillar of NATO and contributing directly to transatlantic burden sharing. This complementarity has become even more tangible following Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO, which has resulted in an unprecedented overlap of membership between the two organisations. Today, the EU and NATO function as increasingly intertwined and mutually reinforcing pillars of Europe's security order.

2.4 Third-country participation in EU initiatives

While the EU's internal defence structures have become more coherent under the frameworks of the Preparedness Union and Readiness 2030, the broader European security architecture continues to evolve through a dynamic web of bilateral, minilateral and transatlantic partnerships. These flexible formats – often referred to as ad hoc coalitions – are not necessarily a sign of fragmentation, but rather of functional differentiation and capacity-building through flexible cooperation (Martill and Gebhard 2022; Reykers and Rieker 2024).

Among third countries, Norway and the UK, in addition to Ukraine, have developed the closest partnerships with the EU in the field of security and defence. Norway remains the most integrated non-member, participating in several CSDP missions and operations, selected PESCO projects, and enjoying access to the EDF through tailored calls. It also has an Administrative Arrangement with the EDA, which grants observer status and structured dialogue. In 2024, Norway and the EU signed a Security and Defence Partnership that formalised regular political and operational consultations, expanded cooperation on hybrid threats, space and critical infrastructure protection, as well as strengthening industrial collaboration (Riddervold and Rieker 2025).

The UK–EU relationship post-Brexit, initially framed by the 2021 Trade and Cooperation Agreement, was upgraded in 2025 through a new Security and Defence Partnership. This agreement establishes regular ministerial and working-level dialogues and opens the possibility for

UK participation in specific EU security and defence initiatives, while cooperation so far has centred on sanctions coordination, support for Ukraine, cyber resilience and technology cooperation (Whitman 2025).

Together, these partnerships reflect a pragmatic model of differentiated integration – where states outside the EU can contribute to and benefit from European defence efforts without formal membership. This model not only broadens Europe's capacity base but also reinforces transatlantic and northern security linkages. However, this model also generates asymmetries between members and associated non-members. For countries like Norway and the UK – closely aligned with the EU and possessing significant defence capacities – the current arrangements may not be ideal. While the differentiated system makes Europe stronger and more secure, it does not always produce optimal solutions for third countries that wish to integrate more deeply but remain outside full membership. Norway has experienced challenges in obtaining additional agreements in areas that are in the grey zone between the internal market (and thus relevant to the European Economic Area) and defence. In that sense, differentiated integration strengthens Europe's collective autonomy but may also highlight the limits of association for certain countries that could, in principle, choose full membership (Riddervold and Rieker 2025). Whether this will lead to a change in how Norway and UK perceive their current arrangements remains to be seen.

While these arrangements inevitably create asymmetries between EU members and closely associated non-members, participation is strictly conditional and governed by clearly defined access rules, ensuring that flexibility does not amount to unrestricted 'cherry-picking' of EU rights without corresponding obligations.

2.5 Non-EU initiatives that strengthen the collective European defence capacity

As mentioned above, the recent security and defence initiatives taken within the EU have largely contributed to a strengthening of the European pillar of NATO, amongst others. It has also facilitated cooperation between the two institutions. The fact that both now share strategic priorities on resilience, military mobility, critical infrastructure protection and hybrid threats has facilitated the cooperation. The unprecedented overlap in membership (with a few notable exceptions), following Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, has further aligned their interests and

coordination mechanisms. Joint task forces on emerging technologies, cyber resilience and defence innovation exemplify this growing complementarity (Ewers-Peters 2025).

Beyond Europe, several broader coalitions of the willing have emerged to support Ukraine and uphold international security norms. The Ukraine Defense Contact Group (Ramstein Group), comprising over 50 countries including EU and NATO members, has become the central coordination platform for military aid. Meanwhile, the European Political Community (EPC) though not a defence structure per se – has provided a political arena for strategic dialogue among 47 European leaders, enabling coordination on sanctions, energy security and hybrid threats (Grand 2023). In addition, the G7-level Russian Elites, Proxies and Oligarchs (REPO) Task Force has played a central role in coordinating sanctions among key allies following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including asset immobilisation, Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT system and cooperation on countering hybrid threats. The coalition of the willing for Ukraine, a coalition of 33 countries established on the initiative of France and the UK, also goes even further than the support delivered by the Ukraine Defense Contact Group by pledging readiness to be part of a peacekeeping force deployed on Ukrainian territory, either by providing troops or contributing in other ways. The peacekeeping force is envisaged only as being deployed once Ukraine and Russia sign a 'comprehensive ceasefire agreement' or 'peace deal' to settle Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. Together, these ad hoc coalitions and cooperation formats reflect the rise of a more networked model of European security governance, one that extends beyond institutional boundaries and engages both EU and non-EU actors in flexible, mission-oriented cooperation.

On top of this, there is also a series of bilateral and minilateral cooperation frameworks that contribute to the strengthening of European defence. The most important example of this is the bilateral cooperation among the larger European powers, such as the Franco–German cooperation, the Franco–British cooperation and the E3, but the cooperation among the smaller European states should also be taken into account.

Since Brexit, the Franco–German axis has remained a central political engine of EU defence integration. Through initiatives such as the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS),

the two countries have sought to pool defence-industrial resources and enhance interoperability. As earlier analyses have shown, these flagship programmes reflect both the ambition and the structural constraints of Franco–German defence-industrial cooperation, including persistent tensions over governance, workshare and industrial leadership (Calcara and Simón 2024). Subsequent assessments of Europe's defence-industrial trajectory in the post-2022 security environment further underline how these structural frictions have translated into uneven programme progress, with MGCS moving towards more formalised governance arrangements, while FCAS continues to face delays and unresolved disputes (Möhring 2023; IISS 2025).

However, the Franco–British partnership, initially forged through the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties, continues to anchor high-end defence cooperation, including nuclear testing, joint expeditionary forces, and cooperation on missiles and UAV technology. While Brexit has complicated the cooperation, the worsening of the European security environment has made both parties more committed to closer defence cooperation (Childs 2024). This was reaffirmed and deepened at the 2025 UK-France summit and in the Northwood Declaration (UK Government 2025), which stated that the two countries' independent nuclear deterrents can be coordinated. Macron's March 2026 speech built further on this logic by placing the Franco-British nuclear relationship more explicitly in an emerging European deterrence debate (Macron 2026).

In Northern Europe, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) has deepened markedly since 2022, with shared operational planning, joint exercises and common procurement initiatives. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO has strengthened the Nordic region's strategic coherence and its alignment with EU and NATO priorities. In this region, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), led by the UK and comprising ten Northern European states (including Norway, Finland, Sweden and the Baltic countries), represents another layer of minilateral defence cooperation focused on rapid deployment and high-readiness forces. Its flexible format allows for coordination both within and outside NATO structures, making it a key complement to EU and allied defence efforts (Tamnes and Friis 2024).

France has also promoted the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) as a flexible framework for countries willing to engage in crisis management and expeditionary operations. The initiative includes both EU and non-EU states (e.g. the UK and Norway) and serves as a bridge between EU ambitions and operational realities (Rieker 2021).

While these are just some examples of cooperation going on at various levels, it is a clear indication that European defence is built at many levels and in many different formats, and that it is likely that European strategic autonomy will be achieved precisely through these many different mechanisms.

It is perhaps not evident that this diversification of formats represents strength. Overlapping membership, competing priorities and differing levels of ambition can create friction – particularly between the more intergovernmental formats (e.g. EI2 or JEF) and the EU's supranational frameworks. In addition, industrial competition and divergent procurement standards still hamper deeper integration in areas like defence production and logistics.

Yet overall, these trends seem to point in the same direction. Rather than fragmenting Europe's security landscape, these overlapping initiatives contribute to capacity-building through differentiated integration – a pragmatic response to a complex strategic environment (Rieker and Giske 2024). Together, they seem to embody a new kind of European ad hoc approach: flexible, inclusive and complementary to existing institutions, which is perhaps needed in today's complex and volatile security context (Reykers and Rieker 2024). As such, Europe's growing web of partnerships – between the EU, NATO and like-minded coalitions – should be understood not as institutional competition but as mutually reinforcing layers of cooperation that collectively enhance Europe's security, resilience and strategic autonomy.

2.6 Conclusions

Returning to the concern that differentiated integration may undermine European cohesion by creating asymmetries and weakening the balance between rights and obligations, the experience of European defence integration points in a different direction. Unlike internal market integration, security and defence cooperation is not primarily governed by uniform legal entitlements, but by shared threat perceptions, operational

necessity and political willingness. Differentiation in this domain does not grant unconditional access to benefits without commitments; rather, it enables structured participation under clearly delimited conditions, political oversight and strategic control. As such, it differs fundamentally from the type of 'cherry-picking' rejected during the Brexit negotiations, which concerned access to the EU's internal market without corresponding regulatory obligations (Schimmelfennig 2018).

A legitimate counter-argument is that greater flexibility may allow reluctant member states to systematically opt out of costly or politically sensitive commitments, potentially weakening unity and entrenching a two-tier Union. This risk is particularly visible in cases where governments contest the EU's broader political direction. However, in the defence domain, differentiation does not confer veto power or automatic benefits on non-participants. On the contrary, flexible formats shift initiative away from the least willing, reducing their capacity to block collective action while preserving the EU's legal and political integrity. In this sense, differentiation functions less as an exit option than as a containment strategy that limits the disruptive effects of reluctance while enabling progress among the willing.

In a context of acute geopolitical pressure, the alternative to differentiated integration is therefore often not deeper unity, but political and operational paralysis. Flexible formats enhance Europe's collective capacity to act by allowing willing states – both EU members and closely associated partners – to move forward without undermining institutional coherence. The post-2025 shift in US policy under President Trump has further accentuated Europe's need for autonomy, as Washington's increasingly conditional approach to allied security commitments has catalysed European efforts towards industrial sovereignty and operational preparedness. At the same time, US retrenchment has increased the legitimacy of European defence initiatives, which are no longer widely perceived as competing with NATO, but rather as pillars of a more balanced transatlantic relationship – an idea long promoted by France.

This take on the emerging European defence architecture illustrates how differentiation can enhance resilience rather than erode cohesion. Functional differentiation enables rapid responses by subsets of willing states; institutional differentiation allows integration across overlapping frameworks such as the EU, NATO, JEF and NORDEFCO;

and external differentiation incorporates non-members in ways that strengthen coherence rather than fragmentation. Together, these forms of differentiation constitute a dynamic, layered and adaptive system of European defence governance.

This pattern challenges the traditional view that differentiation weakens the EU's legitimacy or political unity (Meijer and Brooks 2021). Instead, internal and external differentiation together sustain European actorness by reconciling efficiency with inclusiveness. The structured inclusion of associated partners such as the UK and Norway, as well as future members such as Ukraine and Moldova, demonstrates how differentiation can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier to integration.

The trajectory of European defence since 2022 suggests that differentiated integration has become the default mode of European actorness. Coalitions of the willing, joint procurement mechanisms and cross-institutional cooperation now form a flexible but bounded ecosystem that enables both depth and inclusiveness. In the long run, Europe's ability to sustain this delicate balance – between flexibility and unity, autonomy and alliance – will shape not only its military posture but also its political sovereignty. Differentiation, far from signalling weakness, may thus constitute one of Europe's most important strengths in navigating an increasingly volatile geopolitical order.

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3 New defence-industrial ambitions: The European Commission in EU security and defence

Calle Håkansson

European defence is undergoing a formative transformation, driven both by the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine and by growing uncertainty about the transatlantic relationship under the second Trump administration. Overall, these developments have prompted a significant rearmament effort across the European continent. Within this evolving security landscape, the European Commission has increasingly sought to consolidate and expand the European defence industrial base, a process that has accelerated markedly in recent years. Yet, while the Commission has enhanced its influence in the security and defence domain, primarily through financial incentives in the defence-industrial sector, member states have simultaneously acted to preserve this policy field as one fundamentally grounded in intergovernmental decision-making. This tension underscores the sensitive nature of the security and defence field, as well as highlighting a policy area that continues to evolve.

Nevertheless, the return of large-scale war to the European continent has profoundly reshaped the EU's role in security and defence. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has served as a critical catalyst, exposing both the structural vulnerabilities and the latent potential of the European defence industry. The conflict has triggered a substantial increase in defence spending, renewed scrutiny of Europe's industrial readiness and intensified debates surrounding the strategic implications of procurement choices and defence investments. Moreover, it has heightened concerns over the involvement of third-country suppliers and the long-term risks stemming from the Union's continued dependence on non-EU defence manufacturers. Against this backdrop, the present analysis seeks to examine the evolving role of the European Commission within the defence domain and to identify the key challenges likely to shape its future trajectory. The focus is placed mainly on the defence-industrial domain,

as this represents the Commission's primary area of responsibility within security and defence, and it is the area that has witnessed the most significant developments over the past decade. However, in recent years the European Commission has also advanced a range of broader security-related initiatives, which some analysts argue contribute to the emergence of a European 'total defence' concept (Engberg 2025). Moreover, the Commission has expanded its wider security toolbox in areas such as geoeconomics, cybersecurity, societal resilience and military mobility (see Håkansson 2022; Håkansson 2024a; Perot 2024). However, the focus of this analysis remains on the Commission's competencies and ambitions within the defence-industrial domain.

This analysis is structured as follows. The next section provides a historical overview of the European Commission's involvement in defence, with the focus on the defence-industrial sector, tracing its evolution up to the 2020s. The subsequent section examines the new initiatives launched since 2022. The chapter concludes by outlining the key future challenges and reflecting on the European Commission's evolving and increasingly prominent role within the Union's security and defence policy.

3.1 Historical background: The European Commission in security and defence[13]

Historically, the European Commission has long sought to assert regulatory and political authority within Europe's defence-industrial domain. However, after the unsuccessful attempt to create the European Defence Community in the 1950s, EU[14] institutions largely refrained from engaging in defence-related matters, prioritising economic integration instead. Yet, from the late 1990s onwards, the Commission once again began seeking a more active political role in this field (Karampekios et al. 2018; Oliveira Martins and Mawdsley 2021). The Commission then drew attention to the inefficiencies created by Europe's fragmented defence markets, particularly in relation to competition from US defence industries. To address these challenges, it proposed new rules on public procurement, measures to ease the intra-European trade of defence goods, and stronger connections between civilian and defence industrial sectors. When these initial initiatives failed to gain traction and were

[13] This section draws heavily upon the chapter 'The European Union's Evolving Defence-Industrial Policy: Drivers and Future Challenges' by C. Håkansson (2026 forthcoming) in The EU Charting its Course in a Geopolitical World: Interdisciplinary European Studies, edited by K. Edholm, B. Lundqvist, A. Michalski and L. Oxelheim (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

[14] This text uses the term 'EU' for the predecessors of the Union as well.

rejected by the member states, the Commission renewed its efforts in the early 2000s, issuing a communication in 2003 and a Green Paper on defence industrial cooperation in 2004, both focused on strengthening the EU's defence industrial policy. This included proposed reforms to the movement of defence products within the EU, new procurement frameworks and support for advanced security research (Håkansson forthcoming 2026). Yet these ideas were met with significant opposition from member states wary of supranational involvement in defence affairs, which stalled the process (Strikwerda 2017). Even within the Commission, some voiced concerns about a potential 'militarisation' of the institution. As a result, rather than granting the Commission new powers, member states opted to establish the intergovernmental European Defence Agency (EDA) in 2004 to promote capability development and industrial cooperation (Fiott 2015).

Despite the EDA's creation, the Commission continued to pursue regulatory influence. Drawing on case law from the Court of Justice of the European Union, which had challenged restrictive national procurement practices, it issued another communication in 2007. This effort culminated in the adoption of two new directives: Directive 2009/43/EC, which facilitated the intra-EU transfer of defence products, and Directive 2009/81/EC, which set common rules for defence procurement. These measures marked a legal and political expansion of the Commission's authority in the defence-industrial domain (Blauberger and Weiss 2013). The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent defence budget cuts further encouraged cooperation in this sector. Although the two directives have had limited results thus far, they nonetheless represented a significant step towards consolidating the Commission's role in the field (Håkansson 2021).

In 2013, the Commission issued another communication, this time explicitly linking defence-industrial integration to a worsening security environment. It pointed to the evolving geopolitical situation and the growing range of threats facing Europe. The Commission then proposed a small-scale preparatory action to support research linked to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Although modest, this initiative laid the groundwork for future EU defence research funding. The Commission also floated the idea of joint EU-level procurement and ownership of dual-use technologies, but member states rejected this proposal (European Commission 2013; Håkansson 2021).

A more decisive phase began, however, under the Juncker Commission, which took office in 2014. Under the then EU High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini, the EU presented the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016, which raised the Union's level of ambition in security and defence. This strategic shift paved the way for several new initiatives, most notably the European Defence Fund (EDF) in 2017 (Haroche 2020; Hoeffler 2023). With a budget of €7.9 billion for 2021–2027, the EDF established the Commission as a major financier of defence research and development in Europe. Alongside this, the EU also launched the intergovernmental Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017 and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), thus creating a new, interlinked framework for EU defence integration (Brøgger 2024; Andersson and Britz 2025).

Ursula von der Leyen, who succeeded Juncker as Commission President in 2019, continued to expand the EU's defence agenda. One of her first major steps was the establishment of the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), which was responsible for implementing the EDF and advancing the Commission's broader defence-industrial ambitions. These developments were not without controversy, as member states remained cautious about excessive supranationalisation of defence policy (cf. Riddervold 2016). To secure support, the Commission strategically framed the EDF under its competencies in industrial and internal market policy while using financial incentives to attract member state participation (Hoeffler 2023; Marsh et al. 2025).

Several consistent priorities stand out across all efforts by the European Commission to gain influence within the security and defence matters: arguments regarding reducing fragmentation in the European defence industry, strengthening civil–military synergies in the sector and enhancing competitiveness of the European defence industry (Hammarstedt et al. 2025). Since the early 2010s, however, the Commission's discourse has become increasingly framed in terms of security rather than market efficiency (Fiott 2024). The deteriorating security environment, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, has been used to justify a stronger EU role in defence policy (Håkansson 2024b), and this has become even more evident since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

3.2 New ambitions after 2022

As underscored in the preceding section, the Commission is actively seeking to expand its influence over the domain of security and defence policy. This ambition has, over the past decade, increasingly been shaped by the deterioration of the European security environment. Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has further highlighted the need for improvements and has led to a range of new defence-industrial initiatives at the EU level. The war has also underlined the need to strengthen production capacity in areas such as munitions, while simultaneously investing in new capabilities and technologies (Andersson and Britz 2025). When the war began in 2022, the EU was also in the final stages of adopting its new Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. While led by the member states – with the European External Action Service (EEAS) as the institution in charge of the process – the Compass also came to influence the European Commission's role in defence, particularly in the defence-industrial domain (Håkansson 2025; Sus 2024).

At the outset, and as a consequence of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the European Commission launched several new but short-term initiatives after 2022 to respond to the worsening security situation. First, in the summer of 2022, the Commission proposed the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), aimed at supporting and incentivising investment in joint projects and joint procurement. Although small in scale, with a limited budget of €310 million, it has enabled joint procurement projects in, among other areas, the munitions sector and armoured vehicles (European Commission, n.d.). Second, to increase the supply of artillery ammunition to Ukraine and to rebuild and strengthen the EU's production capacity in this area, the Commission launched the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), aimed at reinforcing and ramping up ammunition manufacturing across Europe. ASAP had a budget of €500 million for the period 2023–2025. We can already see how these frameworks, although still largely small-scale, have, together with national increases in defence spending, contributed to an expansion of production facilities and capacity across Europe (Dubois and Cook 2025). By 2025, the EU's production capacity for artillery ammunition had increased by more than 50% (The Economist 2025).

However, to move from short-term initiatives to a broader framework and higher ambition, the Commission followed up in 2024 with both a new European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and a proposal for the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) (European Commission and HR/VP 2024). EDIP is intended to operate initially as a bridging instrument for EDIRPA and ASAP, both of which had fully allocated their budgets by 2024, covering the period from 2026 until the start of the EU's new MFF in 2028. EDIS also set out a new ambition that, by 2030, EU member states should conduct at least 40% of their defence procurement jointly, and that over 50% of Europe's defence spending should be directed towards products developed within Europe.

In the spring of 2025, following the increasing transatlantic uncertainties associated with the new Trump administration, the Commission also launched a new *White Paper on European Defence Readiness 2030* alongside the ReARM Europe Plan. The ReARM Europe plan aims to mobilise €800 billion for European defence in the coming years. This includes the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) loan instrument, through which the Commission will raise €150 billion to support joint investments by member states in defence capabilities. The SAFE initiative is based on a borrowing model rather than a grant-based system, as used by other initiatives such as the EDF, ASAP and EDIP. This approach was driven both by the constraints of the current EU budget and the need to mobilise a larger sum to address the security challenges Europe faces (Sabatino and Lawrenson 2026). To adopt the initiative, the member states in the European Council, together with the Commission, invoked Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), thereby bypassing the need for formal approval by the European Parliament (see also the contribution by Kreilinger in this volume). In doing so, they relied on the emergency provisions within the treaty, allowing the instrument to be implemented rapidly in response to pressing security needs. The reliance on Article 122 underscores the exceptional nature of the measure, but it also raises important questions about the institutional precedents it may set for future EU interventions in security and defence policy. In total, 19 member states are now participating in the framework, using the full €150 billion, with the first instalment payments scheduled to be disbursed in 2026.

To increase defence investment across the EU, member states may also activate – as part of the ReARM Europe Plan – the national 'escape clause' in the Stability and Growth Pact, which, according to the Commission, could lead to an additional €650 billion in defence spending (European Commission and High Representative 2025). Combined with NATO's new 3.5% core defence spending target, this is expected to drive continued investment in European defence in the years ahead.

To operationalise and provide a clear timetable for new investments, the Commission and the HR/VP also presented a *Roadmap to 2030* with yearly milestones to achieve the 2030 Defence Readiness targets (European Commission and HR/VP 2025). This includes, among other measures, the development of four defence flagship projects: the Eastern Flank Watch and the European Drone Defence Initiative, primarily aimed at countering drones and other threats from Russia and Belarus. The Commission and the HR/VP also proposed the creation of a European Air Shield to establish integrated air and missile defence across Europe, as well as a European Space Shield to protect critical European space assets. To address identified capability gaps across Europe, member states will also form capability coalitions to advance and address the outlined gaps. Most of these developments are expected to be in place by 2028 to meet the 2030 goal (Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy 2025; Cohen 2025). Finally, in 2025, the Commission also presented the first proposal for the next MFF post-2027, with a proposed budget of €131 billion to support investments in defence, security and space. Although this represents a fivefold increase compared to the current MFF, it will now be subject to negotiations among the member states regarding the final total budget. Nevertheless, given the security situation facing Europe, a substantial allocation for security and defence can be expected in the next budget period.

Overall, we can observe that the Commission has taken significant steps to increase investment in European defence in recent years. It has done so by drawing on its competences in the industrial domain and by responding to the deteriorating security environment in Europe following Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine (Håkansson 2024b). Nevertheless, this raises important questions about the future of European security governance and the evolving role of the Commission in this field. How will the governance of these new funds be organised? Will this lead to greater supranationalisation in security and defence, or will member states continue to hold firmly to their prerogatives? Moreover, how should

Europe further develop its defence-industrial capacities in the years ahead? Finally, what are the key strategic questions and uncertainties that lie ahead?

3.3 Future European security governance

Looking at the security situation Europe faces in 2026, we are in a position in which Russia could attack an EU or NATO member state within a few years (Bergmann and Svendsen 2025). Moreover, the Trump administration in the US and the resulting transatlantic turmoil have clearly underscored the need for greater European responsibility for security and defence. However, the build-up of Europe's defences remains uneven, with persistent problems of fragmented and uncoordinated procurement and military capability development (Hackett and Schreer 2024). While European defence spending has increased and production capacity has expanded in several sectors, longstanding structural problems continue to challenge the overall European defence-industrial base. These are problems that the Commission's recent proposals seek to address.

Overall, fragmentation and the lack of collaboration within Europe have been identified as key factors affecting the state, sophistication and cost-efficiency of the European defence industry (Calcara et al. 2023). For example, the influential 2024 Draghi report to the European Commission highlights the fragmented nature of the European defence sector as a major structural challenge. The report argues that the industry remains divided along national lines, thus limiting efficiency, competitiveness and the ability to scale production at the pace demanded by today's security environment. As Draghi underscores:

> The European defence industry is also fragmented, limiting its scale and hindering operational effectiveness in the field. The EU defence industrial landscape is populated mainly by national players operating in relatively small domestic markets. Fragmentation creates two major challenges. First, it means that the industry lacks scale, which is essential in a capital-intensive sector with long investment cycles [...] Second, fragmentation leads to serious issues related to a lack of standardisation and the interoperability of equipment. (Draghi 2024: 59)

As outlined in the sections above, the Commission has long sought to address these structural shortcomings through various proposals. However, recent analyses suggest that some of the previously identified

problems linked to fragmentation may now be less pronounced (Andersson 2023; Hammarstedt et al. 2025). Instead, the central challenge today is to rapidly expand production capacity, invest in new capabilities and technologies, and jointly develop and procure critical enablers. These efforts will be essential to strengthening Europe's overall defence posture. This is where the Commission's efforts should now be focused.

The European Commission's push for a stronger and more integrated defence-industrial policy has nevertheless triggered political resistance from several member states, which regard defence as an especially sensitive national prerogative. Some governments, including the key industrial players, accuse the Commission of overstepping its mandate and using the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to expand its authority (Barigazzi and Kayali 2023; Maulny 2025). Divisions have also emerged over the initiative's openness to other countries and companies outside the EU, with debates on favouring EU-based defence companies and largely excluding third countries making negotiations on the different initiatives particularly difficult. The question of financing – and how such funds should be used – still remains a major challenge. The SAFE loan instrument creates incentives for member states to cooperate more closely and undertake joint procurement. However, the use of the national escape clause in the Stability and Growth Pact could also lead to a more unstructured approach, as well as increased spending on manufacturers outside the EU. In that regard, member states today face a strategic trilemma in the defence-industrial domain – namely, whether to purchase more European equipment jointly, co-develop new capabilities or procure from external suppliers. Given the current security environment, some member states are likely to prioritise rapid procurement over choosing a European option. While this may be necessary in the short term, it could lead to long-term consequences and reduced cooperation in Europe. Looking ahead, the EU's new incentive structures are intended to steer governments towards more collaborative projects and a more cohesive European defence-industrial base. However, the question remains whether member states will adopt these incentives in a structured and sustained manner.

Within the academic debate, the steering – or governance – of the defence field has increasingly been a focus. After a period of attention to how (European) integration theory (Fiott 2019; Haroche 2020; Håkansson 2021) can explain the deepening of EU security and defence cooperation, the literature is now entering a new phase emphasising governance of the

field (Helwig and Iso-Marku 2024; Marsh et al. 2025). Following Helwig and Iso-Marku (2024), the EU and the Commission's work can be seen as having progressed through several distinct phases or modes over the past decades. At first, the Commission sought to regulate the field of security and defence through directives in the 2000s and early 2010s. Intergovernmental frameworks such as PESCO and CARD were then developed at the EU level, although with limited success to date. In the third governance mode – the financial one – the Commission is currently exerting the greatest influence on the field (Helwig and Iso-Marku 2024). However, current policy is shaped by an intertwined and interlinked network of industry, member states and organisations such as the EU and NATO, which both drives current developments and presents obstacles to deeper integration (Marsh et al. 2025).

The increasing role of the Commission in security and defence has also had significant effects on the organisation's internal workings. Most notably, the establishment of DG DEFIS marked a deliberate effort to build up security and defence competences within the Commission. This has been accompanied by greater involvement and political steering from the Commission's Secretariat-General, which reflects the growing strategic importance of this policy area. Defence has also become one of the foremost and most politically salient policy fields under the second von der Leyen Commission. Initiatives such as the ReArm Europe Plan and the SAFE initiative were strongly driven by the Commission's leadership and underscore the extent of change that has taken place in this domain over the past few years. These developments illustrate how the Commission has moved from a largely peripheral role in defence matters to a more proactive agenda-setting position. Nevertheless, as a relative newcomer to the security and defence policy field, the Commission continues to face important limitations. It still lacks sufficient specialised competences and personnel to fully steer policy development and implementation on its own. As a result, the Commission frequently relies on the expertise of member states and established actors such as the EDA to compensate for these internal capacity gaps. This reliance highlights both the progress made and the structural constraints that continue to shape the Commission's role in European security and defence governance.

Finally, the expanding role of the Commission in security and defence has raised, and will continue to raise, important questions of accountability and legitimacy. As a policy field closely linked to the core sovereignty of the member states, security and defence policy remains particularly sensitive,

and ambitions for deeper integration will continue to face political and institutional constraints. Moving too far or too quickly in this domain is therefore likely to remain contested. Nevertheless, the Commission's growing role in the sector is not exercised in isolation. Rather, it is steered and co-shaped through interaction with other key actors, including the European Council, the European Parliament and national parliaments (in this volume, see: Kreilinger 2026; Ondarza 2026).

3.4 Conclusions

Overall, while this text has examined the European Commission's role in defence, particularly in relation to the defence-industrial domain, it remains clear that the future direction of the EU's defence agenda, including the realisation of recent Commission initiatives, will ultimately depend on the collective political will of the member states. Achieving a more resilient and competitive European defence technological and industrial base will require governments to match their stated ambitions with substantial and sustained financial commitments. Yet a number of key barriers persist.

Moreover, several member states continue to voice reservations about deeper supranational involvement in defence matters. Europe's evolving political landscape adds further complexity. Defence policy, particularly continued support for Ukraine, risks becoming increasingly contested within national political systems. As polarisation grows within parties, coalition governments and public opinion, the political cohesion necessary to build credible defence capabilities and maintain long-term support for Ukraine may weaken. At the same time, defence-industrial capacity cannot be scaled up rapidly. Decisions made in the near term will determine Europe's defence posture for decades to come. This underscores the need for predictable, long-term investment frameworks rather than ad hoc measures driven by immediate crises.

Despite the EU's long-standing ambition to reinforce the European defence sector, progress has often been incremental. Reluctance to fully embrace EU-level defence instruments, stemming from sovereignty sensitivities, industrial protectionism and a preference for US-made systems, continues to impede deeper cooperation. The return of Donald Trump to the US presidency adds an additional layer of uncertainty. Questions about the durability of US security guarantees to Europe and the future cohesion of NATO have intensified debates within Europe over how to balance

EU-level cooperation with bilateral defence ties to Washington. Finally, Europe continues to lack several essential strategic enablers required for credible autonomous defence. Reinforcing Europe's defence industrial base is therefore fundamental not only for strengthening the EU's security posture but also for contributing to transatlantic burden-shifting within NATO. In this context, the European Commission's work on enhancing defence industrial capacity serves to strengthen Europe's contribution to NATO.

To conclude, this chapter has demonstrated that the European Commission has increasingly emerged as an important actor in the domain of security and defence over the past decade, a development further accelerated by Russia's war against Ukraine. Nevertheless, security and defence policy will continue to rest primarily with the member states. Within this framework, however, the Commission can, and already has, assumed a meaningful enabling role, supporting member states in the strengthening of Europe's defence capabilities.

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4 A matter of core state power: The intergovernmental sphere of EU defence policy-making

Nicolai von Ondarza

Providing security and defence is the proverbial core state power. It is therefore no wonder that the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been designed as, and largely remains, an intergovernmental policy area. The pre-dominant EU institution in defence policy remains the Council of the EU, and EU member states retain full sovereignty over their national armed forces and defence industry. Looking at the decision-making procedures provided in the EU treaties, the answer to the question of 'who calls the shots' in European defence is thus quite clear: the member states in the Council/European Council.

However, the practice of EU security and defence, in particular since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the growing question marks over the US security guarantee since 2025, show that actual policy-making can be more complex. There remain pockets of supranational decision-making in the search for new tools to strengthen European defence, such as the agenda-setting power of the EU Commission, or the role of the European Parliament when adopting programmes like the Act in Support of Ammunition (ASAP), while elements built upon the principle of 'new intergovernmentalism' such as the European Defence Agency (EDA) are still searching for their role. Despite the Council's prominent role, there also is, ironically, not yet a formal EU Council on Defence.

To disentangle this complex picture, and show why, ultimately, the member states in the Council still remain the ones 'calling the shots' on EU defence policy, this article first puts forward three factors to explain the current institutional setup of CSDP and the wider European defence policy, which remain under the intergovernmental prerogative: (i) Their

connection to core state power, with national capitals especially reluctant to cede sovereignty; (ii) the path dependency of a policy area in a separate, purely intergovernmental pillar that is intentionally kept distinct from economic integration to avoid spillover effects; and (iii) that in defence, the EU is, at best, only a secondary framework to most member states. Tracing these three factors, the analysis will show how intergovernmental decision-making remains the primary mode in CSDP and EU defence policy, and where it is challenged.

4.1 Three interlinked reasons for the intergovernmental prerogative in EU defence policy

The starting point of this analysis of EU decision-making procedures on defence policy is to highlight that it functions fundamentally differently from almost all other EU policy areas. No other policy area has as many caveats and special procedures in the EU treaties as defence. For instance, defence policy is exempted from the passerelle clause that allows a switch to qualified majority voting without treaty change (Article 48 (7) TEU), expenditures arising from EU military operations are outside of the regular EU budget (Article 41 (2) TEU), and the whole institutional setup is different from the EU's legislative processes. Three interlinked reasons explain this.

First and foremost, defence policy and territorial defence remain core state powers, in which member states are very reluctant to transfer or even share sovereignty. The European Westphalian nation state historically and conceptually was built upon three core state powers, including the organised means of coercion (armed forces, police, border patrols), independent fiscal revenue (money, taxes, debt) and the corresponding administrative capacity to implement policy (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2015). Consequently, it is in these areas of core state powers that European states have proven themselves to be most reluctant to move forward in European integration. With military force being the ultimate guarantee of the monopoly of violence of the state and of this 'organised means of coercion', this is particularly true for defence policy.

An expression of this reservation of core state powers regarding defence is the judgement of the German Constitutional Court on the Lisbon Treaty from 2009. In the judgement, the Court ruled that the 'constitutive requirement of a parliamentary decision regarding the international deployment of the armed forces is beyond the reach of European integration' (German Constitutional Court 2009). This meant that the

current level of integration in EU defence policy was compatible with the German constitution, including EU military missions and operations as well as the coordination and harmonisation of joint European arms procurement. But, the Court ruled, the final decision to deploy military force has to remain with the German parliament unless the EU itself turns into a federal state.

In the context of the Russian war against Ukraine, which also threatens the security of EU (and NATO) member states and has turned the European security order into a confrontative mode, some scholars have argued that this could turn into conditions for 'bellicist state-building' (Kelemen and McNamara 2022). In bellicist state-building, historically war – or an acute military threat – has driven the process of state-building and federation. The EU, on the other hand, was created mainly to establish 'security from each other' through economic integration, with the added benefit of enhancing economic prosperity. In practice, although the EU has, since 2022, adopted a host of measures to support Ukraine and increased defence cooperation between its member states, none of the measures changed the balance of competences on EU defence policy. It remains a core state power, where the EU supports the member states, but does not take binding decisions by itself (Genschel 2022).

The second, connected factor is the path dependency of European integration. Although the initial creation of the European Coal and Steal Community (1951) as well as the European Economic Community (1957) had the element of 'security from each other' engrained by using economic integration in the main areas required for making war, defence policy itself was fully excluded from the early European integration. The attempt to create a European Defence Community failed in 1954 after the French National Assembly rejected the ratification of the treaty – also because of a strong hesitation to integrate a core state power with the (former) enemy West Germany so early on. Over the course of the Cold War, defence policy remained completely outside of European integration.

When foreign, security and, later on, defence policy became part of the European Union with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), it did so under a completely separate second pillar with intergovernmental decision-making (Howorth 2007). Whereas the third pillar of the Maastricht Treaty, justice and home affairs, was eventually fully integrated into the main structures of the EU, including regular decision-making with co-legislation by the Council and the European Parliament as well as full

jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remained separate. Thus, when the EU member states created in 1999 what became the CSDP,[15] they did so as an integral part of the CFSP, inheriting all its special decision-making procedures distinct from the rest of the EU.

Even when the Treaty of Lisbon fully abolished the pillar structure of the EU, CFSP remained a distinct policy. It is the only policy area detailed in the Treaty of the EU rather than the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU, and it continues to be 'subject to specific rules and procedures' (Article 24 TEU). This also means that the adoption of legislative acts in CFSP/CSDP is excluded, and that the roles of the European Parliament and Commission continue to be much more limited than in other policy areas, whereas the European Court of Justice does have a very limited jurisdiction in this area.

The third connected factor driving the intergovernmental nature of EU defence policy is that this is a policy area where, for most EU member states, the EU is just one, and often not the most important, forum for international cooperation. This also has historical reasons, but more importantly it is tied to the importance of the US security guarantee – as for those 23 EU member states which are also part of NATO, the transatlantic alliance is the primary forum for their territorial defence. This is also clarified in the EU treaties in Article 42 (7) TEU, which stipulates that the EU's defence policy shall remain consistent with NATO, and that for those EU member states that are also part of the transatlantic alliance, the latter shall remain the foundation for their collective defence, with a long and complicated history of EU–NATO relations (Smith et al. 2020). The primacy of NATO for territorial defence was also underlined by Finland and Sweden's decision to join NATO in 2022.

Even outside NATO, however, EU member states retain a host of bilateral and minilateral cooperations in security and defence. These range from deep integration of parts of their militaries, such as the joint Dutch–German tank battalion, where Dutch forces have been completely integrated, to bilateral defence treaties, such as between France and Poland, to formal groups such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), comprising Nordic and Baltic European countries, including non-EU

[15] Until the Treaty of Lisbon, this policy area was called the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). For reasons of simplicity, this article uses CSDP throughout.

members Norway and the UK. Research by the Heinrich Böll Foundation has shown that, between the Russian annexation of Crimea (2014) and the second Trump administration in 2025, EU member states established over 160 bilateral and minilateral security agreements with each other, with the pace picking up since 2022 (Kefferpütz and Bruck 2025).

Member states are also used to organising their coordination on European defence issues in flexible minilateral formats with EU and non-EU countries. Amongst the most prominent are the E3 (France, Germany and the UK), the Nordic-Baltic Eight and, more recently, the Weimar Plus Format (France, Germany and Poland plus, usually, the UK, and sometimes Italy and/or Spain as well as EU and NATO representatives). The G7 also have a security and defence dimension, in particular regarding sanctions. This list of formats could be further extended. For this analysis, the main takeaway should be that, because member states are involved in so many formats for security and defence policy outside the EU, they also want to remain in the driver seat within the EU.

4.2 The intergovernmental prerogative in EU defence

Taken together, the currents driving a mainly intergovernmental, Council-dominated EU defence policy remain strong. Despite the rising pressure on European security by Russia and a world returning to (great) power competition, these fundamentals are unlikely to change. The following section shows how the Council and the member states continue to dominate EU decision-making on defence policy and the allocation of resources. This continues despite forays by the European Commission into defence policy and the renewed discussion around empowering the EDA.

The dominance of the Council with unanimity

First, looking at EU decision-making on defence policy, both the EU treaties and practice are very clear: All major decisions are being taken by the member states in the European Council and Council, based on the principle of unanimity. As an integral part of the CFSP, CSDP's strategic objectives and general principles are laid down by the heads of state and government in the European Council, acting by unanimity.

In practice, the European Council rarely discussed defence-related issues during the 2010s, which were dominated by the Eurozone and later migration crisis. Occasional exceptions were the endorsement of the European Global Strategy in 2016. It is only since 2022 that the European

Council has regularly featured defence-related issues on its agenda at the highest political level. In March 2022, in the weeks following the Russian invasion, the informal meeting of the European Council at Versailles pledged more EU responsibility in defence, alongside initiatives on energy and economic competitiveness (European Council 2022). Indeed, it was only in February 2025 – three years after the full Russian invasion and more than 25 years after the creation of the CSDP – that EU leaders met for an (informal) European Council meeting focused exclusively on defence (Costa 2025). Previously, when defence policy figured on the agenda of the European Council, it was usually in the form of pre-decided conclusions endorsing decisions made at the Council level. In 2025, however, this changed significantly: Defence policy was on the agenda of every European Council meeting in the year, and often a major aspect of the debate amongst EU leaders. In their conclusions, they mandated the Commission and the Council to move forward quickly on several defence related initiatives, inter alia leading to the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) initiative, the EU Defence Readiness 2030 roadmap and the preparation for a defence-related simplification 'omnibus' package.

The regular decisions on EU defence are thus taken by the Council of the EU. All of these decisions have to be taken unanimously, including those on launching/extending EU military operations and missions, but also on other defence-related initiatives (Article 42 (4) TEU). Two points should be noted on how the Council takes these decisions, both of which are related to the path dependency for how CSDP developed as an integral part of the EU's foreign and security policy.

First, as the Treaty of Lisbon introduced the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy chairing the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) with the double-hatted role of Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP), this also extends to CSDP. Thus, when the Council discusses and decides on defence policy, it does so under the chairmanship of the HR/VP, not the rotating Council Presidency. This extends to the lower, working level of the Council: While Coreper is chaired by the Council Presidency, including on issues of defence policy, the important Political and Security Committee (PSC) just below Coreper is chaired by the European External Action Service (EEAS), as are the relevant Council Working Groups such as the Politico-Military Group (Council of the EU 2025).

This also means that while the Commission does not have the monopoly on the right of initiative in CFSP/CSDP, the HR/VP, but also member states most commonly through the Council Presidency, can bring forward initiatives on defence policy. Looking at EU practice, though, most regular decisions (e.g. on EU military operations or on the use of special budgets like the European Peace Facility, see below) are now brought forward by the HR/VP and prepared by the EEAS. Although the final decisions are then taken by the Council, there is thus a small element of supranational participation in the decision-making.

The second element inherited from the genesis of the CSDP is that, ironically, despite the Council taking all of the decisions on defence, there is no Council on defence. When CSDP was created, the focus was very much on external crisis management operations, many of which had both a civilian and a military dimension. The oversight over these missions and operations rested politically with the foreign offices of the member states. At the European level, that meant that the Council for Foreign Affairs was given the responsibility for CSDP. On a regular basis since the creation of the CSDP in 1999, though, the FAC meets in a 'jumbo format', with both foreign affairs and defence ministers. In 2025, as defence issues became centre stage in the EU, this happened three times. HR/VP Kaja Kallas also convened informal meetings of national defence ministers, although they still meet much less frequently than the foreign ministers, who do so at least once a month in the FAC. This stands in contrast to NATO's North Atlantic Council, which meets regularly as a gathering of defence ministers.

A third feature of EU decision-making on defence is that decisions on defence and military issues are, by and large, excluded from the flexibilities built into the EU treaties. For instance, the EU's passerelle clause for moving towards qualified majority decision-making explicitly rules out being used in the area of defence or in decisions related to military matters (Article 48 (7) TEU). The same is true for the special passerelle clause in relation to CFSP decisions, which also excludes 'decisions having military or defence implications' (Article 31 (4) TEU). Equally, the simplified treaty revision procedure cannot be used for any part of CFSP/CSDP. Finally, although using enhanced cooperation is possible in the area of defence, the treaties stipulate a special procedure for CFSP that ensures that within a possible enhanced cooperation – which has not been used on defence in practice – unanimity remains firmly in place.

Full national sovereignty over defence resources

The second major aspect where the intergovernmental prerogative becomes apparent is the financing of defence-related instruments at the EU level. In principle, whereas the administrative expenditure regarding CFSP (including for the CSDP) is financed through the regular EU budget, the operational expenditures on defence-related and military instruments are not financed through the regular EU budget. This means that the European Parliament does not have any of the co-decision or oversight functions it has on the regular EU budget. This is also different from CSDP civilian missions and operations, which are financed from the regular EU budget.

Most operational expenditures relating to CSDP military missions and operations are therefore covered based on the 'costs lie where they fall' principle, such that those who provide more troops also pay more. The common costs are covered by the European Peace Facility (EPF), an off-budget instrument created by a Council decision, of course based on unanimity. The EPF sources itself directly from the member states on a GNI-basis, although individual member states do not have to pay for actions on which they used the 'constructive abstention' (Article 31 TEU). This became important as the EPF was also used from 2022 onwards for financing military aid to Ukraine, on which the militarily neutral countries Austria and Ireland used constructive abstention. They could thus open the way for the EPF being used – and greatly increased – for supporting Ukraine without contributing to the financing of military aid themselves. For military operations, though, the common costs are only around 5–10%, and even those are strictly decided upon by unanimity (European Parliamentary Research Service 2025).

Of note are also the discussion in 2025 in the wake of the second Trump Presidency in the US on financing the build-up of European military capabilities. Although some national and EU leaders called for a joint element in defence financing ('defence Eurobonds'), the eventual decisions focused squarely on supporting increasing national defence spending (see e.g. Tusk 2025). So far, they consist of three main elements: The first, and most significant element, was activating the national emergency clause as part of the EU's stability and growth pact for three years to exclude defence expenditure. This was aimed at unlocking up to additional €650bn for defence spending, although the extent of that sum obviously depends on – sovereign – national decision-making.

The second element was the SAFE instrument, proposed by the Commission and quickly adopted by the Council. This is a rare instance where a defence-related instrument could be adopted by qualified majority, as it was based on the emergency article 122 TFEU. At the end, 26 member states voted in favour, and Hungary – despite later on applying to become one of the main beneficiaries of the programme – abstained. The SAFE instrument is based on loans of €150bn, which are passed on to EU member states, to support their national defence budgets. Crucially, these loans need to be paid back, although at a better interest rate than most EU member states enjoy on their own.

The final element is a cautious, small introduction of defence industry–related expenditure into the EU budget in the form of the European Defence Industry Plan (EDIP), which was adopted by the Council and the Parliament in autumn 2025 after long negotiations. EDIP is much smaller in size, with €1.5bn for 2025–2027 to support the build-up of the European defence industry. For the upcoming 2028–2034 MFF, the EU Commission has proposed extending the expenditure for defence and space significantly, but the major decisions here are yet to be taken. What is relevant for this analysis is that EDIP and the potential further increase in the upcoming MFF are the only bit of defence-related financing in the traditional EU budget, but they remain, thus far, insignificant in comparison to national defence spending and the SAFE instrument.

It is, however, not only the financing of EU military operations and missions where the member states remain the predominant actors. In all relevant questions of European defence, even where the EU has a role, the member states retain full sovereignty over their defence resources. This starts with the deployment to EU military operations and missions, where it is a sovereign decision about whether and under what restrictions to deploy forces. This is an independent decision from the – unanimous – Council Decision on the mission and operation as such. In many EU member states, the national parliament also has to vote in favour of external deployments.

The same is true for the potential mutual assistance clause in Article 42 (7) TEU. Although the member states have committed themselves in the treaty towards 'aid and assistance by all the means in their power', it remains their decision which means to deploy. In the only real use of Article 42 (7) TEU, by France in 2015 in response to terrorist attacks in

Paris, several member states did indeed contribute their national forces to French operations. The EU has no binding power, however, to compel member states to deploy military force.

In equal measure, all the EU's instruments in defence policy coordination and defence industrial policy rest on the principle of voluntary participation by the member states. This ranges from projects under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), each coordinated by individual or groups of member states, over the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence to newer measures such as the SAFE instrument or the ASAP programme. In addition to a decision-making body, the Council and its working groups act as coordination forums for the member states.

Reluctance towards the European Commission

At the same time, the EU member states remain cautious towards a stronger role of the EU Commission in defence. As shown, initially the role of the Commission in CSDP was at best marginal, if not non-existent, with the focus on the Council and the member states. Over the course of the last two decades – and in particular, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine – the EU Commission has started to stake out a bigger role for itself in defence, especially in defence industrial policy. This has culminated in the establishment of a Commissioner on Defence and Space, with regular proposals coming out of the Commission, including the SAFE programme and the Readiness Roadmap 2030 (see also the contribution by Håkansson in this volume).

However, so far, member states remain reluctant to cede more powers to the Commission in defence. The development of the Readiness Roadmap 2030 is a case in point. Although developed by the Commission, including the HR/VP, it was discussed at several European Council beforehand, where the heads of state and government gave clear directions not only for the policy, but also for the governance. This included a clear insistence that major initiatives such as the Capability Coalitions would be led by member states, and that the role of the Commission itself would be to act as a facilitator. In particular, the large member states such as France and Germany have pushed back strongly against an increased role of the Commission in European defence (Ludlow 2025).

Tight control of the EDA

A noteworthy feature of the EU decision-making apparatus in defence apart from but connected to the Council is the EDA. Created in 2004

during the crisis-management era of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, the EDA is a classic example of a de novo body under the new intergovernmentalism paradigm (Bickerton et al. 2015). It is the only agency directly provided for in the EU treaty (Article 42 (3) TEU) and was originally set up in the separate, second pillar of CSFP. As shown above, this heritage is still present today with a tight connection to the Council.

For one, the EDA is headed by the EU's HR/VP, an additional task for the already overburdened role. Although this means that the EDA has connections to the EEAS, it also provides for the chair of the FAC to oversee the Defence Agency. More unusual, and important for this analysis, is that the Steering Committee of the EDA – its version of the Management Board that has the main decision-making power in EU agencies – is not staffed at the working level but composed of national defence ministers plus one (non-voting) representative from the Commission. The Steering Board of the EDA is therefore a form of EU Council on Defence. In practice, EDA Steering Board meetings are thus often used to organise broader meetings of national defence ministers and tied to informal Council sessions on defence.

In the decision-making processes for EU defence policy, the EDA has, however, so far not played a major role. EU member states[16] have joined the agency, and its main tasks are to facilitate the development of military capabilities and cooperation between the member states in this area. As such, the EDA mainly acts as a catalyst for member state cooperation, although it can propose cooperation projects on its own. Its main added value lies in providing expertise and a common framework in a close linkage with national defence ministries. In the first phases of the CSDP, the EDA provided useful assistance to member states, but it did not develop into a transformative institution for European defence (Filipec and Vavřinová 2025). It is, however, regarded by those member states critical of the growing role of the Commission in security and defence policy as an alternative venue for military cooperation and integration that retains the intergovernmental prerogative. When the European Council in October 2025 reacted to the Commission's Readiness 2030 paper, the heads of state and government explicitly called for the strengthening of the EDA, in what can be seen as a counterweight to the Commissioner on Defence and Space.

[16] Denmark was the last to join the EDA after it abolished its opt-out on EU defence policy in 2022 in the wake of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine.

4.3 Conclusions

This analysis of EU decision-making in security and defence started off with the assumption that it is the Council and the member states who 'call the shots' in this still predominantly intergovernmental policy area. A closer look into EU decision-making processes in this area, including on major recent initiatives in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has broadly validated that assumption. Although there are few pockets of supranational agenda setting and participation, ultimately defence remains a core state power, in which the member states retain their sovereignty – with the Council as the main, and usually only, EU decision-making body, with little to no role for the European Parliament and only a slowly growing influence for the Commission, with the continuous reign of the unanimity principle in these decisions, while the member states also retain full sovereignty over the relevant resources, from financing to deploying military assets to defence industrial cooperation.

Looking ahead, barring a major institutional reform of the EU, this general pattern is unlikely to change. Time and again national capitals – and, as in the case of Germany, national courts – have made clear that defence policy remains a core aspect of national sovereignty. In addition to the path dependency of the heritage of the second, intergovernmental pillar of the EU, the existence of NATO as well as bilateral and minilateral formats as alternative fora for defence policy also suggests that member states may want to strengthen the coordination and facilitation role of the EU in defence policy but not cede control to supranational institutions.

There is, however, still an imperative and room for improvement in the EU's governance in defence policy with the Council at its heart. First, it is high time for a specific Council on Defence that is separate from the FAC. When the CSDP was originally created with the focus on crisis management operations, the strong link to foreign ministries made sense. With the increasing focus on capability development, joint procurement and defence industrial integration – all the way to supporting territorial defence – a much closer integration of national defence ministries and ministers is necessary. Informal meetings of the FAC either in the jumbo format or only with defence minister (as well as the EDA Steering Board) mean there is some integration of defence ministers in EU bodies, but only at the margin. Instead, with the Council at the heart of decision-making on

EU defence policy, national defence ministers should be the ones driving the process. The good news is that this is possible without changing the treaty – a simple Council Decision can create a new Council formation, and the way the EU is set up, this Council formation could immediately take on the decisions relevant for European security and defence policy.

The second, related improvement is a better linkage with the supranational elements, in particular the HR/VP and the Commissioner for Defence and Space. Instead of strengthening the EDA in competition with the Commission, they should be linked. The EU HR/VP is already overburdened with different tasks and has little time to run the EDA in day-to-day management. One option could be to move the role of head of the EDA to the Defence Commissioner, to strengthen ties between the EDA, national defence ministers and the Commissioner. This should turn the HR/VP and Defence Commission into a duo similar to foreign and defence ministers at the national level.

If the foundations for European defence change more radically – for instance, if the current detachment of the US from NATO turns into full antagonism – a more radical rethinking of EU defence policy would be necessary. If the EU were to decide upon a fundamental shift that includes joint financing for defence and joint capabilities, then much more joint decision-making and the corresponding adaptations of the political structures would be required. For the Council, this would mean qualified majority decision-making and creating a framework for quickly scaling up coalitions to develop necessary military capabilities. This, however, would require changing the treaties, abandoning the rejection of duplications to NATO and a willingness among member states to cede sovereignty in a core power.

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5 Backbenchers don't really fight back yet: Parliaments in EU defence policy

Valentin Kreilinger

The multi-level system of European integration puts an additional layer over nation states. This potentially constrains representative institutions at lower levels. European integration experienced a long period in which, for example, European budgetary constraints and national budget procedures coexisted while experiencing occasional tensions – for example, in the Euro crisis with respect to spending cuts. The need to increase defence expenditure since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in a similar way, now increases the risk of tensions between European or international defence commitments and possibly diverging national spending priorities: The need to increase defence budgets requires raising (more) debt or making cuts elsewhere.

'Backbenchers learn to fight back: European integration and parliamentary government' is the title of a landmark journal article published in *West European Politics* in 2000 by Tapio Raunio and Simon Hix.[17] A quarter of a century later, European integration is forcefully entering the core state power of defence policy. However, backbenchers have not really fought back yet. As with European economic integration in the 1980s and 1990s, it might take some time and is likely to vary across different aspects of defence policy such as budget and procurement, strategic questions, deployments or military service.

In general, the involvement of the European Parliament and national parliaments as bodies that represent citizens and hold their governments to account is prominently anchored in the Treaties of a Union that 'shall be founded on representative democracy' (Article 10 (1) TEU). Citizens in the

[17] The title of the essay is inspired by the article 'Backbenchers learn to fight back: European integration and parliamentary government' by Tapio Raunio and Simon Hix (2000).

EU are 'directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament' (Article 10 (2) TEU). The other source of legitimacy for EU policy-making stems from the member states, which are 'represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens' (Article 10 (2) TEU).

This essay proceeds as follows: The first section develops how interparliamentary cooperation at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Western European Union (WEU) occurred in the past. The second section reviews the new reality of interlinked European and national decisions and shows that there have been cautious parliamentary attempts to fight back. The third section turns to the future and the prospect of shrinking budgetary spaces, which creates an even greater risk of inadequate democratic representation. It is therefore necessary that parliaments' involvement increases together with defence spending. The essay concludes that intensified, meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of defence policy, in particular regarding the budget, is possible and is required at all levels.

5.1 The powers of an Assembly that was dissolved

In the case of European integration, the institutional structure of the WEU included a Parliamentary Assembly composed of national parliamentarians that scrutinised defence policy. It was the first European interparliamentary body for security and defence matters, and it provided a democratic forum for debate and political oversight of European security during the Cold War and its aftermath (Wagner 2006).

The WEU and its Assembly were officially dissolved in 2011,[18] with its functions largely absorbed by the European Union. The Assembly had been established by the modified Brussels Treaty of 1954, held its first session in 1955 and was tasked with scrutinising the Council of the WEU on any matter related to the Brussels Treaty. While the body had limited real power, it sent recommendations and opinions to the Council of the WEU, which was then obliged to respond in writing (Wagner 2006). As a debate forum, it discussed major international events, security questions, East-West relations, and even nuclear weapons.

[18] The WEU had a total of ten member countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom) after Greece became the latest country to join in 1995. Sweden had observer status from 1995 to 2011.

Establishing the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) meant that the WEU's role diminished in the 1990s and was mostly taken over by the EU. After the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in 2009, WEU member states decided that the organisation would cease to exist in June 2011. There is no direct successor to the Parliamentary Assembly, but the European Parliament and interparliamentary cooperation between the European Parliament and national parliaments are now covering defence policy.

5.2 Limited parliamentary involvement despite far-reaching defence policy decisions since 2022

Parliamentary involvement in defence differs greatly across representative democracies around the world. Generally, the relationship between government and parliament in defence policy depends on constitutional arrangements and inter-institutional practices. Foreign and defence policies are often conducted and led by national governments. This partly disempowers legislators and means that their influence as well as expectations about how intensively they can scrutinise these policy areas are naturally limited. The two most important aspects of parliamentary involvement are, on the one hand, restrictions on the government for starting military operations without parliamentary approval (Mölling and von Voß 2015). On the other hand, parliaments' budgetary powers also affect defence policy: In some countries, the government's proposal is approved upon presentation, with the possible exception of a small fraction of the budget. In other countries, parliament cannot add new expenditures. Formal procedures for budget-making can also mean very little legislative participation in practice, but parliaments can regain an effective voice in the budget cycle (Schick 2002). More specifically, the involvement of national parliaments in procurement processes varies greatly across EU member states (Mölling and von Voß 2015), and, depending on the role of their government in controlling arms exports, they are at least informed about these processes (e.g. in an annual report).

In many ways, the EU's instruments for Europe's rearmament are like the ones used in the Euro crisis and the pandemic. In March 2025, the European Commission proposed an unprecedented €800 billion defence spending plan. Subsequently adopted by the Council on 27 May 2025, it includes the loan scheme Security Action for Europe (SAFE) that amounts to €150 billion (or about 1% of the EU's GDP in total) for the period until 2030. The EU raises debt on the financial markets to finance loans to member states, which spend the money on defence and weapons that are aimed at

supporting Europe's defence readiness. Member states will have to repay the joint debt within a maximum of 45 years (European Union 2025a). At the early stages of the Euro crisis and the pandemic, the European Financial Stability Mechanism (EFSM) and the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) scheme were created with the same logic. The three instruments (EFSM, SURE and SAFE) also relied on the same legal basis, Article 122 TFEU, which excludes the European Parliament from the EU's decision-making process (Kreilinger 2025).

The nature of defence policy makes it difficult, however, to attribute responsibility and prevents both national parliaments and the European Parliament from properly holding executive decision-makers to account. This reflects long-existing problems of multi-level governance (Crum 2018; Curtin 2014; Papadopoulos 2021). The policy area suffers from insufficient representation: An example are the negotiations on the European Defence Fund (Herranz-Surrallés 2022). Preliminary empirical evidence also indicates that national parliaments were rarely involved in or consulted during the drafting of defence spending targets, and most of them did not have the opportunity to debate and vote on them either, because, when it comes to the target of 5% of GDP, the NATO Defence Planning Process is 'little known outside of defence ministries and NATO headquarters' with 'virtually no parliamentary oversight' (Davis 2025), as the specific capability targets remain classified (Tian et al. 2025). The German Parliament, however, amended the country's constitution in 2025 to lift the debt brake for defence spending above 1% of GDP and thus enabled an increase in military expenditure.

Both the Commission and the Council gain influence via the criteria upon which the progress towards defence readiness is assessed. How, exactly, this plays out remains to be seen. Member states might squabble internally as well as in the Council, but it seems equally possible that the process of disbursing SAFE money will become technocratic and uninfluenced by politics. There is a new surveillance component (through the introduction of milestones and targets to be met before further disbursements), while the application process creates ownership by national governments. How all this works in practice will depend on how provisions that are vague or open to different interpretations are being used and how the European Commission intends to enforce them. Important in this respect is that there will be Council oversight of the Commission and its assessments. The possibility to hold the Commission to account in the Council is, however, a non-parliamentary, intergovernmental control instrument.

Defence spending increases will have long-lasting implications on state finances, because they will mostly be funded through public debt programmes. If countries increase defence spending by raising debt and not by making cuts or raising taxes, interest payments for that debt will have to be carried by the budget and lead to shrinking budgetary resources for other policy areas. The €150 billion debt created for the SAFE loans is supposed to be repaid by the member states by 2070. The financial means to repay the debt have not been put in place yet. The debt could also be rolled over, but that would go against both the spirit and letter of the agreement to create a temporary and exceptional instrument.

National parliaments

In the current context of European rearmament, triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Donald Trump's second term in office, European and national decisions are becoming increasingly interlinked. Preliminary evidence on the involvement of national parliaments in defence policy suggests that they are still playing only a marginal role (Csernatoni and Reykers 2021).

Involvement of national parliaments in any aspect of European defence, such as the preparation of SAFE applications, is not mandatory but based on national provisions. The information that the national parliaments receive from their national governments regarding all different aspects of defence policy varies considerably, as does actual parliamentary involvement (Mölling and von Voß 2015).

There is now a clear case for parliamentary scrutiny of defence policy, compared to the role it had before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, because more is at stake when defence expenditure is expected to reach a NATO target of 3.5% instead of, on average, not achieving the previous 2% target. As increased spending is at the heart of the EU's war response, it should also be at the centre of parliamentary activities. Parliaments are vital places to debate the choices that these measures involve. They are battlegrounds for shifting (electoral) majorities, and their parliamentary involvement – particularly via plenary debates – should be perceived that way. The limited involvement of national parliaments, however, is even more worrying, because the European Parliament has no real say either (Moser 2024). Furthermore, the mostly low levels of national parliaments' involvement during and immediately after spending pledges

suggest a low probability that parliamentary scrutiny of the execution will increase – although this responsibility clearly seems to be a task that the EU level cannot undertake.

European Parliament

The European Parliament is clearly side-lined in defence policy due to the formal and procedural framework of the CSDP remaining intergovernmental (Moser 2024: 49) and thus limiting its role. It upgraded its sub-committee to a fully-fledged Committee on Security and Defence in 2025 and is currently trying to increase its influence. In defence industry–related dossiers, the European Parliament can act as co-legislator, but it faces the threat of not being involved in proposals by the European Commission under Article 122 TFEU. This happened in the case of SAFE. That treaty article is one of those provisions that defines specific procedures in times of crisis for economic policy in case of 'severe difficulties' (Article 122 TFEU) and appoints the Council as the decision-maker in such situations (Wetter Ryde 2022: 14; Kreilinger 2025).

National and European procedures in defence are, similar to economic governance, becoming 'intertwined' (Fasone and Lupo 2016: 14) and 'most of the choices about how the EU funds will be spent are delegated to the Member State level' (Crum 2020: 12), just as in case of the EU's recovery fund. In defence policy, in the case of SAFE, there is European money without European parliamentary scrutiny. The drafting, assessment and decision on SAFE do not provide opportunities for the European Parliament to ensure there are sufficient pan-European elements in these national plans. Besides references to other regulations, the European Parliament is only mentioned twice in Council Regulation (EU) 2025/1106 establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument: In Article 15, with the provision that the Commission shall provide the European Parliament and the Council with an annual report in the use of financial assistance, and in Article 22, with a provision that the Commission 'shall, where appropriate, inform the representation offices of the European Parliament of its actions and involve them in those actions' (European Union 2025a).

As a reaction, the European Parliament has lodged a request with the Court of Justice for the annulment of the SAFE regulation.[19] While the Parliament stresses, according to EurActiv, that the instrument has the full support of Parliament, '[i]t is about the legal basis that was chosen, which undermines democratic legitimacy' (EurActiv 2025). Nobody could vote for far-reaching defence policy measures in the European Parliament elections of June 2024, less than a year before they were adopted. There were very few parties with far-reaching ideas on defence policy on the ballot paper and nothing of this kind was debated at the forefront of the electoral campaign. The question of whether the Commission should have a dedicated Defence Commissioner was the pinnacle of public debate on what might have to change. The policies and measures that are now being put in place were not supported by a majority of voters in May 2019. True, the serious developments were unforeseeable and required a quick and decisive response. But this is worrying from the point of view of the democratic legitimacy of those decisions. In view of its huge redistributive effects, the EU must ensure that its response to geopolitical shifts is sufficiently legitimised.

Interparliamentary cooperation

Both the European Parliament and national parliaments have distinct roles to play, but their involvement in defence matters is, as described above, rather limited. Interparliamentary relations between national parliaments and the European Parliament have often been characterised by conflict and rivalry rather than cooperation (Neunreither 2005).

The Interparliamentary Conference on CFSP and CSDP succeeded the Parliamentary Assembly of the WEU in 2012. It also replaced the regular meetings between the chairpersons of the relevant parliamentary committees. For the CFSP/CSDP Interparliamentary Conference, 'overlapping authority claims' (Herranz-Surrallés 2014) between the European Parliament and national parliaments can largely explain the disagreements at the time of its creation. The underlying explanation is a mismatch between daily EU policy-making and formal treaty powers: An incremental and informal empowerment of the European Parliament clashes with national parliaments and their constitutional role linked to intergovernmental treaties and their domestic role in controlling national governments (Herranz-Surrallés 2014).

[19] European Parliament v. Council of the European Union (Case C-560/25), Official Journal of the European Union, C/2025/5209 (6 October 2025). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202505209

The Interparliamentary Conference meets twice a year, each time in the member state that holds the Council Presidency. It is based on Protocol No. 1 of the Lisbon Treaty, which states in Article 10 that 'interparliamentary conferences on specific topics, in particular to debate matters of common foreign and security policy, including common security and defence policy' may be organised. Coordination between national parliaments and the European Parliament in a specific forum is useful for the parliamentary scrutiny of a policy area traditionally dominated by the executive(s). But defence is only one policy area covered by the Conference: The meetings move beyond CFSP/CSDP, narrowly defined; they even include issues such as trade, neighbourhood policy or migration. The Conference then merely issues Conclusions or Joint Statements of the Co-Chairs (the national parliament of the Council Presidency and the European Parliament) and these have neither the same clearly defined focus nor the formal powers of sending opinions or recommendations to the Council that the Parliamentary Assembly of the WEU enjoyed.

5.3 Possibilities for strengthening parliamentary involvement

The key to achieving a sufficient level of scrutiny depends on national parliaments, the European Parliament and functioning cooperation between them. The initial phase of European rearmament passed with serious loopholes, but there is still time to put scrutiny mechanisms in place. It will be too late if oversight is established when money has already been (mis-)spent. The low level of parliamentary scrutiny at the national level and the limited involvement of the European Parliament also increases the uncertainty about if, when and how (or with which taxes) the debt will be repaid. This section puts forward proposals for strengthening how parliaments could be involved following the logic of 'bringing parliaments in while the defence spending spree is rolled out'.

National parliaments should immediately intensify their scrutiny, consider looking at their neighbours and generally dedicate enough time and resources to defence policy. Parliamentary involvement should increase together with defence spending. At the same time, parliamentary involvement should not be perceived or conceptualised as a one-way street that creates an ever-greater number of veto players: Decision-making should not become cumbersome.

Strengthening parliamentary involvement requires careful consideration of which procedures can and should be adapted and how exactly. Such exercises have occasionally been undertaken in the EU's multi-level system in recent years for other policy areas such as economic governance (Crum 2020). In the area of defence, only a very few recent publications have addressed the role of parliaments in EU defence policy with concrete recommendations (Csernatoni and Reykers 2021) or opt for NATO and the lack of parliamentary involvement as the main angle (Davis 2025). Specifically, this chapter argues that parliamentary involvement could be fostered with regards to four dimensions simultaneously:

- First, national parliaments must ensure that their role in the budget process remains intact and that defence spending receives the same amount of scrutiny as ordinary national budgets. They should interact more regularly with the European Commission and with the Defence Commissioner on defence issues.
- Second, national parliaments must look beyond their own borders at other countries' defence policies and should cooperate with other parliaments to exchange best practices and develop collective scrutiny mechanisms.[20] They must increase their awareness of the positive and negative spillover effects that national defence policies have on other member states. Beyond fiscal policies, industrial and technology policy are areas in which national parliaments could strengthen their interparliamentary cooperation to better consider interdependencies between member states and defence plans.
- Third, the European Parliament must be properly involved and have the power and the capabilities to scrutinise and influence the different elements of the new EU defence policy. Despite a limited role in the CFSP and CSDP, defence industry–related initiatives offer opportunities for involvement by the European Parliament if they fall under co-decision (and not under Article 122 TFEU). Inserting mechanisms for political evaluation in the European monitoring procedures would be useful in this regard.
- Fourth, going beyond currently existing practices, the European Parliament must become a public forum, where national decision-makers must justify their defence policies, and a place for expert scrutiny, where national defence ministers

[20] Among the tasks of the Franco–German Parliamentary Assembly is to assist Franco–German cooperation, especially regarding the Franco–German Defence and Security Council and Europe's foreign security and defence policies.

and officials must explain their progress (or failure) towards meeting milestones and targets. Similar mechanisms were established in economic governance for the European Semester and for the post-pandemic recovery funds. Applying this principle to defence policy would be a big leap for this largely intergovernmental policy area.

These dimensions for strengthening parliamentary involvement seem to be most promising, because the chain of delegation in the EU's multi-level system makes it impossible for national parliaments to hold the European Commission to account and the European Parliament has the same problem when it comes to national decision-makers (Papadopoulos 2021). The proposed arrangements and procedures would offer new linkages between the levels.

It is more necessary than ever to remedy the structural and procedural weaknesses of both the European Parliament and national parliaments through new Euro-national parliamentary procedures that are 'intertwined' (Fasone and Lupo 2016: 14). The objective would be to reduce the information asymmetries and create an exchange of information and best practices with a view to foster their individual and collective ability to scrutinise. National parliaments and the European Parliament must start to see each other as allies in addressing the joint task of democratically controlling these new instruments. This includes strengthening the Interparliamentary Conference and enhancing its scrutiny tools. The Parliamentary Assembly of the WEU that was dissolved in 2011 could serve as a model here: The Conference would get a stronger say and a channel to influence policy via possibilities to draft opinions and express positions that are then submitted to the Commission and/or the Council by the Presidency Parliament and the European Parliament.

There is even a case for considering minimum standards of parliamentary involvement in defence policy. The consequence of this would be a more politicised defence policy within each political system: Political parties would publicly and visibly contest spending priorities, reforms and policy choices. A side-effect of such a strengthening of parliamentary involvement, but still another important consequence, would be a better connection to citizens, who could see their preferences represented in the national and European parliamentary arenas when they act as public

forums to debate defence policy choices. After all, national parliaments are not unitary actors, but majority and opposition are 'two distinct agents of the electorate' (Auel 2007). The European Parliament is, in a similar way, shaped by cleavages between its political groups.

5.4 Conclusions

National parliaments and the European Parliament failed to properly scrutinise the defence surge after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, they can still step up their scrutiny and ensure that the Commission, Council and governments are properly held accountable for their actions and spending. No future developments in defence policy can work smoothly without proper involvement by the European Parliament and by national parliaments. Their involvement is particularly necessary during the drafting and revision of defence spending plans and during their implementation: National parliaments need to agree beforehand and later monitor milestones, targets and execution (see also Davis 2025). The European Parliament should take care of achieving a European added value and creating European public goods.

The notion of parliamentary scrutiny throughout the entire lifetime of the defence spending programme is also important. There are calls for (more) flexibility in spending, as priorities are shifting rapidly to meet new challenges. Besides ideas to use the joint debt for another fund to tackle the challenges from Russia's war, one would have to consider defence plans and strategies as 'living documents' that can be modified and adapted in response to changing circumstances. In this case, national and European parliamentary scrutiny would be even more important as a democratic safeguard.

The benefits of involving national parliaments at these stages go beyond the immediate positive effect of more democratic legitimacy: First, it could reduce the risk of a sudden backlash against European defence in one country – be it because of a Eurosceptic government or parliamentary majority, or be it because of serious spending mismanagement in one or more countries. Second, it could even justify forcing the hands of a national government or parliament that deviates from the EU's defence policy course.

There are ways to ensure sufficient representation without gridlock on defence policy in the EU multi-level system. This essay developed some thinking in that direction and proposed four measures that would make parliamentary scrutiny work and improve defence policy-making. Of course, risks remain. Contestation within national parliaments, notably by opposition parties, and squabbling or clashes between member states are just two risks that one should have in mind. For example, 'in times of high inflation rates and spending cuts [...] and Eurosceptic and/or Russophile governments being in or coming to power (as for instance, in Hungary or Slovakia), it is far from certain that these national parliamentary approvals will always be positive' (Moser 2024: 52).

It was argued here that it is necessary to have greater parliamentary involvement. At the same time, scrutinising defence policy also seems to be in the institutional self-interest of national parliaments as rational actors, as well as governing and opposition parties. The time and resources available are constraining factors for parliamentary involvement. But today's opposition is tomorrow's government, and defence policy choices cannot be overturned, redrafted or changed easily. The fact that backbenchers at the European and national parliamentary levels have not claimed a stronger role in defence policy can be remedied. Parliamentary involvement in defence policy is one essential element for ensuring that it is not only executive actors in the Council and Commission that call the shots in European defence policy.

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6 EU defence architecture: Yesterday's answers to tomorrow's problems?

Roderick Parkes[21]

Following the survey of individual institutions, this concluding chapter searches for the shared routines and architectural blueprints now shaping the Union's defence integration. After the starting gun fired by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it finds evidence of templates such as the 'bellicist state-building', as well as the procedural habits – the familiar engines in a time of uncertainty – that prioritise bureaucratic momentum over strategic creativity. By examining four dynamics of EU defence integration, this analysis exposes the flaws in these path-dependent methods and proposes alternative architectures that better leverage the Union's diverse strengths for resilience and deterrence.

6.1 Why institutional questions matter

Focusing on institutions is no retreat from reality; institutions are the crux of the current global upheaval. As the world lurches into a mix of high imperialism and techno-dystopia, Europe's institutional technicalities are perhaps the only alternative to raw force. If institutions that mediate power and transactionalism can be made to work, they will shape the new order. This requires connecting Europe's complex power-sharing to coercive power – that is, proving that the Union can marshal a response to sheer force and serve as an instrument of statecraft without perverting its own nature.

In more benign times, transferring competencies to Brussels could seem a matter almost of administrative convention – a box ticked for efficient economies of scale. But efficiency now has a visceral new meaning. It is about industrial resurgence and successful bets on the future, and about power politics. Great powers now cite their own economic efficiency to assert a right to grab smaller neighbours who fail to exploit their own

[21] This paper represents the author's personal opinion.

resources. For Europeans, an efficient defence industrial architecture is no longer just a budgetary preference; it is the price of maintaining a sovereign existence.

Europe must be capable of effective action, too – aligning European states even as outside powers use preferential bilateral deals to pick them apart. An effective Europe requires a community bound by more than an external threat and the relics of a strategic era in which the best way to foster trust was to increase states' vulnerability to each other. It requires some shared sense of purpose. Finding this purpose will prove difficult as high stakes inflate national differences, and when the Eastern Flank or the neutral Irish can accuse each other of moral hazard for taking what they deem to be responsible action (Erästö and Wan 2025; Webber and Warrell 2025).

If we need institutions that effectively defend Europeans, we may also need Europeans to actively defend these institutions. A resilient Europe cannot rely on a hollowed-out permissive consensus. As international restraint dissolves and demographic ageing hollows out Western armies, large-scale war would likely see air defences protect small professional forces while civilian centres remain exposed. Resilience requires a citizenry that identifies with these institutions, the choices made in them, and the future they promise.

Academic refinements like 'demoicratic' theory or throughput legitimacy attempt to frame the Union as a sophisticated system of governing with the people. Yet, without a deeper democratic anchor, citizens in a Europe at war will be reduced to passengers on a rollercoaster, bound by a shared infrastructure and a destination they never actively chose. To the nationalist politician, moreover, these abstract structures are merely a multi-level single player game, allowing them to clamber through layers of governance to collect coins and grow bigger.

6.2 The need for critical distance to the institutions

Europeans are asking vital questions of their institutions, but institutional analysis itself can invite navel-gazing. The EU's architecture is a hall of mirrors. Mastering the EU's intricacies induces a professional deformation; we can lose sight of the stakes and accept technical absurdities and long-accepted practices as logic, even if they no longer serve our vital ends. Once inside, this architecture magnifies Europe's global importance and the narcissism of small differences: Poland nursing grievances against

Western neighbours because EU enlargement once reduced it to a 'rule-taker', or Ireland under-investing in defence because it was once granted a 'Triple Lock'.

This is no plea to ditch technical literacy – that is, the need to differentiate between the Defence Agency's steering board, say, and the Commissioner's industrial ambitions. Rather, it is about remembering that European institutions were actually designed for that distortive effect. In the 1950s, Europeans invented institutions designed to change and 'domesticate' geopolitics, turning the fuels of war – coal, steel, and young men – into technical matters regulated like domestic policy. Decades of institutional reinvention were so effective at making brute power seem to disappear that Europeans fooled themselves into believing no effort was needed – they believed their own trick.

Conventional wisdom now suggests that the post-war era was just a hiatus in world affairs and the 'eternal' laws of power have reasserted themselves. Analysts look back to the 1950s and see a world reminiscent of today: A weary United States (US) challenged in the Pacific, Russian aggression in the East, a rising Global South, and an instinct for European autonomy that the US reversed at Suez. They conclude we were naive and that the EU must now become state-like to survive, replicating US capabilities. They regret the 1954 failure of the Pleven Plan and Gaullism as missed opportunities to establish an autonomous military power, leaving Europe with seven decades of catching up to do (Charlemagne 2026; Roos 2026).

Perhaps they are right, and the EU must become more classically state-like or even imperial. But this path might just as easily de-nature the EU and squander opportunities for a global reordering – much like those lost in Spring 2025. When the EU tried to meet President Trump's tariffs with standard retaliatory measures, it denied its own multilateral foundations and missed a golden opportunity to seek new allies (Sapir 2025), ending up split and self-sequestered (The Economist 2025; Klein 2026). This strange geopolitical project, the EU, might instead recapture the creativity and trickery it showed from the 1950s to the 1990s. This analysis will try to help the reader step back, make explicit our habits and blueprints, and see if alternatives are feasible.

6.3 Concept and structure

With the collapse of the post–Cold War settlement and the return of high-intensity conflict, the construction of Europe's security architecture

demands creativity and perspective. After 70 years of integration, though, the EU cannot easily step back from its own habits to reinvent itself *tabula rasa*. It will not diagnose an emerging challenge then forge a bespoke solution; nor will it set a grand goal and work backward to find the necessary means. In a Union of 27, institutional rules and ambitions play out almost automatically, structuring outcomes almost regardless of the problem at hand. The system generates a solution – such as European Sovereignty – which is nurtured for years to secure internal buy-in, only to be deployed when an external crisis finally provides the trigger.

To understand this dynamic, it is helpful to move toward a 'multiple streams' approach (Cohen et al. 1972). The Union does not think in a linear progression from problem to solution; it operates through several simultaneous processes – streams of sense, policy, and decision-making. To judge this machinery, this closing chapter explores the four dynamics that represent these streams:

I. **Outside-In:** How the EU perceives and absorbs external developments. In a world of flux, we must ask which stimuli the Union chooses to respond to and how it melds them to internal process.

II. **Top-Down:** The realm of high-level rhetoric – such as 'Learning the Language of Power' – spelled out by the institutions (Bialasiewicz 2023). These 'solutions' often exist long before the problems they are meant to solve have even emerged.

III. **Bottom-Up:** The actual machinery of implementation. This encompasses the institutional habits and long-standing practices that determine outcomes irrespective of strategic guidance or developments in the outside world.

IV. **Inside-Out:** The effort to influence the world. Given its internal complexity, the Union often relies on banking past practices rather than inventing new ones to project force.

Each of the four dynamics (or 'streams') laid out above has developed certain entrenched patterns – ways of driving agreement and common action between European states. By sorting the findings from the previous chapters into these dynamics, we can isolate the pathologies that typically

govern the machinery. This allows us to anticipate the consequences of applying these procedural habits and templates to defence and to ask whether creative alternatives might be more feasible. While this categorisation is a subjective choice – reflective perhaps of a British national working for NATO – a degree of subjectivity is essential to shape the future rather than simply admire it. Only in this way is it possible to ask how an alternative architectural design might look.

I. Outside-in: Leaning into the Trump effect

The following dynamics represent the 'Outside-In' stream, where the Union attempts to absorb external pressures into its own institutional logic. Since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU has, it seems, identified a triad of forces: a transactional US administration that has exposed the fragility of Europe's defence industrial base; a NATO subject to significant expectations which its European members must now meet; and the rise of defence minilateralism among non-members like the UK and Turkey, who engage in shifting formats both with and without EU states.

The Trump Effect: The shift in the US strategic posture towards the Western Hemisphere has transformed the security guarantee into a fiscal ultimatum. Washington's 2025 National Security Strategy resurrected the Monroe Doctrine as a Trump Corollary, signalling a pivot towards hemispheric dominance. This pressure was codified at the 2025 Hague Summit as a new 5% GDP defence investment benchmark, which replaces the 2% target with a 3.5% core military and 1.5% resilience requirement. With the US providing 66% of NATO spending, Europe must now assume the heavy lift.

NATO Reform: The accession of Finland and then Sweden has effectively merged the European and Atlantic security spaces, with 23 members now common to the EU and NATO. This creates an external requirement for seamless interoperability. The pressure here comes from NATO's own evolving standards, which demand a level of industrial and infrastructure readiness – such as military mobility – that forces the Union's regulatory machinery into the service of NATO's territorial defence requirements. Regulatory machinery is now a tool for NATO's frontline needs.

Minilateral buffering: Minilateral formats like the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO)[22] are operating outside the EU framework. Under its Vision 2030, NORDEFCO now seeks total integration, which means a functional merger of operational planning and logistics that treats the Nordic region as a single theatre. These act as frontline shock absorbers, providing the continent's actual shield to low-level threats while remaining outside the Union's core political ambit. They represent a physical buffer of capable states that bypass the EU's current institutional delays.

Assessment: A Eurocentric reading of global upheaval?
Since the 1990s, the EU has viewed global shifts through a mental map of concentric circles, positioning itself as a gravitational force that asserts control through shared standards. This model assumes that external shocks – financial crisis, migration flows, and now US retrenchment – simply force European states to consolidate under a single functional umbrella. Today, the Union is applying this logic to a more hostile era, leveraging its industrial core to act as a magnet. By aligning NATO's territorial needs with Commission work-orders, the EU is leaning into US pressure to establish itself as NATO's central pillar. Minilateral formats like the JEF are viewed as outer circles destined to scale up within the Union.

If this is an accurate diagnosis of the EU's posture, the Union is successfully leveraging the pressure for burden-sharing into a recipe for integration. But the signs are that this is yesterday's solution to tomorrow's problems. It would not be the first time the EU has operated through a logic of reactive necessity, anticipating unpalatable leaps in integration but pursuing them only when the external environment renders alternatives impossible. Today, EU members are finally making a painful leap: increasing defence spending and making active operational contributions to regional security. Yet this is a response to the world as it was. The US has moved far beyond the old demands for collective burden-sharing.

The US now demands that allies commit 5% of GDP to defence, recasting the security guarantee as a commercial service. Under the 2025 National Security Strategy, this 5% is the price of entry for a bilateral trade in industrial utility. US support is contingent on a partner's immediate industrial capacity or its consumption of US products. These transactional

[22] This consists of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

supply routes bypass the EU's institutional floor. South Korea is worth defending for its military shipbuilding (Nemeth 2024); conversely, the US commitment to Taiwan becomes increasingly precarious as the US seeks to disentangle its own supply chains from the island's chips. This logic creates a centrifugal pressure, as individual European states trade specific resources for external security rather than waiting for the construction of a central Pillar.

By picturing itself as the core of a set of concentric circles, the EU risks being euro-centric. But zoom out: Global relations are being restructured through a scramble for resources that places the EU firmly on the periphery. China currently dominates the global mineral processing vital for defence industries, controlling over 80% of refining capacity and leveraging supply chains for silver, tungsten, and antimony through new licensing regimes. The US is responding by negotiating overseas supply agreements with minimum price floors and a $2.5 billion Strategic Resilience Reserve to stockpile resources. Power is defined by the physical control of supply chains and productive capacity, such as shipbuilding, rather than the regulatory power the EU traditionally wields.

If that is so, the EU will not be reinforced by differentiated integration – quite the reverse. Peripheral states, realising that an insulated Franco-German core cannot provide a functional shield, may well seek survival through agile, external architectures. Turkey, rebuffed by the EU's SAFE programme, is reportedly seeking trilateral ties with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. AUKUS remains the primary vehicle for the UK to bypass the Brussels Effect (Tzinieris et al. 2025). Member states like Poland are also pursuing differentiated formats not as a supplement to the emerging EU core but to forge an alternative, directing a record 5% of GDP in 2026 to its own defence and toward US- and South Korean–led procurement to rapidly fill Baltic security gaps.

II Top down: The ambition of readiness

The agenda spelled out at a strategic level reflects the long-stated ambitions, fears, and habits that in many cases anticipated and predicted today's strategic environment. This agenda typically cites its own specific triad: a political goal of total readiness by 2030, a defence industrial trilemma that requires nimble navigation, and a massive debt gamble. Together, these elements signal the Union's ambition to withstand whatever is thrown at it.

The Political Mandate: The Readiness 2030 roadmap requested by the European Council adopts a whole-of-society approach, transitioning to a Preparedness Union that treats geopolitical disorder as a permanent operating condition. Readiness is built on four flagship projects: the European Air Shield, Drone Defence, Eastern Flank Watch, and a Space Shield. Designed to be 'born European', these collective assets aim to bypass national silos and scale national models of total defence across 27 nations. The goal is a unified perimeter capable of absorbing shocks across all domains by the decade's end.

The Obvious Trilemma: The goal of readiness over a five-year frame forces member states to choose between immediate procurement of off-the-peg capabilities from abroad, long-term European industrial sovereignty, and the persistent option of developing their own specific tech in the mid-term. The European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) mandates that 55% of investment stay within the EU by 2030. The logic accepts the short-term necessity of US purchases while betting that aggregated demand will force a fragmented market into a productive khaki economy – even as it generates significant costs up front.

Responsibility Deferred: By providing 45-year, low-interest loans for joint procurement and activating fiscal escape clauses, the Union is effectively buying its way into cohesion. Under the SAFE programme, member states can scale up military readiness today while deferring the financial burden for decades. This mechanism is specifically designed to bypass the political friction of immediate price tags, locking both national capitals into a 27-state industrial core and their budgets to a unified European defence architecture.

Assessment: Strategic ambition without strategic will?
Amid deep uncertainty, the Union's logic is coherent. Its primary output is not a strategic doctrine, but cohesion. By framing the goal as readiness for anything, the EU bypasses the friction of strategic choice, betting instead that a unified Europe can withstand any shock. The flagship projects offer something for everyone: The Drone Wall offers a security perimeter to the Baltics and Poland, while the Space and Air Shields secure high-tech R&D for the Northern and Western Big Three. Meanwhile, SME-targeted funds like EDIS ensure Southern and smaller states share in the industrial dividend. Underwritten by 45-year SAFE loans, this distributive logic

allows capitals to avoid painful fiscal trade-offs while creating the scale for industrial sovereignty – a structural answer to a potentially divisive trilemma.

This gradual industrial lock-in leaves the EU well-placed for a geopolitical Kabuki dance with the US – a performance of mutual deception designed to forestall a fundamental breach. Washington seeks to preserve its industrial hold over Europe while retrenching its security commitments. Europeans desire the inverse: To tether the US until they have engineered an industrial autonomy that renders US commitment optional. Tools like SAFE are designed to help Europeans win this long game without Washington noticing. Even states like Poland, which buy US products to secure immediate patronage, may discover that the invisible hand of EU debt and 'Buy European' mandates is already decoupling them from the transatlantic orbit.

Yet the risk is that this all-hazard, catch-all resilience is merely a framing of convenience. Proper readiness requires painful, zero-sum choices: cutting pensions to fund a war footing or confronting the US over its industrial dominance at the risk of a damaging trade war or support for Ukraine. Currently, the EU lacks the political capacity for such choices because it lacks cohesion – both within member states bubbling with political dissent and between them. This makes the future bet on cohesion look less like a plan and more like wishful thinking, which masks a deeper paralysis where the Union cannot yet act as a singular geopolitical power. The EU's strategic bet on a future, all-hazard cohesion is occasioned by its current lack of cohesion.

The EU is currently downplaying the painful trade-offs required by a genuine 'REARM' moment, opting instead for comfortable illusions (Liboreiro 2025). By promising 'khaki' economic growth and leveraging long-term debt, Brussels avoids the painful reality that building specialised, unproductive, and often redundant military capacity is a net drain on a civilian economy. This lack of political honesty allows the Union to sanitise its initiatives – rebranding the urgent necessity of rearmament as the more passive *Readiness* – thereby dodging the fiscal and social friction that genuine security demands. It is a diagnosis of the world designed to suit internal limitations, typical of fragmented groupings that frame the environment to justify an existing posture rather than adapt.

The danger is that the EU, acutely aware of its own lack of will to adapt or act, paints a picture of future threats tailored specifically to these internal limitations. This is not unusual; many in NATO seem to overstate the cohesion of a 'CRINKs' counter-bloc[23] purely to validate the Organisation's current structure. In the EU's case, its 'Readiness 2030' roadmap seems to assume a state of low-level regional 'perma-crisis' – a disorder that conveniently pushes members together without requiring divisive decisions. It hubristically assumes adversaries will scale up their attacks only in tandem with projects like the 'Drone Wall' or 'Space Shield', although these appear designed for internal political signalling rather than for a hostile agency that will specifically target the weak spots in European planning.

III. Bottom-up: The machinery of implementation

The dynamic of European defence implementation is defined by its own rather different triad: intergovernmental ambition that is not matched by political appetite, a push for EU market-building, and a growing accountability deficit that cannot be left unresolved forever. Together, these elements reflect the friction between the Union's supranational impetus and the stubborn reality of national sovereignty.

The Sovereignty Reflex: The intergovernmental sphere remains the primary site of decision-making. Member states continue to treat defence as a core state power, using Council unanimity to ringfence the CSDP from the Community method. This resistance is bolstered by the availability of alternative fora like NATO or the JEF. In practice, all EU defence instruments – from PESCO to the SAFE facility – rest on voluntary participation, which means that the Union lacks any binding power to compel member states to deploy force or resources.

The Industrial Logic: Acting as the enabler, the Commission has adopted a financial mode to bypass national silos. It uses internal market competencies to create efficiency, providing co-funding for projects through EDIP that would be economically irrational for states to pursue in isolation. By establishing permanent mechanisms for coordinated production and supply-chain resilience, the Commission is betting that a market logic and aggregated demand can eventually engineer a 'European preference' that political declarations alone have failed to deliver.

[23] China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

The Democratic Blind Spot: The move towards collective debt and rapid rearmament has created a significant accountability deficit. The scale of commitments, such as the SAFE scheme, outpaces both the political will of the Council and the level of democratic oversight. Adopted through executive procedures with minimal parliamentary involvement, these mechanisms shift resources toward long-term defence spending without public scrutiny. This multi-level delegation makes it nearly impossible for parliaments to hold decision-makers to account for the resulting strategic burdens.

Assessment: Invoking high politics to justify low manoeuvring?
This dynamic represents a coherent response to what is widely accepted as the impossibility of applying a supranational architecture to sensitive areas. Defence ranks as high politics – a pillar of core sovereignty where supranational institutions have traditionally failed to gain traction. By accepting intergovernmental resistance as a given, the EU has found a way to pursue goals that are necessary and will ultimately be accepted as beneficial. It uses defence enablement to address inefficiencies arising from state-to-state haggling without the friction of treaty change. By leaning on the Council's authority, the Commission can advance while deferring the problem of the democratic deficit. This tiptoeing is a pragmatic workaround that allows for institutional progress in a field where overt supranationalisation would be rejected.

But what if this tiptoeing is simply expedience? It is common to claim that EU institutions must move cautiously into defence because it remains 'high politics' or a 'core state power'. Yet the problem may not be that defence is too sensitive for cooperation, but that it was for a long time too small to merit serious attention. Between 1995 and 2014, aggregate member state expenditure withered to a trough of 1.1% of GDP. With the industry representing a negligible 0.2% of the Union's labour force, the sector was simply too marginal for the Commission to prioritise. If defence were truly a domain apart, it would justify the institutional creativity NATO achieved seven decades ago, but it is unclear if the EU is aiming for that. Its comparative neglect of defence in the 2000s leaves the Union without an imaginative template for the current era of flux.

This tiptoeing is the tried and tested procedure for establishing a classical supranational architecture, the easy route to the Community Method. From border control to finance, the routine remains the same: The Council grudgingly admits the need for collective action; the Commission

identifies economies of scale that haggling precludes; and the Parliament initially accepts the democratic deficit while new powers take root, only to later exploit the gap between Commission ambition and Council appetite. These institutional struggles are almost performative. The actors know the end result and allow themselves to be 'pushed' into it. However, by prioritising this procedural momentum over strategic purpose, we risk building an architecture that is technically functional but strategically hollowed out before it is even completed.

Ironically, polling suggests the public might enthusiastically mandate defence integration – even its supranational elements. The danger, then, is that habits of oblique implementation (i.e. Community creep) become the default, thus squandering active political will. If the institutions adopt a performative approach to political debate, where each actor allows itself to be pushed toward a predetermined outcome, the Union misses both the real problem and its solution. For instance, the Commission analysis plays up European market fragmentation, inefficiency, and duplication to justify centralisation while downplaying the strategic flexibility provided by diverse, global supply chains. Yet member states allow themselves to be nudged towards greater European industrial autonomy by the Commission's diagnosis because that is the familiar direction of travel.

By overstating fragmentation and downplaying the 30% of procurement already involving joint ventures or European-based foreign firms, the Commission justifies a closed industrial architecture. This risks severing the cross-border ties that define the modern industry and threatens vital supply chains with partners like the UK or Turkey. It forces a false choice between bureaucratic integration and strategic depth, precluding more agile alternatives. A networked architecture – leveraging flexible coalitions or a strengthened European Defence Agency – would better allow Europeans to club together for production or global procurement clout. This would preserve the flexibility required for genuine security without the friction of an ill-fitting institutional template.

IV. Inside-Out: The Projective Impulse

The Inside-Out dynamic represents the attempt to manufacture a collective capacity for action by creating a shared acceptance, both internally and externally, that the Union is a defence actor. This is not about exporting a model of governance, but about confirming agency and choice through three main forces.

The Franco-German Motor: This axis serves as the primary mechanism for demonstrating power, aligning French strategic ambition with German industrial weight. It creates a gravitational pull that brings the rest of Europe into its strategic orbit. Flagship projects like MGCS and (the troubled) FCAS are designed to establish a continental standard of force. This projects the image of a unified military choice, encouraging other European states to adopt Franco-German industrial standards and political priorities as the price of admission to the European security core.

The Brussels Effect: The Union uses the rules of its internal market to create a shared acceptance of its role as a global regulator, thus enforcing standardisation and interoperability across security markets. Through the Readiness 2030 roadmap and SAFE facility, it builds economies of scale that act as a barrier to non-European producers. By establishing a European preference, Brussels uses its power as a massive consumer to oblige external partners – notably the US and the UK – to follow European rules and industrial methods to maintain access to the EU market.

Asserting European Sovereignty: This framework, formalised through the Strategic Compass, seeks to build the credibility of a sovereign power by consolidating military instruments under unified structures like the MPCC. By using the European Peace Facility – now a €17 billion off-budget fund – the Union has moved from a civilian regulator to a primary security provider. This institutionalisation aims to convince both member states and global rivals that the EU is transitioning from a collection of national actors into a single, sovereign power.

Assessment: Action as agency denied?

Years of talk about how to establish European 'actorness' now matter viscerally: Establishing the EU's standing as a defence actor is the key to deterrence, alliance-building, and influencing global ordering. Other states weighing bandwagoning or aggression will judge the Union on its appeal, effectiveness, and the simple credibility of its political decisions. By creating defence goods at scale, the EU can offer a serious strategic orientation for nearby Britain, Turkey, or Ukraine, as well as for vital mid-sized global powers seeking a path beyond great-power dominance. The triad identified here – the Franco-German motor, the Brussels Effect applied to defence markets, and the conceptual framework of European sovereignty – can provide the basis for establishing that reputation.

Long-term success nevertheless rests on a provocative gambit: The Union must manufacture the status of a capable, sovereign actor before it has fully become one. This requires accumulating enough military mass to be taken seriously while managing the risk that this sudden shift in the continental balance – or the gap between its claims and capabilities – invites attack. Paris and Berlin view this swift scaling up as the cost of historical compromises, as catch-up for past errors: For too long, the EU was too open to the US, not least because it was too open to Atlanticist neighbours and former members such as the UK or Turkey. That dependence has created today's problems, which must be remedied by quickly establishing EU sovereignty, with the UK and others outside.

But there are valid warning signs. True actorness is defined by the exercise of choice; yet European sovereignty is currently being framed not as an act of will, but as a consequence of US abandonment. Rather than the product of positive choice or overt strategy, this strategic pivot is being thrust upon the Union, creating a TINA (There Is No Alternative) moment where leaders blame the inaction of their predecessors to justify current urgency. Because this shift is presented as a geopolitical necessity rather than a political vision, it lacks a deep democratic anchor. If the EU-isation of Europe's defence rests on a mandate that neither its voters nor its vulnerable neighbours have really endorsed, it remains a shaky basis for long-term deterrence. The result is a paradox: sovereignty as choicelessness.

This choicelessness, moreover, is a façade, because US abandonment *was* in fact partly the result of European ambition and strategy, if largely hidden from voters. The EU's pursuit of the Brussels Effect and European autonomy since around 2017 has contributed significantly to its abandonment by the US. The EU's decision to regulate US tech and industrial methods while remaining a security dependent has antagonised its primary partner. Its choices have also hardly improved the security situation. By raising regulatory walls to leverage market access, the Union has made its southern neighbours less stable, its supply chains weaker, and potential partners like India increasingly hostile (Li 2024; Morone and Alfino 2025).

If the Brussels Effect is partly to blame for today's crisis, then responsibility rests disproportionately with the Franco-German tandem: It was realised as a unique mix of German over-regulation, French protectionism, and mutual US-scepticism when it came to tech and innovation (Barker and Hagebölling 2022). The pair now claim the right to lead Europe out of

a dangerous situation without acknowledging their responsibility for leading it in – and their recipe is more of the same. Paris and Berlin enjoy the mantle of leadership today because they once led through imaginative compromises, like the Mitterrand–Kohl pact. That duo dissolved enmities by creating market incentives; today's bind Europe in hidden debt.

6.4 Conclusions

EU policymakers do not progress from problem to solution in a linear way: They cannot. Often, they possess a solution looking for a problem, relying on a system that achieves diplomatic progress by narrowing choices and making hundreds of complex inter-institutional buy-offs. While this may sound like the stuff of Eurosceptic fantasy – of eurocrats using any excuse to drive through integration and Europe-building – it is no criticism. The Union is, to paraphrase Delors, a UGO: an unidentified geopolitical object. Integration remains a leap of faith. It is transformative and experimental, and that precludes classical, linear planning just as it does neat democratic accountability. The operating system described in this chapter is nothing more than a series of habits that allow for a leap into projects that can only ever be half conceived, planned, or pre-tested.

The nature of European transformative geopolitics lies in its ability to *rescale* the world around it. The best European projects make big problems smaller, applying domestic governance mechanisms – parliaments, executives, regulations – to age-old sources of international grievance. In so doing, they tend to scale up the weight of small players: peripheral islands like Cyprus, Malta, or Ireland, or post-industrial zones like the Ruhr and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Schengen makes former 'borderlands' integral politically and economically. EU transport policy links states otherwise separated by history and geography. This plasticity is vital because geopolitical aggression by great powers has always been characterised by a crisis of scale – the reality that natural resources, trade routes, chokepoints, and environmental dangers are unevenly distributed, as is the know-how required to organise governance at scale.

Towards the end of the Cold War, Daniel Bell warned that this crisis of scale was now global (Bell 1987; Blake and Gilman 2021). The nation-state was too small to handle big problems (like migration, environmental problems, transnational supply chain shocks), but it had also become too big and clumsy to handle the filigree local realities of most citizens. Forty years later, the European Union is reckoning with the world's failure to address that crisis. The Union itself may have created multi-level

governance, an elevator that took problems up and down to find the right scale. It may have helped others participate in that rescaling, through enlargement, international institutions, the export of its administrative know-how. But others did not heed that original nugget of EU wisdom reportedly articulated by Paul-Henri Spaak in the 1950s: Even big states have to learn they are just too small.

The Union is responding to this global failure by taking that Spaakism literally: In a hostile environment, its members are acutely aware of their smallness and are using the EU as a vehicle to become big. After 50 years of experimentation, here at last is a project the voter can grasp. Its latest transformation rejects the old EU attempts to rewrite the laws of geopolitics, accepting them instead as given. After 70 years in which the Union plausibly claimed that its internal integration, its geographical expansion, and its policy work abroad were not about classical power politics, it turns out they are (Hansen and Jonsson 2014; Streeck 2019). The templates being referenced for its own development are familiar: NATO, the US, or a quasi-imperial arrangement with a core of member states and a dependent fringe. These are concepts the voter understands well; yet the democratic decision has been deferred, as if it were just another of those old, open-ended, transformative experiments.

The reason for deferring the democratic decision on European defence seems to be that leaders believe voters are not ready to get real. Decision-makers know their populations to be wedded to the 'end of history', and attached to the peace dividend; a post-heroic public with a welfare rather than a warfare mindset cannot be trusted to choose correctly. Polling confirms this *guns versus butter* disconnect: A strong majority of EU citizens may say they support more EU defence, but they remain hostile to the inevitable cuts to social programmes (Chihaia 2024; Prochwicz-Jazowska and Zerka 2025). Even in the UK, a country not shy about using military force, 57% support greater military investment, but only 24% accept the corresponding reduction in public services (YouGov 2026). To bridge that kind of gap, the old EU operating system is reactivated, albeit reduced somewhat to a mechanism of pre-cooked decisions, pork-barrel inter-institutionalism, and the systematic deferral of popular consent.

But is this a necessary paternalism? Or are decision-takers constructing a 'lions leading donkeys' narrative to disguise their own inability to think creatively about geopolitics and make a corresponding political case? If citizens today are complacent, polarised, and deeply sceptical of authority, is this because they naively believed in the end of history or is it in fact because of this specific style of European governance? It was the political class that, in 1989, declared the end of ideological competition. By abandoning the art of persuasion, they lost the ability to justify any collective effort, including defence. Instead, they forced technocrats to behave politically, providing definitive data to gift-wrap decisions – including invasions – that could no longer be defended on principle. The result is a polarised society, mistrustful of authority and prey to disinformation.

The 'post-heroic' diagnosis shows a similar circularity. Edward Luttwak coined the term after the Cold War to claim that modern demography in advanced economies could no longer sustain the blood-cost of war (Luttwak 1995). Governments apparently heard his warning, but rather than engaging with society or indeed scaling back, they responded with the pretence that war was a bloodless, surgical exercise in shock and awe or overseas managerialism. This very response filled Luttwak's term with meaning: By marketing war as a risk-free liberal crusade, and failing, elites ensured that societies now profoundly mistrust the military instrument of power. Now that populations have come to mistrust the military instrument of power, decision-makers seem to have turned on the public, blaming that same post-heroic nature for the loss of military standing and spending. It is a convenient deflection.

The point is simply that the mode of decision-taking and institution-building sketched out in this chapter insulates decision-takers both from responsibility to voters and from facing up to the effects of their actions on the world outside. In both directions, their behaviour and policies risk creating the hostile environment to which they claim to be responding.

The EU's operating system systematically narrows political options and excludes dissent, perversely swelling the ranks of the disillusioned. It is a dangerous insulation for which Europeans are unlikely to thank decision-makers once the cost is measured in conflict. Leaders throw

money at military hardware because they believe their own populations are too soft to fight, resulting in the assembly of expensive capabilities whose deployment lacks any popular mandate. If they now threaten to cut welfare to reclaim a peace dividend that was actually liquidated into tax cuts, they will fracture society without ever raising the necessary revenue. This democratic deficit is not merely a domestic flaw; it is a strategic vulnerability. By failing to offer a genuine ideological case for how to adapt (to) this new world order, the Union becomes reactive, relying on the hostility of its adversaries to justify its own development.

The successful Cold War response to Europe's vulnerability was not an arms race, but the cultivation of mutual vulnerability – opening up to create transparency and stability. The imaginative response to today's negative dependencies is not autonomy but *indispensability*, as an ally and producer (Teer et al. 2025). Autonomy, by contrast, mimics the closed systems of the past; it may create a more classical geopolitical actor, but it also creates a clearer target that is ultimately less relevant globally. The Union will be subject to more brutal attacks because it matters less to the world, with neutral states in particular bullied into taking sides. This is the recursive trap of bellicist state-building: By putting a model of European statecraft first, the Union embraces the very war required to justify its existence. In this light, the suspicion that decision-makers have put a solution ahead of a problem will trigger a massive backlash.

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7 Sammanfattning på svenska

Det europeiska försvaret befinner sig i en genomgripande omvandlingsprocess. Efter flera decennier, då Europa i hög grad har varit beroende av transatlantiska säkerhetsgarantier, ökar i dag trycket på att Europeiska unionen och dess medlemsstater ska axla ett större ansvar för den egna säkerheten. Rysslands fullskaliga invasion av Ukraina 2022, ihållande instabilitet i Europas närområde liksom tilltagande osäkerhet kring de amerikanska säkerhetsåtagandena har i grunden omformat den strategiska kontexten. Parallellt har europeiska beslutsfattare i allt högre grad betonat behovet av att utveckla EU till en mer autonom och handlingskraftig säkerhetsaktör.

Mot denna bakgrund stiger förväntningarna på EU:s roll inom försvarsområdet. Unionens handlingsförmåga är dock fortsatt begränsad, vilket hänger samman med institutionella, politiska och kapacitetsrelaterade faktorer. Trots betydande institutionella framsteg är den europeiska försvarsintegrationen ett område under utveckling. Detta är bakgrunden till den här volymen, som fokuserar på de institutionella dimensionerna av ett stärkt europeiskt försvar och analyserar centrala problem och vägval i denna process.

I det inledande kapitlet ramar *Göran von Sydow* och *Valentin Kreilinger* in den övergripande problematiken och motiverar betydelsen av den institutionella och politiska dynamiken inom Europa. De identifierar ett antal horisontella frågor av relevans för de efterföljande bidragen och placerar analysen i såväl en politisk som akademisk kontext, liksom i relation till den bredare utvecklingen av europeisk integration.

I det andra kapitlet analyserar *Pernille Rieker* framväxten av en europeisk försvarsarkitektur präglad av differentierad integration och variabel geometri. Rysslands krig mot Ukraina och den ökade osäkerheten kring de transatlantiska säkerhetsarrangemangens hållbarhet har accelererat utvecklingen av europeiskt försvarssamarbete på flera nivåer. Snarare än att konvergera kring en enhetlig institutionell modell har samarbetet utvecklats genom överlappande ramverk både inom och utanför EU, koalitioner av villiga stater samt flexibla samarbetsformer som inkluderar både medlemsstater och associerade partners. Kapitlet argumenterar

för att differentierad integration inte nödvändigtvis undergräver europeisk sammanhållning, utan snarare utgör ett funktionellt svar på akuta säkerhetsutmaningar. Genom att betrakta integration på ett dynamiskt sätt visar Rieker hur EU-instrument, såsom Pesco, Europeiska försvarsfonden, gemensamma upphandlingsinitiativ och Europeiska fredsfaciliteten, samverkar med Nato, minilaterala konstellationer och ad hoc-koalitioner. Nya initiativ som beredskapsunionen har ytterligare förstärkt samordningen av EU:s försvarsroll, samtidigt som de förblir inbäddade i en bredare europeisk och transatlantisk säkerhetsordning. Kapitlet belyser även hur deltagande från tredje land, särskilt Norge och Storbritannien, kan stärka Europas operativa kapacitet, men också de institutionella begränsningar som följer av frånvaro av fullt medlemskap.

I det tredje kapitlet analyserar *Calle Håkansson* Europeiska kommissionens förändrade roll inom EU:s säkerhets- och försvarspolitik, med särskilt fokus på det försvarsindustriella området. Trots att försvar traditionellt utgjort en mellanstatlig kompetens har kommissionen successivt expanderat sitt inflytande genom att mobilisera sina befogenheter inom industripolitik, inremarknadsreglering och ekonomisk styrning. Den försämrade säkerhetssituationen har därutöver skapat ett politiskt utrymme för att bredda kommissionens mandat. Denna utveckling har intensifierats i kölvattnet av Rysslands invasion av Ukraina samt den ökade osäkerheten i det transatlantiska samarbetet, vilket har stärkt kommissionens roll när det gäller att både styra och sätta dagordningen. Kapitlet beskriver denna utveckling som en förskjutning mot ett finansiellt orienterat styrningssätt, inom ramen för en institutionell hybridordning som präglas av bestående spänningar mellan överstatliga ambitioner och medlemsstaternas kontroll. Slutsatsen är att kommissionen har etablerat sig som en central möjliggörande aktör, men att denna roll är beroende av fortsatt politiskt stöd från medlemsstaterna.

I det fjärde kapitlet riktar *Nicolai von Ondarza* fokus mot den mellanstatliga dimensionen av EU:s försvarspolitik. EU:s gemensamma säkerhets- och försvarspolitik (CSDP) har utformats som – och förblir i stor utsträckning – ett mellanstatligt politikområde. Med rötter i den gemensamma utrikes- och säkerhetspolitiken präglas beslutsfattandet av enhällighet bland medlemsstaterna. Samtidigt identifieras inslag av en ”ny mellanstatlighet”, exempelvis genom etableringen av Europeiska försvarsbyrån (EDA) och kommissionens utökade roll när det gäller att sätta dagordningen. Kapitlet identifierar tre drivkrafter bakom denna utveckling: försvarets ställning som statlig kärnkompetens, CSDP:s stigberoende med fokus på krishantering samt Natos roll som alternativ

säkerhetsstruktur. Analysen indikerar att den rådsdominerade modellen sannolikt kommer att bestå men att två institutionella anpassningar skulle kunna stärka EU:s handlingsförmåga: att det inrättas ett särskilt försvarsråd och att det utvecklas ett samspel mellan mellanstatliga och överstatliga aktörer, inklusive försvars- och rymdkommissionären.

I kapitel fem anlägger *Valentin Kreilinger* ett kritiskt perspektiv på frågan om demokratiskt ansvarsutkrävande i takt med att försvarspolitikens betydelse och budgetära omfattning ökar. Kapitlet redogör för den parlamentariska dimensionen inom Västeuropeiska unionens parlamentariska församling (WEU) under perioden 1955–2011 och konstaterar att såväl Europaparlamentet som nationella parlament i dag har ett begränsat inflytande på försvarsområdet. Detta illustreras bland annat av SAFE-instrumentet. Kreilinger argumenterar för att denna utveckling ger upphov till ett demokratiskt underskott och föreslår åtgärder för att stärka parlamentens roll i samband med den pågående europeiska upprustningen. I takt med att resurser omfördelas till försvarsområdet ökar risken för bristande representation inom andra politikområden, vilket förstärker behovet av ett utökat parlamentariskt deltagande. Slutsatsen är att en fördjupad och mer systematisk granskning av försvarspolitiken är nödvändig på europeisk, nationell och interparlamentarisk nivå.

I det sjätte och avslutande kapitlet analyserar *Roderick Parkes* de institutionella mönster och den politiska logik som präglar EU:s försvarsintegration. Analysen identifierar återkommande tendenser där byråkratisk dynamik ofta ges företräde framför strategisk innovation. Genom att undersöka fyra centrala typer av integrationsdynamik synliggör Parkes begränsningarna i dessa stigberoende processer och föreslår alternativa institutionella arrangemang som bättre kan tillvarata unionens samlade kapacitet i syfte att stärka motståndskraft och avskräckning.

Sammantaget erbjuder volymen en mångdimensionell analys av den institutionella och politiska dynamik som präglar den europeiska försvarsuppbyggnaden. Medan vissa bidrag betonar svårigheterna i att samla 27 medlemsstater kring komplexa och resurskrävande beslutsprocesser, framhåller andra att dessa processer är en nödvändig förutsättning för EU:s funktion. Tillsammans bidrar författarna med analytiskt förankrade och delvis kompletterande perspektiv på en utveckling som kan betraktas som formativt för EU:s framtida roll som säkerhetsaktör.

‘The geopolitical environment confronting Europe in early 2026 is characterised by increased strategic competition, regional instability, and uncertainty about the reliability of traditional security arrangements. […] A thorough understanding of the organisational and institutional dimensions of European defence is crucial for assessing its potential future development. Within the EU and beyond, institutions shape the incentives for cooperation among member states and can provide mechanisms for coordinating defence policies and creating joint capabilities.’

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