Editorial

Europe's Defence Trilemma

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1 INTRODUCTION

The second Trump administration has sent geopolitical shifts in a tailspin and pushed the EU in reaching an inflection point for defence integration. Demand for what the public perceives as a 'common' defence policy has never been greater. According to the Winter 2025 Eurobarometer poll on public opinion in the European Union, it is the Number 1 priority.[1] This solidifies a trend which shows that close to 80% of Europeans are in favour of a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) among Member States; and that over 70% agree that the EU needs to reinforce its capacity to produce military equipment.[2] If political parties agree on one thing, then it is that the way to address citizens' anxieties is by moving from words to deeds and implementing an agenda that restores a more robust sense of security.

The European policy response has so far primarily consisted in committing more money for defence and the development of instruments to boost joint production and procurement. Yet, as defence industrial integration gets underway, policy developments on the EU's operational side stagnate. The energy to mobilize a 'reassurance force' for Ukraine is not channelled through the CSDP but in the hands of a few European states acting in a coalition of the willing outside the institutional structures of the EU. This bifurcation is hindering the quest for strategic autonomy, delays which the EU can ill afford at a time when it is facing an existential threat from Russia and the US is undermining NATO's philosophy of deterrence.

If the EU Member States are serious about the 'progressive framing of a common defence policy that might lead to a common defence' (Article 24(1) TEU) then they will have to solve the following conundrum: cede the

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1 European Parliament, Eurobarometer, Winter Survey 2025, EB 103.1.

2 European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 101, Spring 2024.

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exercise of sovereignty over parts of their national militaries, accept a substantial impact on other policy areas or tax hikes, or compromise on what weapons systems to buy and from whom.

2 EVOLVING THREAT LANDSCAPE

Russia's war against Ukraine barrels on, already for more than a decade. It is a dangerous illusion[3] to assume that the Russo-Ukrainian war is just a conflict between Slavic brethren and that Putin will stop once he has conquered 'Little Russia'.[4] The Kremlin has left no doubt, whether by its statements or actions, as to its objectives: to regain control of Central and Eastern Europe and to restore a Yalta-style European order.[5] Neo-imperialist Russia is at war with the EU and NATO. Therefore, Europe's security is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine.

Russia's economy is in full war mode. Hit by Western sanctions, it is being propped up by China, which is buying its energy, providing an alternative to the US dollar, and replacing Western supplies, from electronics and other dual-use goods to – allegedly – weapons.[6] President Putin is spending well over a third of his country's budget on the military (SIPRI, 2025).[7] In a period of three months Russia can produce more weapons and more ammunition than the EU Member States collectively can in twelve.

Sabotage conducted or ordered by Kremlin operatives happens all over the continent and the low-risk high-reward attacks on critical infrastructures in the Baltic Sea may well be replicated elsewhere. The military intelligence agencies of Germany and Denmark have openly warned that Russia could test Europe's readiness to defend itself in three to five years' time.[8] This has led High Representative Kallas to say that this 'heavily militarized country presents an existential threat to all of us'.[9] NATO Secretary General

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3 K. Schlögel, *Europe Refuses to See That Vladimir Putin Is in Fact Waging a War Against it and Against the West* (Le Monde 1 Mar. 2025).

4 S. Plokhy, *Russia Thought It Was Invading the Ukraine of 2014* (World Today 2 Jun. 2023).

5 *See* e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Draft Documents on Legal Security Guarantees from the United States and NATO* (17 Dec. 2021).

6 *See* e.g., N. Sher, *Behind the Scenes: China's Increasing Role in Russia's Defense Industry* (Carnegie Politika 6 May 2024); and A. Malenko, Y. Dysa & T. Balmforth, *Zelenskiy Accuses China of Supplying Russia With Weapons* (Reuters 17 Apr. 2025).

7 J. Cooper, *Preparing for a Fourth Year of War: Military Spending in Russia's Budget for 2025*, Sipri Insights on Peace and Security No. 2025/04 (Apr. 2025).

8 T. Dunlop, *Germany Warns Russia May Be Preparing Attack on NATO* (UKDJ 29 Mar. 2025); and Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, *Opdateret vurdering af truslen fra Rusland mod Rigsfæl- lesskabet* (9 Feb. 2025).

9 European External Action Service, *Defence: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the Annual Conference of the European Defence Agency* (21 Jan. 2025).

Mark Rutte has gone even further: 'I am telling you very clearly: we must prepare for war. This is the best way to avoid war'.[10]

Shoring up Europe's defences is invariably declared a priority. This sense of urgency is reflected in the European Council's Strategic Agenda 2024–29 and in the conclusions of a series of extraordinary and regular summits in the first half of 2025: 'Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its repercussions for European and global security in a changing environment constitute an existential challenge for the European Union'.[11] Beneath the innocuous reference to 'a changing environment' lie deep worries about the US security commitment to Europe.

The sanctity of NATO's famous Article 5 is being threatened from within the Alliance, by the 'indispensable nation'.[12] For eight decades, the US has provided Europe with a military shield, both nuclear and conventional. However, the arrangements underpinning this *Pax Americana* are becoming increasingly fragile in view of proposals to withdraw thousands of US troops and kit from the continent and halt joint exercises with allies.[13] Ahead of the June 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, the White House had not yet told its NATO allies how far it intended to pull back its force commitments in Europe, but that it would certainly start later this year and in consultation with allies to avoid leaving any security gaps.[14] A recent report suggested that it might take ten or twelve years for Europe to replace key US military capabilities.[15]

One doesn't have to share the loathing by top Make America Great Again (MAGA) officials of European 'free-loading'[16] to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that Europeans are not ready to properly defend themselves – let alone others – without American engagement. While the White House has given no indication that it would withdraw the nuclear umbrella, contradictions in President Trump's statements and policies have shaken European leaders' faith in the US commitment to extended deterrence. How else to explain the Polish and German interest in President Macron's offer to spread the French nuclear umbrella to other parts of the EU?

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10 S. Prengel, *Nato-Boss: Deutschland wird mehr zahlen müssen* (Bild 1 Feb. 2025).

11 European Council, *Conclusions* (6 Mar. 2025), point 4.

12 M. K. Albright, *Interview on NBC-TV 'The Today Show' With Matt Lauer* (19 Feb. 1998), as released by the Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State.

13 G. Lubold, D. De Luce & C. Kube, *Pentagon Considering Proposal to Cut Thousands of Troops from Europe, Officials Say* (NBC News 8 Apr. 2025).

14 A. Sytas, *US to Start European Troop Withdrawal Discussions Later This Year, US NATO Ambassador Says* (Reuters 16 May 2025).

15 K.-H. Röhl & H. Bardt, *Mehr Verteidigung mit Weniger USA?*, Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft, Policy Paper IW 7/25 (Apr. 2025).

16 A. Roth, *Stunning Signal Leak Reveals Depths of Trump Administration's Loathing of Europe* (The Guardian 25 Mar. 2025).

While some of the Trump administration's pronouncements may be softened or reversed, the longer-term direction of travel is clear: Trump wants Europe to not just share the burden for security of the old continent with the US; he wants to shift the burden to Europe so that US capabilities that will have been replaced can be moved elsewhere,[17] mainly to Asia in an attempt to contain arch-rival China, but also to the border with Mexico to destroy the drug cartels and other trafficking networks.

Upping the ante, Trump first adopted a more conciliatory approach towards President Putin, raising suspicions about an American alignment with Russia over ending the war in Ukraine. Trump and his acolytes then suspended all military aid to Ukraine, framed President Zelensky in a widely televised dressing-down at the White House and subsequently resumed much-needed intelligence-sharing to cajole Ukraine into making concessions for a separate mineral deal with Washington, supposedly as a step towards a US-brokered ceasefire agreement with Russia.

In parallel, the Trump administration has sown doubt as to how much damage it would be prepared to inflict on NATO, by questioning the US commitment to mutual defence and by not ruling out an attack of other NATO members like Canada (the so-called fifty-first state) or Denmark (over Greenland). With allies like these, who needs enemies?

Europe cannot afford to wait another couple of years to see whether Trump's threats will hold. With the concentration of executive power around the Presidency, a purge of the administration to make it loyal to the MAGA agenda, big tech (and thus big investment money) brought to heel, and attempts to muzzle the American press, academia, and law firms, the liberal-democratic US of yesteryear will not return anytime soon, irrespective of whether the Democrats make gains in the mid-term elections of November 2026. Even if Trump is constitutionally blocked from a third mandate as president, his brand of 'competitive authoritarianism'[18] is expected to be around for the next decade and may still be repowered if a MAGA heir like Vice-President JD Vance assumes the highest office. The editorial board of the Financial Times summarized it aptly: 'allies and erstwhile friends must banish (any) self-soothing thoughts. America has turned. Donald Trump's abandonment of allies is real and will endure'.[19]

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[17] P. Hegseth, *Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)* (Brussels 12 Feb. 2025).

[18] S. Levitsky & L. A. Way, *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*, 13(2) J. Democracy 51–65 (2002).

[19] Editorial Board, *America Has Turned on Its Friends* (Financial Times 21 Feb. 2025).

3 INDISPENSABLE NATO?

Despite the sharp deterioration in transatlantic relations, there is still a remarkable degree of consensus across Europe that there is no alternative to NATO. In its plans to ramp up Europe's defence readiness by 2030, the European Commission and the High Representative stick with NATO.[20] Even France, standard-bearer of European strategic autonomy,[21] regards the Alliance as the bedrock of collective defence.[22] No other body has the command structures, the planning capabilities, or the strategic culture of operating together to defend the continent.

If the US were to consistently frustrate common action through NATO or withdraw from the Alliance altogether, then the bulk of the other thirty-one allies (twenty-three EU Member States, four EU candidate countries, and strategically aligned Iceland, Norway, UK, and Canada) would no doubt try and reconstitute a NATO *minus*, benefitting from the long-bred strategic doctrine and procedures which they share. Whether they'd succeed depends on many variables, but if they did then they might even consider other states joining (e.g., Ukraine). While this scenario is no longer unthinkable, no political capital is spent on its development.

In an effort to keep the US wedded to NATO, leaders of European allies are committing to higher defence spending targets and officials from countries that pack the most military punch have begun discussing informally how to shift the burden from the US to Europe in an orderly fashion over the next five to ten years.[23] Optimists say that if European capitals can over that period provide all the forces required to implement NATO's regional defence plans to bolster its eastern flank, that would automatically lessen America's burden and ease Washington into accepting a stronger European pillar within NATO. But few want to precipitate 'the very thing they want to avoid: American disinterest in NATO and disengagement from European defence'.[24] According to the chair of the NATO Military Committee, a realistic scenario of burden-shifting would entail that Europe takes responsibility for regional deterrence, mainly with conventional and rapid reaction capabilities, while the US continues to provide air power, space capabilities and the nuclear deterrent.[25]

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[20] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, JOIN(2025) 120 final (19 Mar. 2025).

[21] *See* N. Helwig & V. Sinkkonen, *Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term*, 27 (Special Issue) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 1–20 (2022), doi: 10.54648/EERR2022009.

[22] S. Kauffmann, *Penser l'impensable – l'OTAN sans les Américains – , c'est le nouvel et troublant exercice auquel se livrent les Européens* (Le Monde 2 Apr. 2025).

[23] H. Foy & B. Hall, *European Military Powers Work on 5–10 Year Plan to Replace US in Nato* (Financial Times 20 Mar. 2025).

[24] N. Gnesotto, *Defence 25: Thinking Outside of the Box*, Notre Europe, Policy Paper No. 308 (Jan. 2025).

[25] G. Cavo Dragone, *Speech at the Paris Defence and Strategy Forum*, Académie de défense de l'Ecole militaire (12 Mar. 2025).

The evolving threat landscape demands that European duplication of NATO capabilities be seen not as inefficiency, but as a necessary buffer against uncertainty. Helpfully, NATO itself no longer views an enhanced European defence capacity as inherently duplicative, but increasingly as necessary burden-sharing – especially if transatlantic cohesion weakens in the coming years.[26] Yet, while many talk breezily about creating a 'European pillar within NATO', few can say what it means in practice or even whether it would be possible without Washington's full consent.

4 EUROPE'S ROADMAP FOR DEFENCE INDUSTRIAL READINESS

The incoming German Chancellor Friedrich Merz took everyone by surprise when he said on the night of his election victory on 23 February 2025 that his priority was 'independence' from Trump's America.[27] The Christian Democrat leader subsequently hatched a game-changing coalition deal with the Social Democratic Party to relax the constitutional debt brake and loosen fiscal rules to allow Berlin to borrow hundreds of billions for defence and infrastructure investment.[28] Given Germany's economic heft and its armed forces' focus on territorial defence, this sea change in fiscal policy could mean that the country becomes the bedrock of European security and defence.

Across Europe, national defence spending has been steadily increasing over the past few years. Going by the latest publicly available figures, twenty-two NATO allies were expected in 2024 to meet or exceed the target of investing at least 2% of GDP in defence, compared to only three allies in 2014 (US, UK, Greece). Over the past decade, European allies (and Canada) steadily increased their collective investment in defence – from 1.43% of their combined GDP in 2014, to 2.02% in 2024.[29] Croatia, Italia, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain failed to meet that threshold, whereas Belgium and Canada were expected to also fall below the second agreed target by spending below 20% on new equipment. The laggards have all promised to meet the agreed targets before the end of 2025. Meanwhile, a new pledge at The Hague raises the bar to 3.5% spent on defence and 1.5% on wider security-related items. Only Poland and the Baltic states currently meet such spending commitments.

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[26] R. D. Hooker, Jr. & M. Molot, *Building a Stronger Europe: A Companion to the Belfer Center Task Force Report on a New Transatlantic Bargain* 8–9 (Harvard Kennedy School Feb. 2025).

[27] T. Ross & N. Nöstlinger, *Germany's Merz vows 'Independence' from Trump's America, Warning NATO May Soon Be Dead* (Politico 23 Feb. 2025).

[28] A.-S. Chassany and L. Pitel, *Germany's Friedrich Merz Strikes 'Game-Changing' Deal to Boost Defence Spending* (Financial Times 4 Mar. 2025).

[29] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2024)* (17 Jun. 2024).

Recognizing that Europe's security is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine, the heads of state or government have at several intervals stressed the need to substantially increase expenditure on Europe's security and defence and called on the Commission to recommend common actions.

Before the end of her first term, President von der Leyen had already commissioned several reports to assess the situation and advise on the way forward. The Letta report from April 2024 called for a 'radical transformation' of the EU's industrial capacity and the creation of a common market in the fields of security and defence.[30] In September 2024, the Draghi report called the major investments needed to plug shortfalls in the defence industrial sphere an 'insurance cost' for Europe to become more strategically autonomous.[31] The former president of the European Central Bank recommended an annual investment boost of EUR 800 billion to tackle the challenges of decarbonization, digitization and defence, while maintaining Europe's global competitiveness. Draghi's message was clear: either find the money or face the slow agony of relative decline. In complementary fashion, the former Finnish President Niinistö at the end of October 2024 advised on how to join up the existing administrative, budgetary and operational instruments to bolster civilian and defence readiness in a 'whole of EU' approach.[32]

The need for an integrated approach was underlined in the White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030,[33] produced jointly by the new High Representative, Kaja Kallas, and Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius. Published in mid-March 2025 to mark the Commission's 100 days in office, the White Paper presents a quick scan of global threats and politely notes that the US is 'reducing its historical role as a primary security guarantor' at a time when the Russian war economy is expected to 'surpass Member States' defence spending in purchasing power parity terms', and when 'authoritarian' China presents both a 'systemic' and 'systematic' challenge.[34] While the document offers a glimpse into the EU institutions' wider geopolitical thinking, for instance on the dangers of a potential conflict over Taiwan, it doesn't pretend to be a real strategy which establishes priority actions with accompanying trade-offs across various scenarios. It rather doubles down on the maxim that Europe's security and defence is inseparably linked to Ukraine and requires immediate action. On this basis, the

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30 E. Letta, *Much More Than a Market – Speed, Security, Solidarity* (Council of the EU Apr. 2024).

31 M. Draghi, *The Future of European. A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe (Part A)* 55 (European Commission 9 Sep. 2024).

32 S. Niinistö, *Report: Safer Together – Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness* (European Commission 30 Oct. 2024).

33 White Paper, *supra* n. 20.

34 *Ibid*.

White Paper lays down a roadmap to re-arm Europe through a EUR 800 billion 'once-in-a-generation surge in European defence investment'.[35]

The reference here is to the Commission's 'ReArm Europe' initiative,[36] which was endorsed by the European Council on 6 March 2025 and renamed 'Readiness 2030' after complaints that the initial label was excessively charged and might alienate citizens.[37] This plan to complement national defence upgrades is built on five key pillars:

(1) A landmark relaxation of eurozone fiscal rules to allow greater defence spending without breaching EU budget constraints.
(2) The creation of a new EUR 150 bn joint EU loan instrument called 'Security Action for Europe (SAFE)' to finance strategic defence capabilities – drones, anti-drone systems, cyber and missile defence.[38]
(3) A revision of the EU's cohesion policy and a redirection of post-Covid recovery and resiliency funds towards military investments.[39]
(4) An expansion of the European Investment Bank's mandate to support the defence industry.
(5) The mobilization of private capital through the Capital Markets Union to fund security-related projects.

These ideas come on top of multiple, but mostly small-scale initiatives made during two earlier rounds of EU defence policy innovations over the past decade. Firstly, the post-2014 creation of a Commission-managed European Defence Fund (EDF), with EUR eight bn allocated under the current multiannual financial framework (MFF; 2021–2027); the launch of seventy-five industrial and logistical support projects under the most populated of enhanced cooperation formats provided for in the Treaties (PESCO); and a semester-like Coordinated Annual Review for Defence (CARD) mechanism, also managed by the European Commission, to assess progress in the implementation of Member States' capability development plans. Secondly, the post-2022 adoption of the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), worth EUR 500 mn resp. EUR 300 mn drawn from the general budget of the EU for a period of two years to co-finance the production of ammunition

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35 *Ibid*.
36 Press statement by President von der Leyen on the defence package, Brussels, 4 Mar. 2025.
37 J. Liboreiro, *Brussels rebrands 'Rearm Europe' Plan After Backlash from Leaders of Italy and Spain* (Euronews 21 Mar. 2025).
38 European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Regulation Establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) Through the Reinforcement of European Defence Industry Instrument*, COM(2025) 122 final (19 Mar. 2025).
39 European Commission, *A Modernised Cohesion Policy: The Mid-Term Review*, COM(2025) 163 final (1 Apr. 2025).

resp. partially reimburse joint purchases involving consortia of at least three Member States.[40]

While the latest initiatives and pledges in military expenditures are dearly needed after years of austerity, Europe cannot simply spend its way out of this crisis. With the large sums of money being committed by Member States comes the temptation to spend domestically. But accumulating national defence expenditures does not contribute to a common European defence and does very little to improve the EU's standing on the geopolitical plane. Also, the Commission's proposal to relax fiscal rules will not necessarily help countries with high deficits and debts like France, Italy, or Spain to borrow more. As part of the ReArm Europe initiative, the proposed EUR 150 bn loan instrument may in fact be too small and not financially favourable enough for governments to make a big difference to Europe's deeply fragmented defence market.[41]

This raises the question whether the EU needs new institutions with much more firepower to accelerate defence procurement and promote the consolidation and scaling up of Europe's defence industry. It is of course true that the EU's institutional framework has been reinforced over the past few years. Acting under the authority of the High Representative, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has occupied a greater role in the policy initiation and external representation on defence matters. Its managing directorate for peace, security and defence policy has ballooned and the EEAS now also includes a permanent headquarters (euphemistically called Military Planning and Conduct Capability – MPCC) for non-executive CSDP missions and operations under the EU Military Staff. The European Commission has added a Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), headed by its own Commissioner. On the side of the European Parliament (EP), the relevant sub-committee of the Foreign Affairs Committee was elevated to a fully-fledged committee on Security and Defence (SEDE) at the beginning of 2025.

This institutional upgrade has been accompanied by a regulatory trend. Using its competence to support EU countries' industrial policy, the Commission has employed Article 173(3) TFEU as the main legal basis for the adoption of regulations through the ordinary legislative procedure (with the Council deciding by qualified majority vote – QMV). In 2024, the executive proposed a European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) as a gap filler between 2025 and the next MFF (2028–2035), providing EUR 1.5 bn in new funding to beef up the

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[40] *See* e.g., F. Fabbrini, *European Defence Union ASAP: The Act in Support of Ammunition Production and the Development of EU Defence Capabilities in Response to the war in Ukraine*, 29(1) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 67–84 (2024), doi: 10.54648/EERR2024004.

[41] *See* e.g., D. Chinn & H. Lavandier, *Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for European Defense Spending* (McKinsey & Company 19 Dec. 2022).

European Defence Technological and Innovation Base (EDTIB) and that of Ukraine (cf. Article 212 TFEU as additional legal basis) via the EU budget.[42] More structurally, EDIP is designed to deepen the Commission's new role established through the temporary ASAP and EDIRPA, allowing it to intervene in a number of regulatory areas and in defence planning in times of supply crisis, thereby conferring new powers on the Commission like those pioneered under the emergency response Covid-19 vaccine strategy and replicated in the EU's Chips Act and Critical Raw Materials Act. As such, EDIP is intended to:

- Strengthen the European Commission's capacity to support, coordinate and rationalize Member States' demand for military equipment vis-à-vis the defence industry.
- Enable the Commission to negotiate defence contracts (which it could co-finance) on behalf of groups of Member States.
- Give the executive an unprecedented role in selecting defence projects of 'common interest' that could be co-financed by the EU.
- Authorize the Commission, in exceptional circumstances and under certain strict conditions agreed with the Member States concerned, to impose priorities on defence companies in terms of military production and critical components, even going so far as to impose sanctions if necessary.

A new Defence Industrial Readiness Board (DIRB) will assist the Commission and be responsible for, inter alia, supply chain surveillance and monitoring, proposing that the Council activate a state of supply crisis, advising and assessing emergency measures, facilitating coordination action between the Commission and the Member States, and identifying funding priority areas taking into account Member States' capability development plans. Based on Articles 114(1), 173(3), 212(2) and 322(1) TFEU, the DIRB will operate along supranational lines. Even if it is said to 'complement' the European Defence Agency (EDA), the DIRB would eclipse the Agency in a state of supply crisis – which may come sooner than Member States wish for if China, for instance, blocks the supply of certain rare earths and critical materials needed in the European defence industry. Sat under the CSDP, the EDA runs along intergovernmental lines, which has dampened its effectiveness. With its limited staff and budget, reluctance of (big) Member States' defence ministries to cooperate, and NATO's refusal to exchange information about its planning processes, the Agency has been unable to play an impactful

[42] European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing the European Defence Industry Programme and a Framework of Measures to Ensure the Timely Availability and Supply of Defence Products ('EDIP')*, COM(2024) 150 final (5 Mar. 2024).

role in terms of fostering more research and development (R&D) and procurement of military equipment.[43] Acting under the authority of DG DEFIS, the DIRB may well become the channel through which to functionally spill over and supranationalize certain tasks hitherto managed by the EDA. The rationale to use the Community method in arranging EU support for Member States' R&D and joint procurement is indeed strong.

Predictably, the draft regulation has provoked grumblings in some European capitals which see EDIP as a power grab by the Commission to steer defence industrial production, also outside crisis situations for the financing of activities aimed at supporting the deployment of 'European defence projects of common interest'. But given the sense of emergency over threats to Europe's security, there is little tampering to be expected with the text of the draft regulation. The EP has endorsed it at the end of April 2025 and the Member States are expected follow suit. To be sure, the extension of Covid-era powers to the Commission in the area of defence would require appropriate levels of transparency and accountability.[44]

Central to its White Paper of 19 March 2025 is a 'porcupine strategy' for Ukraine to defend itself and deter Russia – also from attacking EU Member States. The surest way of quickly filling critical gaps is indeed to link Ukraine to EU initiatives to develop defence capabilities and integrate the respective industries. Accelerating the candidate country's defence industrial integration isn't just Brussels' geostrategic response to Russia's war of aggression. It also serves the EU's self-enlightened interest:

> Ukraine has become the world's leading defence and technology innovation laboratory. Closer cooperation between the Ukrainian and European defence industries will enable first-hand knowledge transfer on how to best use innovation to achieve military superiority on the battlefield, including on rapidly scaling up production and updating existing capabilities.[45]

The Commission and High Representative are not shy in stating that Ukraine and all EU Member States need the capabilities required to conduct the 'entire spectrum of military tasks', ranging from providing a minimum of two million rounds of large-calibre artillery ammunition, air-defence systems, missiles and drones to key enablers like space assets and services to replace American capacities for intelligence-sharing, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

The fact that nuclear capabilities are left out of the White Paper is an understandable omission given the limitations of nuclear weapon states to share their

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43 *See* L. Scazzieri, *Towards an EU 'Defence Union'?*, CER Policy Brief (30 Jan. 2025).

44 *See* C. Moser & S. Blockmans, *The Untapped Role of the European Parliament in Common Security and Defence Policy*, ZaoeRV – Heidelberg J. Int'l L. 585–637 (2024). *See also* Case T-36/23, *Stevi and The New York Times v. Commission*, ECLI:EU:T:2025:483.

45 White Paper, *supra* n. 20, at 12.

command and control, neutral states' objections, and the EU's minor civilian competences in this field – Europe's nuclear trilemma.[46] Arguably, the extension of France's nuclear umbrella to the rest of the EU will only happen on terms acceptable by Paris.[47]

The White Paper does not deal in hyperbole. It offers realistic suggestions on how to enhance defence readiness by working through the EU institutions. Indeed, the EU is uniquely placed to harmonize standards (cf. Defence Omnibus Simplification Proposal),[48] stimulate joint production and facilitate joint procurement. Yet, adding up all the elements of the White Paper's shopping list of military capabilities amounts to the creation of – all but in name – a strategically autonomous European defence industrial pillar. Gone are the days of worrying about duplicating capabilities with those on the other side of the Atlantic.[49]

Contrary to the Trump administration's isolationist agenda and untrustworthiness towards its neighbours, friends, and allies, the EU is promoting an 'open architecture combined with variable geometry' to enhance its security. The White Paper implicitly encourages like-minded states which don't (yet) have a security and defence partnership with the EU (cf. the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and India) to agree one quickly, lest their companies miss out on the fresh subsidies that the EU plans to dole out. American companies, however, are implicitly frozen out of the current spending plans. This is a small victory for Paris, which continues to insist that the new money should primarily 'buy European'.

While the suggestion that the EU should 'de-risk' from the US would have been politically too explosive to include in the White Paper, it's nevertheless counterintuitive for the Commission and High Representative to suggest that the EU will 'continue to build on the deep and extensive transatlantic supply chain'.[50] Now would have been the moment to push for the rebalancing of the defence industrial relationship and spell out clearly what it means to make it 'mutually beneficial'. With the growing weight of an increasingly integrated defence market, from which the US benefits so much, comes the need to renegotiate the terms and conditions of industrial cooperation with Washington, so that Europe (1) when it produces for US consumption, is no longer subject to American control of its value chain; and (2) when it buys American, the US can no

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46 *See* M. S. Bell & F. R. Hoffmann, *Europe's Nuclear Trilemma. The Difficult and Dangerous Options for Post-American Deterrence* (Foreign Affairs 31 Mar. 2025).

47 *See* e.g., E. Perot, *Revisiting Deterrence: Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella Over Europe?*, CSDS Policy Brief 6/2025 (20 Mar. 2025).

48 European Commission, *Consultation to contribute to the Defence Omnibus Simplification Proposal*, DG DEFIS News Article (25 Mar. 2025).

49 *See* M. K. Albright, *The Right Balance Will Secure NATO's Future* (Financial Times 7 Dec. 1998).

50 White Paper, *supra* n. 20, at 19–20.

longer flick a kill switch to deny what Europeans see as the legitimate exercise of their strategic autonomy.[51] Going forward, the transatlantic industrial alliance will have to be imbued with more reciprocity.

The European Commission and High Representative do display more confidence in demanding strategic clarity from candidate countries: those which don't fully align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (e.g., Serbia and Georgia) are not listed in the White Paper and risk being left by the wayside. The fact that this has little to do with their democratic backsliding is revealed by the inclusion of an increasingly autocratic Turkey, which is deemed key to the European 'coalition of the able and willing' to police a future ceasefire agreement between Russia and Ukraine.

So, security trumps values, it seems. But then is the EU not bound to its own rulebook? If the Union is to help shape the European security order in the second half of this decade, then it will have to find a way to marry the values it is expected to uphold with the development of defence projects of common interest and an enhanced governance model of the future 'Defence Union'. On the latter the White Paper doesn't meet expectations.

5 OPERATIONAL DEFICIENCIES

Even though the ambition of 'the progressive framing of a common defence policy that might lead to a common defence' has been enshrined in Article 24(1) TEU and not the TFEU, EU defence integration is powering ahead on the industrial track, governed by the Community method, while progress on the intergovernmental track of EU operations is falling behind.

Over the years, the EU brand of CSDP operations has been strengthened in the fields of counterterrorism, maritime security, peace enforcement, and training of military staff of partner countries. In terms of external border management, CSDP operations have closely cooperated with Frontex – the European Boarder and Coast Guard – in the Aegean and central Mediterranean to disrupt smuggling networks. But a much-needed reassurance force aimed at policing a future ceasefire agreement in Ukraine must be cobbled together by a coalition of the willing outside of the EU structures, in part because Hungary and Slovakia are opposed and do not wish to constructively abstain from a Council decision.

Besides the unanimity requirement in Council decision-making, major hurdles in scoping and mobilizing CSDP operations include the unnecessarily strict interpretation of the prohibition in Article 41(2) TEU to charge the costs for EU

[51] *See* G. Spatafora, *Turning Money into Action: What Next Steps for European Defence?* (EUISS Brief 11 Mar. 2025).

operations having military or defence implications to the EU budget, and limitations in the EU's integrated command structure, which is in principle limited to non-executive missions and thus incompatible with the functions performed by NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

Nowadays, policy innovation in CSDP happens through modular compositions of Member States participating in PESCO projects. Military mobility has improved through the implementation of an off-the-shelf project from NATO involving twenty-five Member States and Canada, Norway, the US, the UK, and soon also Switzerland. And on the request of Ukraine, the Cyber Rapid Response Team was the first-ever PESCO project to be activated, in the week of Russia's full-scale invasion. For the most part, however, PESCO has been used as an incubator for defence industrial cooperation, thus strengthening the supranational dimension of EU defence policy. Catalysed with EDF money, an incipient coalescing effect can be discerned across the borders of the EU's fragmented defence market.[52] However, PESCO deliverables are coming online slower than foreseen, with only half of the anticipated twenty-six projects reaching full operational capability in 2025, and projections for the other half to be ready between 2026 and 2029.[53] The reasons for that lie, among others, in the natural state of competition between national champions and the quest for project management, the protection of intellectual property rights, and export licensing.

Another, more structural obstacle is posed by the impossibility to combine legal bases under the CSDP and the defence industrial sphere for cross-policy action. In the context of an integrated approach to EU defence action it is also noteworthy that no institutional upgrade has occurred in the column of the Council. While the European Council has met more regularly than usual to discuss defence in informal and special formats since 2022 (three times in the first quarter of 2025 alone), the Foreign Affairs Council in defence configuration meets infrequently, while more mundane Council formations (e.g., agriculture and fisheries) do so on a monthly basis.

6 EUROPE'S DEFENCE TRILEMMA

Without a complete overhaul of the way defence is governed, the EU cannot solve the existing trilemma: enabling Member States to massively increase defence spending,

[52] *See* S. Blockmans & D. Macchiarini Crosson, *PESCO: A Force for Positive Integration in EU Defence*, 26 (Special Issue) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 87–110 (2021), doi: 10.54648/EERR2021028.

[53] Council of the European Union, *Conclusions on the PESCO Strategic Review*, Council doc. 14375/24 (18 Nov. 2024).

without substantial impact on other policy areas or triggering tax hikes, or without ceding any sovereignty over their defence policy or compromising on what to buy and from whom.

Seen through this prism, the Commission's plan to 'ReArm Europe' is high in symbolism and low in substance. Since the launch of the initiative, the debate has centred around intergovernmental solutions like using the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) as a model to finance increased defence spending.[54] However, the currency of defence is not singular and national control over it will not be ceded easily, in particular as a result of the lack of parliamentary control experienced with the ESM. Defence 'remains a policy of national sovereignty, stemming from history, geography, linked in an intimate, almost genetic way, to the psychology of states and their populations'.[55]

The real debate to be had is about the trade-offs of massive increases in defence spending on the budget available for other policy priorities, such as social security, regional cohesion, climate and environment. In this context it is understandable that Member States turn to the European Commission for a promise of debt financing to stretch the burden over time. And although defence expenditure is mostly not very productive – one buys material that is supposed to sit around never to be used – there is a case that at least parts of the increase could be financed by debt. But debt is not free as many treasuries in Europe can attest to. Indeed, space to go more into debt is limited for many countries – be it because of their economic fundamentals or national rules.

For the EU's plans to stick, economic coherence and coordination will have to be the glue that holds it all together.[56] The EU will need to be realistic and acknowledge the clear trade-off between increasing its defence capabilities in the short term – which will necessarily involve spending on non-EU produced equipment – and building a truly autonomous European defence technological and industrial base, independent from the US, which will inevitably take much longer. On top of this, Member States – particularly Germany – will have to forge a common strategic culture and a willingness to send their soldiers into harms' way.

This points to three related shortfalls in the EU's current policy response to the spiralling crisis. Firstly, the Commission and High Representative have shied away from discussing issues of organization, personnel, training, leadership and education, which are key to exercise due diligence in determining the acceptability, suitability, and feasibility of a military design change. Secondly, forward

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54 *See* G. B. Wolff, A.Steinbach & J. Zettelmeyer, *The Governance and Funding of European Rearmament* (Bruegel Policy Brief 7 Apr. 2025).

55 N. Gros Verheyde, *[Analysis] Are the Bruegel Report and Its European Defense Mechanism Interesting? Answer: No* (B2 10 Apr. 2025).

56 *See* J. Arnal & S. Blockmans, *From Free-riders to Front-loaders: Why the EU's Defence Awakening Must Be Matched by Economic Coherence* (CEPS Policy Brief 15 Apr. 2025).

defence in Ukraine, which is a precondition for the EU's own security, is hampered by disagreement between Member States about operational deployment. This has led to a search for a coalition of the able and willing outside the EU's structures to include NATO allies like the UK and Turkey. While the White Paper on European Defence Readiness 2030 promotes an 'open architecture combined with variable geometry' to enhance the EU's security, it adopts an inside-out approach.[57] Yet, the Union may have to adapt to organizational realities that serve the wider European security order. And thirdly, the timeframe for collective action barely goes beyond the EU's current institutional mandate. This is sufficient for standard regulatory approaches, but too short for institutional reform and mandating the EU to engage in territorial defence proper, both requiring treaty change *and* constitutional amendment at the level of the Member States.

For common defence to emerge, Europe will – sooner rather than later – have to bite the bullet.

This editorial draws on a report produced by the author for Charge Research Platform Volt titled 'Roadmap Towards a Common Defence for Europe: Analysing Eight Governance Models' (2025).

[57] White Paper, *supra* n. 20, at 19.