

The Brain and the Bones of European Defence: Multi-Domain Command and Civilian Preparedness as Foundations of Self-Reliance

by **Rosaria Puglisi and Fernando Giancotti**

Under shifting global power dynamics, Europe – both at an EU and at a continental level – faces a dual challenge: Russia’s protracted confrontation with Europe and growing questions over the reliability of US security guarantees. These pressures expose Europe’s vulnerability and demand accelerated defence self-reliance. While recent initiatives have aimed at boosting budgets, industrial modernisation and procurement, deterrence requires more than resources. The critical gap lies in the capacity to coherently transform investments into deployable capabilities and engage society across the continent. Two priorities are highlighted: 1) establishing a permanent European multi-domain command-and-control structure to integrate land, maritime, air, space and cyber components into coherent operational planning, coordinated with political and interagency governance; and 2) strengthening civilian preparedness, ensuring that governments, private actors and societies can respond effectively to crises and hybrid attacks. Together with the full development of military capabilities, these measures provide the foundation of Europe’s strategic autonomy and the most immediate steps toward credible deterrence and resilience in a volatile international environment.

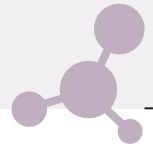
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In combination with the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, the coming to power of the second Trump Administration – and its approach to Europe – has dramatically altered the security landscape of the continent prompting what French President Emmanuel Macron has called a “profound strategic awakening”.¹ At no time the asymmetrical dual challenges to European security emanating from Moscow and Washington have been more palpable than at the summit between Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Anchorage, in August 2025. Against the backdrop of the Russian leader’s apparent rehabilitation – despite ongoing US sanctions and an outstanding international warrant for war crimes – the optics and atmospherics of the summit pointed to a strategic realignment between the two leaders and a continued US decoupling from Europe, not only in

¹ Jacqué, Philippe et al., “Europe Decides to Take Its Security in Its Own Hands, Without Breaking with the US”, in *Le Monde*, 7 March 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/03/07/europe-decides-to-take-its-security-into-its-own-hands-without-breaking-with-us_6738910_4.html.



The summit between Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Anchorage pointed to a strategic realignment between the two leaders and a continued US decoupling from Europe

terms of security commitments but also of a shared normative framework. Significantly, neither Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky nor any European leaders were invited to what turned out to be a “strikingly convivial reunion”² – one in which the future of Ukraine and the security of Europe would be discussed.

Because of its aggressive and revisionist foreign policy Russia remains a clear and present danger to Europe, determined to erase Ukraine’s statehood, unravel the post-Cold War security architecture and drive a wedge between the United States and its European allies. Transatlantic strains are no less troubling, though. American open hostility toward Europe led Munich Security Conference Chairman Christoph Heusgen to warn in his 2025 closing remarks that “our common value base is not that common anymore”.³ This was just an early signal of what subsequent events would confirm: the urgency for Europe to accelerate on the path towards defence self-reliance, within NATO if possible, outside of it if necessary.⁴ Responding to this urgency involves understanding European defence as a living structure, in which military force and industrial production provide strength, while political decision-making, multi-domain command and control, and civilian preparedness ensure direction and endurance. Power rests on the coherence and integration of these functions; without them, strength remains brittle.

That the security of Europe starts in Ukraine is a conviction that has been articulated consistently in EU political and defence circles, with European presidents and prime ministers remarking as early as two days after the Russian full-scale invasion: “European security is indivisible. Any challenge to the European security order affects the security of the EU and its Member States.”⁵ Leaders like former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin have framed the European support to Kyiv as a matter of “self-interest”.⁶ Finland, together with Nordic and Eastern European countries, has demonstratively enforced a “Ukraine is Europe’s first line of defence” narrative by

² Baker, Peter and Katie Rogers, “Trump and Putin Put on a Show of Friendship but Come Away Without a Deal”, in *The New York Times*, 15 August 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/15/us/politics/trump-putin-alaska-ukraine.html>.

³ Filkins, Dexter, “The Trump Administration Trashes Europe and NATO”, in *The New Yorker*, 20 February 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/the-trump-administration-trashes-europe-and-nato>.

⁴ Glancy, Joshua, “Europe Says It’s Rearing, but Does It Have the Stomach to Face Putin?”, in *The Sunday Times*, 16 August 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/article/36c9d0c9-c13b-49c8-a171-b658942c8acb>. On the debate about the European role in NATO see Droin, Mathieu et al., “NATO’s Missing Pillar”, in *Foreign Affairs*, 14 June 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1131855>.

⁵ Council of the EU, *Council Conclusions on the European Security Situation*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/53949/st05591-en22.pdf>.

⁶ Economist, “Now Is the Time for Europe to Show Strength, Not Division, Argues Sanna Marin”, in *The Economist*, 19 February 2025, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2025/02/19/now-is-the-time-for-europe-to-show-strength-not-division-argues-sanna-marin>.



The US pivot away from Europe is a harsh reality with which the Europeans have come to reckon

donating weapons from its own national defensive stockpiles.⁷

Since US Vice President JD Vance's momentous speech in Munich and his hint that US forces' posture in Europe would be decreased because of alternative strategic realities,⁸ Europe, both at an EU and a pan-European level, has been confronted with what UK Prime Minister Starmer called "a generational challenge".⁹

The US pivot away from Europe is – in the view of one realist thinker – part of a 'natural shift' in US foreign policy preferences, the end of an eighty-years cycle created after World War II and now perceived as obsolete.¹⁰ Impatience with continued US defence overspending vis-à-vis European partners has been consistently signalled by previous US Administrations, making it unlikely for the current course of action to be significantly reversed, regardless of White House's occupancy.¹¹ This is a harsh reality with which the Europeans have come to reckon.

Unexpectedly, swift decision-making has followed in both EU and NATO formats, aimed at demonstrating to the Trump Administration European relevance while genuinely reinforcing capabilities in the face of an unrelenting Russian threat. To reverse the decline engendered by years of post-Cold war defence neglect, the European Council endorsed in March 2025 the "White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030", proclaiming urgency in accelerating defence readiness over the next five years.¹² In May, the 150 billion euro Security Action for Europe (SAFE) fund to finance joint procurement of defence projects was approved, with a majority "buy European" clause.¹³ In June, the NATO Summit in The Hague concluded with

⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the EP Plenary Session Key Debate on the Upcoming NATO Summit on 24-26 June 2025*, 18 June 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/453841_en.

⁸ White House, *Speech by J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference 2025*, 14 February 2025, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2025/Selected_Key_Speeches_Vol._II/MS_C_Speeches_2025_Vol2_Ansicht_gek%C3%BCrzt.pdf. In the same occasion, Special Presidential Envoy Keith Kellogg announced that the Europeans would not be invited to participate in the Ukraine-Russia peace talks facilitated by the United States. See Gray, Andrew et al., "Europe Will Not Be Part of Ukraine Peace Talks, US Envoy Says", in *Reuters*, 15 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-calls-european-army-deter-russia-earn-us-respect-2025-02-15>.

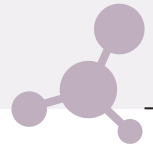
⁹ Economist, "The Nightmare of a Trump-Putin Deal Leaves Europe in Shock", in *The Economist*, 17 February 2025, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/02/17/the-nightmare-of-a-trump-putin-deal-leaves-europe-in-shock>.

¹⁰ Friedman, George, "The Euro-American Shift", in *Geopolitical Futures*, 7 July 2024, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/?p=377162>; Kasparov, Garry, "The Storm Before the Calm" (podcast), in *The Atlantic Autocracy*, 8 August 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/archive/2025/08/storm-before-calm/683794>.

¹¹ Bergman, Max, "A More European NATO", in *Foreign Affairs*, 21 March 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1131528>.

¹² European Commission, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, 19 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0120>.

¹³ Council of the EU, *SAFE: Council Adopts €150 Billion Boost for Joint Procurement on European Security and Defence*, 27 May 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/safe-council-adopts-150-billion-boost-for-joint-procurement-on-european-security-and-defence>; European Council, *European Council*



A key aspect of capability and preparedness-building is the establishment of a coherent and effective European military command and control structure and the development of civilian preparedness

landmark commitments: a new 5 per cent of GDP defence spending target for member states (3.5 per cent in core military needs, 1.5 per cent on broader security-related costs, including support to Ukraine), a reaffirmed “ironclad commitment” to Article 5, and the acknowledgement that Ukraine’s security enhances NATO’s own.¹⁴

At the same time, a whirlwind of diplomatic initiatives, spanning from the Weimar Plus to the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine to bilateral security arrangements have been plotting out a network of alternative security guarantees, should the US commitment to NATO’s Article 5, the legal basis for mutual defence, wane.¹⁵ Most remarkably, France and the United Kingdom have started discussing deeper nuclear coordination to ensure that any extreme threat to Europe would not catch them unprepared.¹⁶

The future of European security lies in both diplomacy and hard realities – weaponry, manpower and willpower. While a crucially important debate rages on military spending, the modernisation of the European defence industry and the streamlining of finance and procurement procedures to stimulate innovation, away from the limelight other key aspects of capability and preparedness-building are under review and deserve wider attention. The establishment of a coherent and effective European military command and control structure and the development of civilian preparedness is what the remainder of this paper will be devoted to.

Conclusions on Competitiveness, European Defence and Security and Migration, 20 March 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/03/20/european-council-conclusions-on-competitiveness-european-defence-and-security-and-migration>; European Council, *European Council, 20 March 2025*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2025/03/20-21>.

¹⁴ NATO, *The Hague Summit Declaration*, 25 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

¹⁵ France et al., *Weimar+ Joint Statement on Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic Security*, 12 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/weimar-joint-statement-on-ukraine-and-euro-atlantic-security>; France and UK, *Statement of the Co-Chairs of the Coalition of the Willing*, 17 August 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/08/17/statement-of-the-co-chairs-of-the-coalition-of-the-willing-17-august-2025>; Poland Government, *Poland and France Sign Historic Security and Cooperation Treaty in Nancy*, 9 May 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/poland-and-france-sign-historic-security-and-cooperation-treaty-in-nancy>; Marsh, Sarah and Elizabeth Piper, “UK and Germany Hail Wide-Ranging Treaty, Deepening Ties in Face of Threats”, in *Reuters*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uk-germany-hail-wide-ranging-treaty-deepening-ties-face-threats-2025-07-16>.

¹⁶ UK and France, *Northwood Declaration (UK-France Joint Nuclear Statement)*, 10 July 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>; Economist, “France’s Top General Says Russia Could Attack in Five Years”, in *The Economist*, 31 July 2025, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/07/31/frances-top-general-says-russia-could-attack-in-five-years>.



Deterrence depends above all on the capacity to transform resources into effective and deployable capabilities, applied coherently in support of shared political objectives

1 MULTI-DOMAIN COMMAND AND CONTROL

Public debate in Europe has so far centred on raising defence budgets, stimulating the defence industry and building military capabilities – the visible “muscles” of European defence. While indispensable, these measures alone cannot guarantee deterrence, which depends above all on the capacity to transform resources into effective and deployable capabilities, applied coherently in support of shared political objectives. In this respect, Europe still faces a critical weakness: although in 2024 EU member states collectively spent 343 billion euros on defence,¹⁷ which is more than twice Russia’s estimated wartime expenditure of 149 billion dollars (137 billion euros),¹⁸ the bloc as a whole continues to lack the structures – the central “brain”, so to speak – that would allow these resources and forces to be employed coherently and decisively.

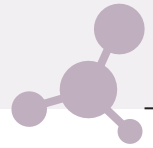
This shortcoming is not new. NATO and national militaries have long pursued capability development as a systemic process, combining equipment, doctrine, training, leadership and logistics into a functioning whole. The EU, by contrast, has been constrained by treaty provisions and by the persistence of national priorities. Combined with a reluctance to engage in defence issues – rooted in the EU’s origins as a ‘peace project’ – these factors have so far prevented the emergence of a comprehensive military system able to protect the Union in its entirety.¹⁹ The institutions that have been created – the EU Military Staff, the European Defence Agency and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability – perform useful functions, but their mandates and scale are suited only to limited operations and remain inadequate in the face of strategic threats.

The ongoing development of Europe-wide initiatives on the industrial front, which include the European Defence Fund, the European Defence Industrial Development Programme, the more recent European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act, the Strategic Compass, and the 2025 White Paper on Defence Readiness, reflects a clear ambition to consolidate Europe’s defence base. Yet, as the European Court of Auditors already warned in 2022, the operational return on such investments will require time, common standards, and – above all – an overarching political direction. Similarly, the EU’s operational record demonstrates

¹⁷ Council of the EU website: *EU Defence in Numbers*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-numbers>.

¹⁸ SIPRI, *Unprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditures as European and Middle East Spending Surges*, 28 April 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/node/7322>.

¹⁹ Menon, Anand, “The European Union Was Designed for Peace – It Is Never Going to Be a War Machine”, in *The Guardian*, 1 October 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/x3bvng>.



Europe possesses substantial resources, credible military forces and a growing array of industrial and institutional initiatives, yet it lacks the one element that would bind them together: a permanent command structure

professionalism but also severe limitations.²⁰ The Union has twenty-one ongoing missions, twelve civilian and nine military, involving some 4,000 participants.²¹ While generally diligent in fulfilling their mandates, these missions remain marginal to the continent's emerging strategic environment.

The paradox is therefore evident. Europe possesses substantial resources, credible military forces and a growing array of industrial and institutional initiatives, yet it lacks the one element that would bind them together: a permanent command structure. The EU Concept for Military Command and Control already recognised this in 2019, when it noted that “the EU does not have a standing military command and control (C2) structure for military executive operations; therefore, clear and effective C2 arrangements are needed to ensure the successful planning and conduct of military CSDP missions and military CSDP operations.”²² Without such a structure, the EU cannot convert potential into power. The Union urgently needs a permanent joint operational command, with its own land, maritime, air, space, and cyber components, as clearly articulated by Special Adviser on European Competitiveness Mario Draghi and former Head of the French Armed Forces Thierry Burkhard.²³

A permanent multi-domain operations (MDO) command would address this gap.²⁴ By integrating land, maritime, air, space and cyber components, it would undertake strategic and operational planning for the European theatre, oversee joint exercises and identify capability shortfalls. More broadly, it would serve as a driver of integration: aligning budgetary allocations with operational requirements (and not the other way round), orienting the

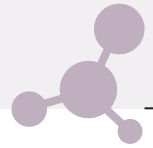
²⁰ European Court of Auditors, “The EU Recovery and Resilience Facility – A Jump to a Resilient Europe?”, in *ECA Journal*, No. 2/2022, <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/news.aspx?nid=17504>.

²¹ EEAS, *Missions and Operations*, 30 January 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410425_en.

²² EEAS, *EU Concept for Military Command and Control - Rev 8*, 23 April 2019, point 2, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8798-2019-INIT/en/pdf>.

²³ Draghi, Mario, *The Future of European Competitiveness*, September 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/node/32880_en; Economist, “France’s Top General Says ...”, cit.

²⁴ In multi-domain operations, command and control is understood as a distributed and interconnected system rather than a linear hierarchy: strategic leaders set goals, effects and rules of engagement, operational commanders synchronise actions across domains, and tactical units act with delegated authority to seize fleeting opportunities. This requires cyber, space, ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), fires and electronic warfare nodes linked through federated networks and shared data services that connect sensors, effectors and decision-makers into one decision ecosystem. Automation, AI and decision-support tools accelerate the human-machine cycle, while political and interagency structures ensure governance of cross-domain effects, data sharing, and interoperability, especially in the information environment and in cyberspace, with active civilian contributions. See Granillo, Adrian, *Initial Concept Development MDC2*, Utrecht, NATO Command and Control Centre of Excellence, 8 September 2021, <https://c2coe.org/?p=24958>. See also NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) website: *Multi-Domain Operations*, <https://www.act.nato.int/activities/multi-domain-operations>.



A multi-domain operations (MDO) approach would replace outdated Cold War and counter-insurgency doctrines with a framework that reflects the changing character of warfare

defence industry towards operational demands, and consolidating enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance, mobility, logistics, and interoperability.

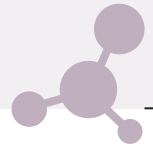
An MDO approach would replace outdated Cold War and counter-insurgency doctrines with a framework that reflects the changing character of warfare. Technological acceleration, hybrid tactics, and the growing speed and complexity of operations mean that effects must be generated simultaneously across the physical, cognitive and virtual domains, with civilian preparedness as an integral component.

To achieve this, MDO requires a deeper, multi-level understanding of both adversaries' and our own domain-specific capabilities, so that strategic anticipation and information superiority can be synchronised and applied rapidly to disrupt an opponent's response. Holistic by design, the MDO concept rests on a whole-of-government approach, with decision-making and guidance extending to the political-strategic level. In the EU context, this implies the active engagement of the European Council, the European External Action Service, the Political and Security Committee, and military structures in a single continuum of decision-making that links operational effectiveness with political responsibility.

Establishing such a command is within reach. European officers already serve daily in NATO's Command Structure and have trained together in NATO, bilateral and EU frameworks. A staff of a few thousand – drawn from the Union's 1.5 million service members – would suffice to create an initial operational capability, at a modest cost compared with large industrial programmes.

More importantly, a rapidly deployed EU command would provide a powerful response to the call for the Union to finally “do something” launched in the Draghi Report: a demonstration of self-belief, a credible first step toward deterrence and a clear signal to allies and competitors that Europe is taking responsibility for its own security. Such a profoundly political act needs not be construed as directed against any specific opponent, but rather as the essential security enabler of the strategic autonomy the EU requires – one commensurate with its economic and diplomatic size.²⁵ At the same time, it would answer insistent American calls for Europe to assume a larger share of the transatlantic defence burden. Framed in this light, the initiative would be a complement to NATO's command-and-control system – inevitably involving further investment and some overlap yet delivering greater resilience and strengthening Europe's ability to manage multiple contingencies – including those that could arise should a US pivot to Asia create opportunities for adversaries to test European security in Washington's absence. The technical

²⁵ Biscop, Sven, *European Strategy in the 21st Century. New Future for Old Power*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019.



The NATO-EU Berlin Plus arrangements remain conceptually valid and would allow a new structure to complement NATO operations under agreed mandates

solutions to minimise cost and still enable an effective autonomous EU C2 can and should be carefully studied and negotiated among the stakeholders. They can go from full duplication to overmanning of existing structures to replace US personnel committed elsewhere, to redefinition of essential C2 capabilities for the EU, to be implemented in specific EU-only centres, and other solutions, some already implemented in multinational C2 systems. The balance to strike is both technical and political and higher costs are in any case involved. But the tailoring of C2 structures to political needs and national and coalition sensitivities is very common, and the strategic weight of such choice warrants the costs involved, anyway a small fraction of the investment for the defence of the Union already planned.

The NATO-EU Berlin Plus arrangements remain conceptually valid and would allow a new structure to complement NATO operations under agreed mandates.²⁶ Ideally, all twenty-seven EU member states would participate, but if unanimity proves elusive, Article 20 of the Treaty on the European Union provides for enhanced cooperation by a coalition of the willing. Including the United Kingdom would be both strategically desirable and politically prudent: despite Brexit, it remains one of Europe's principal military actors, and convergence on defence goals is clear and valuable.

The central issue, however, remains political. Who would assign the mission and ensure coherence between political and operational directives? Broad convergence on the need to enhance security already exists, as demonstrated by the expanding array of initiatives. Yet in an emergency there will be no time to improvise; cohesion must be built in advance. The responsibility for this preparation – and for defining the strategic guidance that underpins it – falls squarely on Europe's political leadership.

The first step in this direction must be the coordination of operational capabilities already in place and their linkage to longer-term defence programmes, within a whole-of-force/whole-of-government approach that also prepares the population for a grave emergency. Beyond political symbolism, this would set in motion a process of organic growth grounded in field-level practice rather than abstract debate. Establishing a multi-domain European C2 capability is the fastest path to meaningful deterrence – complementary to diplomacy and not inherently adversarial. It can be done immediately, for Europe must be protected now. The window of vulnerability is already wide open: hybrid warfare is under way, drone incursions have already targeted EU countries, and the probability of further conflict cannot be excluded. Nor can Europe continue to assume that others will provide for its security.

²⁶ EU and NATO, *EU-NATO Declaration on ESDP*, 16 December 2002, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_19544.htm.



That the armed forces are not the only pillar of national defence and resistance is one of the key lessons drawn from the war in Ukraine

2 CIVILIAN PREPAREDNESS AND SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

That the armed forces are not the only pillar of national defence and resistance is one of the key lessons drawn from the war in Ukraine. In the spring of 2014, at the time of Russia's covert intervention in the Donbas and the subsequent onset of open hostilities, Kyiv was undergoing a moment of marked institutional fragility. Years of underfunding, corruption, patronage and Russian penetration had severely weakened the Ukrainian armed forces, which were not combat-ready. The initial defence was therefore carried out by the National Guard, Territorial Defence units and volunteer battalions, while in parallel, building on the activist networks emerged during the Maidan demonstrations, civil society mobilised rapidly and extensively to collect, produce and distribute goods and services to satisfy the fighters' primary needs.²⁷

Since the 2013-14 Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine has undergone a profound reconfiguration of state-society relations, also affecting the security and defence sector. This has taken the form of an expanded inclusion of civil society organisations, volunteer networks and local communities in advisory, policymaking, implementation and oversight roles – formally enshrined in law in 2015. With the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022, these networks have become the backbone of national resilience, producing what has been described as a model of co-production of governance.²⁸ In support and, when needed, in lieu of the state, hundreds of “little hands” have taken upon themselves the “multiple and at times minuscule functions, which, combined, constitute the social fabric of the defence”.²⁹ Participation in what a Ukrainian volunteer defined “co-construction of the national defence” transformed individuals' perception of their role as citizens filling with new meaning the very idea of civic engagement.³⁰ Today, as social analysts observe, Ukraine's security is co-produced by soldiers, mayors, volunteers and ordinary citizens alike.³¹ In this sense, societal engagement has formed the underlying

²⁷ Puglisi, Rosaria, “Institutional Failure and Civic Activism: The Potential for Democratic Control in Post-Maidan Ukraine”, in Aurel Croissant and David Kühn (eds), *Reforming Civil-Military Relations in New Democracies. Democratic Control and Military Effectiveness in Comparative Perspectives*, Cham, Springer, 2017, p. 41-61; Puglisi, Rosaria, “A People's Army: Civil Society as a Security Actor in Post-Maidan Ukraine”, in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 15|23 (July 2015), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/4418>; Puglisi, Rosaria, “Defence Bottom-Up: Volunteer Battalions at the Onset of the Russian War in Ukraine”, in Christian Kaunert et al. (eds), *In the Eye of the Storm. Origins, Ideology, and Controversies of the Azov Brigade, 2014-2023*, Hannover/Stuttgart, ibidem Verlag, 2024, p. 55-82.

²⁸ Rabinovych, Maryna, *Co-production of Governance in Ukraine's Defense Sector*, Kyiv, Ministry of Defence of Ukraine Reforms Support Office, March 2024.

²⁹ Colin Lebedev, Anna, *Ukraine: la force des faibles*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2025, p. 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³¹ Stepanenko, Viktor and Susan Stewart, “‘Who, If Not Us?’ Civic Activism and Defence in Wartime Ukraine”, in *Innovation*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2025), p. 152-168, <https://doi.org/10.1>



The system of defence that emerged in Ukraine mirrors in practice what the Nordic ‘total defence’ model codifies institutionally

structure that gives the system its endurance.

The system of defence that emerged in Ukraine – spontaneously and incrementally, through trial, adaptation and negotiation between state and society – mirrors in practice what the Nordic ‘total defence’ model codifies institutionally: a system in which state authorities, local communities and citizens participate in the provision of security. Both the Ukrainian practice and the Nordic total defence experience demonstrate that civilian preparedness, grounded in social trust, shared responsibility and collective ownership, is not auxiliary to national defence but integral to a society’s capacity to deter and withstand aggression – whether in the form of full-scale war, as in Ukraine, or hybrid and grey-zone pressures increasingly visible across Europe.

As articulated by the Commander of the Finnish Defence Forces, total defence is defined by structured relations in which every ministry, public institution, private organisation and citizen has clearly specified duties in the event of crisis or war.³² Finland – population five million – maintains approximately 700,000 trained reservists ready for territorial defence, a reflection of a deeply internalised social contract.³³

Historically, total defence emerged in small Nordic states exposed to conventional threats during the Cold War and seeking to ensure national survival despite limited standing forces.³⁴ In its modern form, total defence constitutes a comprehensive security model integrating civilian and military resources, national and local authorities, the private sector and citizens into a whole-of-society, whole-of-government approach designed to prevent, absorb, respond to and recover from crises, hybrid operations and military aggression.³⁵ Civil defence forms the civilian pillar of this architecture, tasked with ensuring continuity of governance and essential services, while supporting the military effort. Implementation typically involves legal frameworks enabling the mobilisation of civilian assets, structured civil-military coordination, preparedness regulations, national and regional exercises, infrastructure protection planning and stockpiling.³⁶ Crucially, the threat perception underpinning

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³² Finland Government, *Security Strategy for Society*, 2025, <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/items/0126122a-1e8a-4ffa-9868-6286292efc01>.

³³ The Telegraph, “Russia Bombs American Factory in One of War’s Largest Attacks, Defying Trump Peace Efforts” (podcast), in *Ukraine: The Latest*, 21 August 2025, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6udyZnDmeAn6w7pY3yJ7tC>.

³⁴ Swedish Government website: *Defence Resolution 2025-2030*, <https://www.government.se/government-policy/total-defence/defence-resolution-2025-20302>.

³⁵ Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB) website: *Total Defence*, <https://www.dsb.no/en/risk-vulnerability-and-preparedness/Total-Defence>.

³⁶ Danish Ministry of Defence website: *Danish Defence Agreement 2024-2033*, <https://www.fmn.dk/en/topics/agreements-and-economy/agreement-for-danish-defence>.



The array of non-military capabilities that constitute civilian preparedness remains a national responsibility, rooted in local governance and societal participation

total defence has broadened: it now addresses complex hybrid risks, cyber disruption, disinformation, supply-chain vulnerabilities and sustained societal resilience.³⁷

The growing relevance of the civilian dimension in warfare – evident in Russia’s deliberate targeting of civilians and critical infrastructure in Ukraine, combined with grey-zone operations across Europe – has prompted a continent-wide debate in which societal preparedness is no longer conceived as post-crisis response but as a component of deterrence and continuity of governance. The array of non-military capabilities that constitute civilian preparedness remains a national responsibility, rooted in local governance and societal participation. It should be coordinated and, where appropriate, aligned with multi-domain command and control structures. Crucially, what is required at EU and NATO level is not the subordination of civilian functions to a military chain of command, but a framework of coordination and interoperability with multi-domain planning – ensuring that civilian and military responses can be prepared, exercised and activated in concert, without compromising democratic oversight or the autonomy of national authorities. This shift carries expanding policy implications at both EU and NATO levels, and increasingly also among non-EU NATO members such as the UK.

The publication of the Niinistö Report (prepared by the Commission on European Defence and Security, chaired by Sauli Niinistö, former President of Finland) in October 2024 marks a turning point in how preparedness is framed at an EU level. The report focuses on ways how the Union can “enhance Europe’s civilian and defence preparedness and readiness” across peacetime, crisis and war, identifying key actionable components: improving foresight and early warning; ensuring the Union and its member states can function “under all circumstances”;³⁸ enabling faster decision-making through structures “fit for purpose”;³⁹ and recognising citizens as active contributors to resilience.⁴⁰ The unifying concern is the continuity of governance and essential functions under pressure – decision-making, public administration, critical services, logistics, and communications. The report refers also to EU-NATO dynamics and interdependencies, as partial joint membership will require the two organisations to operate in parallel and in concert when facing

³⁷ Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CIMIC-COE), *Resilience through Civil Preparedness*, 2018, <https://www.cimic-coe.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/factsheet-resilience-through-civil-preparedness.pdf>.

³⁸ Niinistö, Sauli, *Safer Together. Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, Report to the President of the European Commission, October 2024, p. 3 and chapter 2, https://commission.europa.eu/media/59923_en.

³⁹ Ibid, chapter 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid. chapter 4.



The Niinistö Report's key contribution lies in shifting the policy debate from whether preparedness matters to how to organise it across civilian, military, private-sector and societal levels

major contingencies.⁴¹ The report's key contribution lies in shifting the policy debate from whether preparedness matters to how to organise it across civilian, military, private-sector and societal levels.

The European Preparedness Union Strategy of March 2025 seeks to translate this orientation into practice by embracing an all-hazards approach and identifying essential societal functions – from energy and health systems to food supply, digital infrastructure and public administration – as areas requiring structured resilience planning. The objective is not to build a new crisis-management bureaucracy, but to embed preparedness within national systems, supported by EU-level coordination tools, shared risk and threat assessments, targeted stockpiling and strengthened civil-military cooperation.⁴² The Strategy is intentionally aligned with the NATO Baseline Requirements for National Resilience, which unambiguously place the responsibility to ensure continuity of government, continuity of essential services, civil support to military operations, resilient energy and food supplies, robust communications and resilient transport networks on every single ally.⁴³ Both within the NATO and the EU framework this approach requires that national administrations are able to keep crisis-management and continuity-of-government structures operating, maintain utilities and payments, move civilians and materiel quickly, absorb civilian casualties, and communicate credibly under pressure. In line with national sovereignty, implementation is therefore carried out at the level of member states. However, because it depends on differing administrative capacity, sectorial legislation, resources and political direction, it is likely to result in structural delays and uneven levels of coherence, with direct implications for the effectiveness of the defence efforts.

Military mobility offers a clear illustration of this potential vulnerability. Although the issue has been prioritised both as a flagship EU project under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework since 2017⁴⁴ and as a core area of EU-NATO cooperation in the 2018 and 2023 Joint Declarations,⁴⁵ cross-border transit of allied forces within the EU can still take up to 45 days to

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 50.

⁴² European Commission and ECHO, *European Preparedness Union Strategy* (JOIN/2025/130), 26 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0130>.

⁴³ Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CIMIC-COE) website: "Seven Baseline Requirements", in *CIMIC Handbook*, <https://www.cimic-coe.org/handbook-entries/welcome-to-the-cimic-handbook/vii-resilience/7-2-seven-baseline-requirements>.

⁴⁴ Council of the EU, *Declarations on PESCO Projects*, 11 December 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32020/draft-pesco-declaration-clean-10122017.pdf>.

⁴⁵ EU and NATO, *Chairman's Statement on NATO-Ukraine following the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council with Georgia and Ukraine at the Brussels Summit*, 12 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156623.htm; EU and NATO, *Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation*, 10 January 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_210549.htm.



Cross-border transit of allied forces within the EU can still take up to 45 days to authorise, depending on national administrative procedures

authorise, depending on national administrative procedures.⁴⁶ Divergent legal frameworks slow authorisation, while infrastructure bottlenecks and inconsistent planning standards delay execution, resulting in reinforcement timelines that remain misaligned with operational requirements. These challenges have fed into the current debate on the administrative, legal and financial reforms needed to strengthen and speed up the EU's capacity to act in major crises and, specifically, on the need for the Union to approve a Preparedness Act to enable the mobilisation of industrial capacity, the safeguarding of supply chains and the protection of critical functions under stress.⁴⁷

The United Kingdom's Strategic Defence Review (2025) likewise introduces a full chapter on civilian preparedness and societal resilience, defined as a "concerted, collective effort" involving industry, the financial sector, civil society, academia, education and local communities, and centred on government continuity, essential economic functions and public order under prolonged strain.⁴⁸ Similarly, the document recommends the adoption of a Defence Readiness Bill to grant government additional powers to mobilise industry and reserves when required.⁴⁹ Taken together, these provisions indicate a shared European direction: the defence of the continent is no longer conceived solely as the responsibility of armed forces, but as a task that reaches across society – "nations go to war, not just armed forces".⁵⁰

Notably, the Review stresses the need for a "national conversation" to explain security threats, future risks, and the role of citizens in national resilience, acknowledging that decades of expeditionary operations and shrinking personnel numbers have contributed to a declining public awareness of defence.⁵¹ This brings into focus the role of strategic communication, which is not an adjunct to civilian preparedness but one of its enabling conditions.

Public attitudes toward security and defence vary considerably across Europe in view of differing historical experiences and political culture. Surveys show broad consensus that Russia poses a direct security threat to the continent and that the EU should play a stronger role in defence. Yet preferences diverge on how security

⁴⁶ Šatūnas, Simonas, intervention at ECFR Conference "Preventing War in Europe. Swift Action for Peace", Rome, 14 October 2025.

⁴⁷ Boone, Laurence and Nicu Popescu, "Better Firefighting: Readyng Europe for an Age between War and Peace", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, November 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=128790>; Antunes, Tiago, "Law of Duty: A Proposal for a European Preparedness Act", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, May 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=138233>.

⁴⁸ UK Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review 2025. Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad*, 2 June 2025, p. 87, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad>.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 90.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 87.



Differences in European threat perception and public attitudes toward defence are strongly shaped by historical memory and strategic culture

and defence provisions should be organised. Conscription, defence spending, military assistance to Ukraine, and the forms of European coordination enjoy varying levels of support across countries.⁵²

Differences in European threat perception and public attitudes toward defence are not necessarily ideological but are strongly shaped by historical memory and strategic culture. Societies that experienced Soviet domination or remain geographically exposed to Russia generally display higher awareness of security risks, while those farther west often register lower salience unless sustained communication makes threats legible. These asymmetries interact with the information environment. Russian influence strategies rely less on coherent persuasion than on volume, speed and narrative saturation, exploiting high-frequency, low-fidelity messaging to unsettle consensus.⁵³ Where domestic communication is fragmented or episodic, such campaigns more readily convert strategic questions into polarising cultural or distributive debates. By contrast, where authorities articulate security risks clearly, explain the purpose of defence measures, and involve civil actors in the communication process, public trust and resilience are significantly stronger.⁵⁴ In this sense, communication is not an external accompaniment to preparedness but a structural component of it: shared understanding of the threat is what enables societies to sustain collective defence efforts over time.

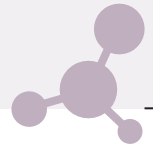
A second factor is the role of external actors in exploiting these communication gaps. Russia does not pursue a single ideological line in Europe; rather, its strategic communication is opportunistic, supporting political forces – whether left or right – whose messages weaken consensus on sanctions, defence assistance, or alignment with NATO and the EU. Research shows that the Kremlin's objective is not to advance a coherent political project, but to amplify internal divisions and erode strategic resolve.⁵⁵ Studies of Russian information operations describe this as a strategy of creating multiple centres

⁵² European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 103 - Spring 2025*, May 2025, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372>; EEAS, *EU Survey Record High Trust in the EU and Strong Support for Common Defence*, 29 May 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/453099_en; Debomy, Daniel, "A Devalued United States, a Desire for European Defence and Consolidated Support for Ukraine", in *Jacques Delors Institute Blog*, July 2025, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/a-devalued-united-states-a-desire-for-european-defence-and-consolidated-support-for-ukraine>; Smith, Matthew, "Where Does Western Europe Stand on Ukraine, Donald Trump and National Defence?", in *YouGov Articles*, 6 March 2025, <https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/51741>; Puglierin, Jana et al., "Transatlantic Twilight: European Public Opinion and the Long Shadow of Trump", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, February 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=132992>.

⁵³ Paul, Christopher and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model", in *RAND Perspectives*, 2016, <http://www.rand.org/t/PE198>.

⁵⁴ EUvsDisinfo, *Guide for Public Communicators on Pro-Kremlin Disinformation*, January 2020, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/uploads/2020/04/EEAS_EUVSDISINFO-Handbook.pdf.

⁵⁵ Shekhovtsov, Anton, *Russia and the Western Far Right. Tango Noir*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018.



National sensitivities need to be taken seriously when shaping public messages if EU-wide cohesion is to be strengthened at a time when difficult decisions are required

of doubt, rather than persuading citizens of a single alternative narrative.⁵⁶ Limited or inconsistent public understanding provides a fertile environment for such efforts, enabling strategic debates to be recast as cultural, identity or economic disputes. For this reason, communication coherence is not a secondary political concern, but a condition for sustaining societal resilience and civilian preparedness.

National sensitivities therefore need to be taken seriously when shaping public messages if EU-wide cohesion is to be strengthened at a time when difficult decisions are required. The controversy surrounding the initial branding of the Commission's Re-Arm Europe proposal illustrates this dynamic: the language, perceived as unnecessarily martial, triggered resistance due to the political and cultural connotations of rearmament. Similarly, highly performative rhetoric in domestic debates – such as Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's remark to French President Emmanuel Macron to “Put your helmet on, your jacket, your rifle and you go to Ukraine”⁵⁷ – does not, in itself, dictate policy outcomes, but triggers the emotional register of the discussion, narrowing the space for informed deliberation.

Again, the Ukrainian lesson is extremely relevant. Ukrainians continue to reproach their authorities for not preparing society early and openly enough for the possibility of a full-scale invasion in the winter of 2022.⁵⁸ Citizens cannot contribute to resilience if they do not understand the stakes. Europe already faces decisions that demand long-term investment and patience at both national and individual levels. If these are to be sustained democratically, they must be underpinned by coherent communication, shared understanding, and public trust – conditions without which civilian preparedness cannot take root.

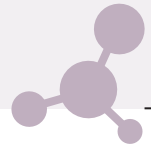
CONCLUSIONS

“Europe is in a fight. A fight for a continent that is whole and at peace. For a free and independent Europe,” declared European Commission President von der Leyen in her 2025 State of the Union Address. Delivered in the immediate aftermath of the Russian drones' incursion into Polish territory, her message was far-reaching. It embraced “a world in which many major powers are either ambivalent or openly hostile to Europe”, a world of imperial ambitions and imperial wars,

⁵⁶ Paul, Christopher and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model”, cit.; EUvsDisinfo, *Guide for Public Communicators on Pro-Kremlin Disinformation*, cit.

⁵⁷ “France Summons Italian Ambassador over Challenge to Macron on Ukraine”, in *Reuters*, 23 August 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-summons-italian-ambassador-over-challenge-macron-ukraine-2025-08-23>.

⁵⁸ Colin Lebedev, Anna, *Ukraine: la force des faibles*, cit., p. 35.



Achieving defence self-reliance is an urgent task for Europe

in which “dependencies are ruthlessly weaponised”.⁵⁹

Despite its dwindling economy, Russia is set on a path of protracted confrontation with Europe, preparing for a permanent state of war, with Ukraine only the first front.⁶⁰ Should a ceasefire in Ukraine be achieved, Moscow would be able to reconstitute its military capacity and launch a large-scale attack against a neighbouring country within five to ten years, as various national intelligence services predict. Long-term rearmament plans further point to the Kremlin’s preparations for a potential future conventional war against NATO.⁶¹ Yet hybrid aggressions are already taking place – targeting critical infrastructure across the continent, from undersea cables sabotage in the Baltic Sea to cyber-attacks on the UK National Health Service – and are expected to increase.⁶² Russia remains a clear and present danger for Europe, but it is not the only one in an international context marked by power competition, where the reliability of longstanding allies can no longer be taken for granted.

Achieving defence self-reliance is an urgent task for Europe – demanding, but not impossible. It requires above all a significant shift in mindset, one that embraces a more comprehensive understanding of security, building at the same time the muscles, the brain, and the bones of the European defence. Industrial modernisation and increased military capabilities are essential to fill the gaps left by years of post-Cold War underfunding, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. As the war in Ukraine demonstrates, in increasingly complex and interdependent societies, security is a much broader objective: it encompasses energy independence, connectivity, financial and economic structures, robust infrastructures and social protection systems.⁶³ It also entails societal cohesion in the face of emergencies and resilience against disinformation and the risks of polarisation. At the core of these efforts lie policy harmonisation and relentless coordination, based on a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach that brings together military and civilian sectors, enhances effectiveness, and ensures full preparedness. The establishment of a European multidomain command-and-control system and

⁵⁹ European Commission, *State of the Union Address 2025*, 10 September 2025, https://commission.europa.eu/node/42684_en.

⁶⁰ Lucas, Edward, “Wake Up West, Russia’s Ready for Perpetual War”, in *The Times*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/wake-up-west-russia-war-donald-trump-5kscn3w32>.

⁶¹ Institute for the Study of War, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, July 22, 2025, p. 27, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-22-2025>.

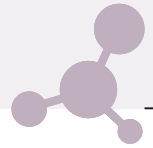
⁶² Verhelst, Koen, “Putin Is Stepping Up ‘Aggressive’ Hybrid Attacks on Germany, Spy Chief Warns”, in *Politico EU*, 21 July 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=6938289>.

⁶³ Letta, Enrico, “European Security Is a Much Broader Objective than Defensive Military Effectiveness”, in *Le Monde*, 11 March 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/03/11/enrico-letta-european-security-is-a-much-broader-objective-than-defensive-military-effectiveness_6739031_23.html.



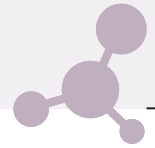
the development of national strategies to foster greater societal participation in defence and security stand as the two immediate priorities to reach these objectives.

By focusing

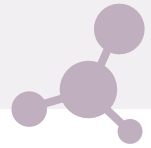


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