Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, in western Europe, it was widely believed that history (understood as the long narrative of conflicts between nations and the machinations of power politics) had come to an end. This illusion, already shaken by the collapse of Yugoslavia, was proved wrong as instability spread across the European neighbourhood in Northern African and in the Middle East. However, only Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine could really change the mindset of European policymakers and showcase that history was not only present around us but surging with intensity.

The relative calm that followed the fall of the Berlin wall was not the end of history but rather a temporary lull, shaped by the unipolar dominance of the United States, a moment now fading into the past. As this era recedes, Europe faces the need to adapt to a multipolar world order increasingly dominated by continental powers with hegemonic or imperialistic ambitions: Russia, China, and perhaps the US.

The pressing question is whether Europe will emerge as one of the poles in this new geopolitical configuration or be relegated to the sidelines. At present, Europe appears starkly divided in its response to this evolving reality. The eastern part of the continent, acutely aware of history's resurgence, feels its current vividly, whether through the existential threat posed by Russia's war in Ukraine or the broader realignment of global power dynamics. By contrast, in Western Europe, others seem convinced that this war is a transient anomaly, driven by the whims of erratic figures such as Putin or Trump, or others, and that the world will soon return to the stability and optimism of the 1990s. Over the last 35 years, this pervasive sense of detachment from history and the unreadiness to develop a common foreign policy, have significantly shaped Europe's defence posture and have been one of the primary reasons why progress toward a cohesive military union was minimal. The result is a series of unfulfilled initiatives, leaving Europe with a patchwork of incomplete or ineffective military structures.

When the topic of setting up a European Defence Union (EDU) is brought to the table, politicians and scholars love to remind us of the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) as a reference for any future debate on the matter. This never-forgotten experiment, that fell together with the proposal of a European Political Community, continues to haunt discussions on European defence, floating like a ghost in the minds of policy makers. The reason is understandable: seventy years after its collapse, the EDC remains today the only clear example of a tangible project aimed at developing a common European army. The EDC fame is also based on a paradox, as many regard the Treaty of Paris, which proposed the EDC as a visionary and progressive endeavour rather than just a political failure. In fact, had the European governments invested as much in tangible defence capabilities as scholars have in discussions, proposals, and publications about the EDC Europe might have, by now, assembled at least a functional

force to address contemporary security threats, particularly those posed by Russia and its proxies.

In both the 1950s and the 2020s, Europe faced a threat from the East. In the Cold War, as now, this adversary was viewed as technologically advanced and more willing to wage protracted conflict than Europe. In the aftermath of World War II, European states such as France, Belgium, and the Netherlands bore the scars of occupation by the Wehrmacht, while Germany and Italy suffered defeat at the hands of Allied forces. The trauma of this conflict left Europe in a psychological state of impotence, with collective defence seen as the only viable path forward to face an assertive enemy such as the Soviet Union. The EDC proposal was born in this context, where pooling resources with other European nations appeared essential for survival, especially in the face of potential American disengagement - a concern that has resurfaced in recent years with shifting US priorities.[1]

The parallels between the Cold War's inception and today's geopolitical climate are striking. Arguably, Trump's overtures to Putin regarding Ukraine and his potential abandonment of the US security guarantee to Europe makes the proposal to establish a fully-fledged European Defence Community more urgent than ever. Beyond the clear historical similarities, the old EDC Treaty cannot just be revived and ratified. According to the 1952 treaty, the armed forces of the six Member States of the community were to be integrated into a single European force. National armies, except for specific exceptions outlined in Article 10, were to be largely dissolved. This included the Europeanisation of air and naval assets, a concept that embodied a profound level of integration which may be beyond reach in the short term.

The new EDC encompasses the current EU acquis in the field of security and defence, while being able to guarantee what the US and even NATO may not necessarily be in the position to offer any longer: the territorial defence of Europe. This could be done through the establishment of a European Defence System (EDS), with the national armies as its main building blocks, and the further development of the Rapid Deployment Force as the embryo of an EU federal army, all integrated into a common command, planning, and control structure.

The new EDS must take into account that the institutional landscape of Brussels has evolved dramatically, and the European Union is not the European Communities of the 1950s. Not only the EU's membership has expanded significantly, but its institutional architecture is far more complex, including mechanisms like the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Agency, and the European Defence Fund (EDF). These initiatives, though imperfect and insufficient, represent a layer of integration unimagined during the EDC's conception. Moreover, the technological and industrial environment has transformed. The defence sector now involves sophisticated technologies, cyber capabilities, and private industry stakeholders that were not part of the equation in the 1950s. These changes have introduced new actors and competitors, demanding a broader approach to defence integration.[2]

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[1] William I. Hitchcock, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), pp.13–98
[2] Petros Violakis, *Europeanisation and the Transformation of EU Security Policy: Post-Cold War Developments in the Common Security and Defence Policy* (London: Routledge, 2020), chap. 5, "Defence Production and Dynamics"

For sure, the foundational idea of a collective European capability to safeguard sovereignty and project power remains a worthy and necessary aspiration. In the context of the most difficult geopolitical landscape since the end of the Second World War, Europe has an opportunity to revisit the lessons of the EDC and craft a Defence Union that aligns with the geopolitical, institutional, and technological landscape of today.

In business classes, one common story is the "Rocks, Pebbles and Sand". A teacher fills an empty jar with rocks and asks to the class if the jar is full. If they respond affirmatively, they pour the pebbles inside. When they fit, the teacher asks whether the jar is finally full. When they are finally convinced that this the case, the teacher flows the sand over the jar to fill the last and almost invisible empty spaces. The lesson is that one needs to prioritise the big issues, such as the rocks, over the smaller ones like pebbles and sand; changing the order of the items to put inside the jar would not allow them all in. In the last decade, the jar of European Defence was filled with sand, namely focusing on arms development, interoperability and procurement. As a result, today we don't have space for rocks, which is the operative side and the creation of a common military capability. There are three reasons why the EU Member States have been choosing to focus during the last 25 years on joint acquisition and development over military planning and operationalisation. The first and most prominent is NATO and the preoccupation for its possible lack of credibility or even fragmentation.

The second was the conviction that Europe had not faced, since the end of the Cold War, any pressing military threat, and therefore a military initiative would just rise global tension. The third is the belief that the European military unpreparedness is just a facet of a wider EU issue with technological innovation and an industrial rather than a political issue.

The Current State of Affairs

NATO

Europe's security architecture has so far relied heavily on the contributions of the United States and the United Kingdom. These nations bring advanced technologies, extensive arsenals, and significant military expertise that surpass the capabilities of most European countries. While France, Germany and Poland possess a respectable military force, including nuclear capabilities for France, their armies alone are insufficient to guarantee the continent's security against modern threats.[3] NATO bridges this gap, providing a framework where smaller European militaries can integrate with larger forces to maximise their collective power.

Indeed, not undermining NATO has been a central concern for both the United States and Europe since the end of the Cold War. Rather than a complex strategic thought, this has been proved to be first and foremost an instinctive political conviction steady across the two continents throughout the last decades. Whenever proposals for a closer, independent European defence system ever arisen, both sides of the Atlantic always worked diligently to dilute or counterbalance them to ensure NATO's primacy. For instance, during the 1990s, debates over

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[3] Barry R. Posen, *Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back*, International Security 45, no. 4 (2021): 7–43

the Eurocorps - a multinational military unit spearheaded by France and Germany - drew concern from American officials, including the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Her warnings about the risks of "duplication, discrimination, and decoupling" highlighted fears that a separate European defence identity might compete with NATO rather than complement it.[4] In the 2000s, the establishment of EU Battlegroups sparked similar unease, and the Bush administration viewed these efforts as potentially undermining the transatlantic alliance, emphasising that NATO should remain the central pillar of collective security.

From the European side, internal divisions and the competing interests of Member States often hindered progress toward a unified defence system, despite rhetorical support for greater autonomy. One of the most pro-EU British Prime Ministers the UK ever had, Tony Blair, was hesitant to back a European military headquarters during his negotiations with French President Jacques Chirac, especially as transatlantic relations frayed in the aftermath of the Iraq War. As a result, such headquarters never became fully operative.[5] More recently, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's calls for a European army following French President Emmanuel Macron's election largely amounted to symbolic gestures rather than substantive action.[6] Today, the second election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States has been felt as a pivotal moment for NATO that would mark the beginning of a "European path" in Defence.[7]

On the US side, Trump's rhetoric and scepticism toward NATO are viewed by some as signalling an existential threat, sparking debates about the consistency of the American commitment. On the European side, many leaders, are insisting on the notion of a greater strategic autonomy and underlined the limits of the Atlantic alliance. Yet, in the history of NATO, there have always been periodic fears for a potential weakening of the Alliance, such as the Iraq War, the Obama's pivot to Asia or the first presidency of Donald Trump himself. Each of these crises were seen as a "step change" that never materialised. It is for now an open question whether the second Trump presidency will be the final game-changer for NATO´s primacy, but the real issue is whether Europe can afford the risk of not having a actionable European Defence System in case there is indeed an US disengagement from Europe or even NATO itself.

The European Union

Among decades of unrealised ambitions, the Eurocorps stands out as a prime example. Initially envisioned as a multinational military force capable of advancing European defence independence, it has instead evolved into a supporting corps for NATO, operating largely outside EU control. Similarly, the EU Battlegroups, designed in the Helsinki Headline Goal process, were a well-structured and promising concept intended to provide rapid response forces for crises. Both forces remained little more than "dead words," barely operationalised (in the case of Eurocorps) or never utilised (in the case of the Battlegroups).

[4] Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003), p.386
[5] Federico Castiglioni, *L'Europa negli anni della guerra al terrore* (Rome: Arcadia Publisher, Università degli studi Roma Tre, 2022), 73–129
[6] David Herszenhorn, *Merkel and Macron Push for EU Army to Complement NATO*, Politico, November 14, 2018
[7] Nathalie Tocci, *L'ansia europea si trasformerà in azione comune?*, Affari Internazionali, 11 November 2024

The notion of a European military headquarters has fared no better. Despite repeated calls for its establishment, it exists today under the name of Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) as little more than a symbolic entity; an empty shell lacking both an army and the substantive capacities needed to act autonomously, only able to oversee CSDP missions of limited size.

In the last 35 years, the only real progress that the EU ever made was the approval of the Petersberg Tasks, a strategic framework established in 1992 that envisioned a role for the EU in crisis management and conflict prevention, specifically through peacekeeping missions, always outside EU Member States.[8] These tasks would have ultimately become in Lisbon the cornerstone of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The CSDP operations were seen as a way for Europe to intervene in areas where the United States did not want to be involved, providing a distinct role for the EU that complemented, rather than competed with, NATO.

In this framework, the EU took on a responsibility to manage crises in its neighbourhood and beyond, often stepping in where NATO's military capacity were disproportioned or the US preferred not to engage directly. While the hard defence of Europe itself—especially in terms of military capabilities for territorial defence—was consistently viewed as falling under NATO's purview, the EU was tasked with a more pro-active and innovative engagement abroad. This division of labour between NATO and EU's CSDP didn't work effectively, mainly because of the shortcomings of the latter. At the beginning, the first major hindrance to the CSDP operations was budgetary, and more specifically the impossibility to link military expenses to the EU budget, following article 41 TUE. The gimmick found to operationalise the first missions abroad was the Athena mechanism, an extra-EU budget line that made the CSDP financing possible but cumbersome and inefficient.[9] The mechanism, designed to handle the shared financing of military operations, was often inadequate, leading to delays and difficulties. When finally Athena's duties were transferred to a more structured article 41 TFUE (although off budget) instrument, the European Peace Facility (EPF), the CSDP mission could not benefit from the shift as resources were diverted to ship arms to Ukraine.[10] But beyond financial challenges, the CSDP always suffered from a structural weakness, hampered by an inefficient organisational structure with a small headquarters in the European External Action Service (EEAS) under the leadership of a body called European Union Military Staff (EUMS). This limited structure is incapable of leading large-scale military operations, coupled with a clear lack of political will to expand or enhance the CSDP's operational capacity.

A prime example of this inertia was the protracted delay in integrating the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) within the EEAS, a move that, if implemented in time, would have better connected the past CSDP missions with the EU strategic direction. The delay in integrating the MPCC reflects the poor commitment of the EU governments in providing military personnel

[8] Michael E. Smith, *Europe's Common Security and Defence Policy: Capacity-Building, Experiential Learning, and Institutional Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)
[9] Council of the European Union, *Athena Mechanism*, (https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/athena/)
[10] Council of the European Union. *European Peace Facility*, (https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/)/ European Parliamentary Research Service, *The European Peace Facility*, EPRS Briefing, January 2024

and commanding structures, especially for land operations. The inadequate personnel for CSDP missions, their limited agency on the ground, the precise and purposely low-profile role in third countries set out the record for an almost invisible presence of the EU missions abroad.[11] Above the EUMS, the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) is a body composed of the Member States' chiefs of staff. The role of the EUMC is barely symbolic as it gives military advice to the EEAS and the High Representative /Vice President of the European Commission and oversees (not command) the EUMS. The presence of two military bodies (EUMC and EUMS) belonging to two different structures with the uncertain position of the High Representative /Vice President of the European Commission between them, coupled with the above-mentioned problems, complicate the CSDP governance beyond reason. As a result, when crises have escalated, such as in Mali or Syria, EU Member States have often opted to act multilaterally, bypassing the CSDP framework entirely. Even more, when crises required an intense military effort, as in the case of Libya, NATO stepped in and took control of the operations. This approach led to a fragmented and incoherent European response, relying on the support of non-EU countries, particularly the United States, to be minimally effective.

The most striking example of the CSDP's failure came during the Libyan War in 2011. The EU, despite having a framework for such operations, was unable to take the lead. Instead, NATO, which was supposed to play a limited defensive role, assumed control of the operation. This not only highlighted the EU's inability to assert its defence capabilities but also demonstrated the EU's dependence on NATO for decisive action. More recently, the proposal by French President Macron to send troops to Ukraine, though not yet realised, underscored the persistent reliance on Western powers, including the UK , rather than an EU-driven effort. Macron's suggestion to send troops, despite its controversial nature, reveals a critical truth: when the stakes are high, the EU is not equipped to act independently or decisively.[12] The EU's structural and organisational limitations, combined with a lack of political coherence and financial backing, have left it ill-prepared for high-intensity military engagements.

The EU Strategic Compass was released in 2022, in the aftermath of the Versailles summit after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It proposed a permanent Rapid Deployment Capacity, an "entry force" of 5.000 troops, a number that pales in comparison to the requirements of large-scale conflicts such as Russia's war against Ukraine and far below the 60.000 soldiers agreed in the Helsinki Summit of 1999.[13] The EU's Strategic Concept evolved to including assets for land, sea, and air operations, or introducing the first-ever training exercises, such as MILEX, but the governance of the CSDP remained unchallenged. As the CSDP's bureaucratic inefficiencies and fragmented command structure have not been fully addressed, there is the need to go beyond this framework and assess the real problems behind the limitations of the CSDP.

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[11] Niklas I. M. Nováky, *European Union Military Operations: A Collective Action Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–24
[12] Ivi, pp.187-206
[13] European Union External Action*, Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, European Union, March 2022

The Defence Industry

In the last 20 years, the EU has prioritised industrial development as a cornerstone of its defence strategy. Within this framework, defence technological capabilities have emerged as a critical area, reflecting the need for greater cooperation among Member States in an increasingly competitive international environment.

The European Defence Agency (EDA)

A pivotal moment was the establishment of the European Defence Agency (EDA) in 2004. The EDA was designed to enhance interoperability among Member States' armed forces, promote collaborative defence projects, and lay the foundation for the joint development of advanced weaponry. The EDA was put under the jurisdiction of the Council of the European Union rather than being integrated into the European Commission. This decision, while pragmatic in its intent, underscored the persistent ambiguity in the EU's approach to defence; delegating such a vital responsibility to an intergovernmental body instead of the Commission—an entity already equipped to handle industrial integration—reflects the constant concern for any association between the Commission itself and Defence policy.

Predictably, the EDA faced significant challenges over the years as chronic underfunding and staffing shortages hampered its ability to fully achieve its objectives. Furthermore, the EDA has not operated in isolation and its mission has often overlapped with that of other European defence organisations. The Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR), for example, has been actively involved in joint weapons development and procurement for decades, sometimes in collaboration and in competition with the EDA.[14] Recently, NATO strengthened its Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) with the intent to uniform procurement across Member States. This multi-layered institutional framework reveals a fundamental contradiction at the heart of European defence policy: the EU Member States seek to establish a unified defence strategy through the EDA while simultaneously relying on overlapping organisations that serve similar purposes but align with different political and strategic priorities. OCCAR's engagement with the UK—now outside the EU—and NATO's alignment with US interests exemplify this tension. These overlaps not only dilute the EU's strategic autonomy but also complicate efforts to present a coherent vision for European defence.

The European Defence Fund (EDF)

In this landscape, the EDF is probably one of the few good news and one of the most notable advancements in the Defence field since the creation of the Union. The EDF serves a dual purpose: first, to promote the development of technologically advanced defence systems, and second, to facilitate their acquisition by EU Member States. This clear and focused mandate addresses two of the EU's longstanding challenges in defence: fragmentation of efforts and the lack of a coherent framework for innovation and procurement. By incentivising collaboration and pooling resources, the EDF aims to create economies of scale, enhance interoperability among Member States, and reduce redundancies in defence capabilities. The governance of the EDF is designed to ensure a coordinated approach. The secretariat is composed of the European

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[14] Aude Bercusson and Michael L. S. McDonald, eds., *The European Union and the World: The Case of External Relations* (Cham: Springer, 2023)

External Action Service (EEAS), the European Defence Agency (EDA), and the European Commission. This tripartite structure ensures that the fund aligns with broader EU foreign policy goals (via the EEAS), leverages technical and operational expertise (via the EDA), and benefits from robust institutional support and oversight (via the Commission).

The EDF is backed by a significant budget under the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027, amounting to €7.95 billion. This allocation is divided into two main components:

- *Research Funding* (€2.7 billion): This segment supports collaborative defence research projects, enabling Member States to develop cutting-edge technologies in areas such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber defence, and next generation weaponry.
- *Capability Development Funding* (€5.3 billion): This segment co-finances collaborative projects to develop and procure new military equipment, something absolutely needed to replenish the European stocks emptied by assistance to Ukraine.

The establishment of the EDF laid the foundation for a proper response, at least in the industrial domain, after the invasion of Ukraine with the European Commission leading the effort for the first time. Am

The European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA)

In addition, the Commission launched the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), established as a short-term measure to encourage EU Member States and Norway to collaborate on the joint procurement of urgently needed defence equipment. EDIRPA, governed by the European Commission, focuses on incentivising cooperation by reimbursing administrative costs, fostering efficiency in addressing critical supply gaps.

The Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP)

Another pressing military and industrial need to help Ukraine was the production of ammunition. The Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), aims to rapidly bolster Europe's ammunition manufacturing capacity to meet the demands of Member States and Ukraine. With a budget exceeding €500 million, ASAP mitigates supply chain constraints, accelerates production, and replenishes dwindling stocks. Finally, the Ammunition Initiative, introduced in February 2023, seeks to provide Ukraine with one million rounds of artillery ammunition within a year by streamlining procurement and coordinating contributions from Member States.

These initiatives, each spearheaded by the European Commission, demonstrate a historic shift in EU defence policy, focusing on industrial collaboration and capacity building.

The fact that the Commission is taking the lead in all these initiatives, including the EDF, is undoubtedly a positive development, reflecting a more proactive and unified approach to European defence. Furthermore, the upcoming White Paper is expected to coordinate Member States to both identify promising technologies to invest on and common procurement to leverage on scale economies.

However, this positive development hides inherent dangers, particularly in framing defence primarily as an economic or industrial issue. While the focus on technology and innovation is

crucial, the war in Ukraine has starkly demonstrated that war success hinges not just on advanced weaponry but also on human factors: the willingness to sacrifice, the availability of personnel, effective organisation, well-devised tactics, and clear planning and command structures.

In other words, the Commission is fostering a dangerous illusion among EU citizens: the creation of defence-related initiatives could inadvertently suggest either that wars are fought mainly through technological and industrial superiority or that the EU is really equipping itself to provide a defence umbrella. Both these statements are evidently false. This double illusion—first, that the EU has a comprehensive defence structure akin to NATO, and second, that wars can be won without sacrifice and solidarity—could result in a significant erosion of public trust should a real conflict arise. When the facade breaks, citizens may not only lose faith in the concept of common defence but in the Union as a whole. In the past, institutions way more solid than the EU fell because of a security threat or inability to provide security to their citizens. And in the current international environment, this possibility is concrete.

A new European Defence Community

Activating Article 42.2 TEU for Common Defence

Article 42.7 TEU underscores the responsibility of Member States to assist one another in the event of armed aggression with all their possible means (mutual defence clause). This provision today remains largely theoretical, not only because it was never activated by a Member State (with the symbolic exception of France after the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo) but also because the EU governments don't have a defence organisation of their own that could ensure effective military aid. To bridge this gap, the European Union must develop the capacity to defend itself autonomously if required, while simultaneously leveraging NATO's best assets.

This could be done by a unanimous decision of the European Council to establish a Common Defence, in accordance to article 42.2 TEU.

The key question, beyond the required political consensus, is the definition of the contents of a Common Defence. By logic, a Common Defence has to be understood as the organisation of the territorial defence of Europe, since CSDP missions and operations "out of area" tasks such as crisis management and peacekeeping, humanitarian emergencies, and so on. The activation of article 42.2 TEU means in effect of the operationalisation of the European mutual defence clause, whether NATO is mobilised or not. The military forces that would compose an EU response in the field of territorial defence would unavoidably rely on the existing capabilities of its Member States. Creating entirely new forces under an EU budget or recruitment system is unrealistic in the short to medium term, especially given the complex and resource-intensive challenges in key regions such as the eastern Mediterranean, the eastern flank, or the Pacific Ocean.

This requires setting up a command, planning, and control structure, including a military doctrine, wargaming, the transformation of the EUMS and MPCC into a full EU Military Headquarters, and the quantification of forces and capabilities that the national armies must

make available in the event of an aggression, among other aspects. These national armies would prove the bulk of the forces and assets, but within a coordinated framework and under EU command, at the political level exercised by the European Council and the Council of Defence Ministers, and at the strategic and operational level by the HRVP, the EUMC, and the EU Military Headquarters (encompassing the EUMS and the MPCC). Some of these items could be put into practice through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) which operates under qualified majority voting (QMV). An inter-institutional agreement should closely associate the Commission and the European Parliament as a fundamental part of the political authority overseeing the EDS.

<u>The Revamped Rapid Deployment Capacity: A Rapid Defence Force</u>

A beefed-up Rapid Deployment Capacity could also be integrated into the overall European Defence System. Unlike the current Deployment Capacity, this one must consist of European soldiers recruited by Member States independently but answering solely to the Union. The proposed 5.000-strong RDC is the minimum necessary to establish a mission. This force would function either as a first-response unit in crises, a supportive contingent for the armed forces of third countries, or for territorial defence in support of deployed national armies under EU command.

The establishment of an autonomous EU force, under the strategic leadership of the EU Military Headquarters, could achieve several critical objectives: strengthening the EU's credibility as a defence actor, tackling the moral hazard problem where Member States are reluctant to risk their personnel in high-stakes missions, and addressing the budgetary inefficiencies embedded in the principle of "costs lie where they fall." Like other CSDP initiatives, this force could be financed through the EPF. While this funding mechanism remains off-budget to comply with Article 41 TEU (which prohibits the EU from directly financing military missions), this legal arrangement creates a lack of accountability to both the European Parliament and national legislatures. However, the need is urgent, and this force could represent the only genuine shift in the effectiveness of CSDP missions. Should the EPF not be an option, the EU governments could create another mechanism like Athena. The Rapid Deployment Force would serve the broader European interest and employed, for instance, for rescuing and evacuation missions – as in Afghanistan - or peacekeeping operations in a specific and limited geographic area. The number of troops at the EU disposal would not allow major military operations (if not assisted by the larger and more structured EDS), as far as the RDC does not grow to achieve the Helsinki headline objective.

The current Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) of 5.000 troops is and will be inadequate for interventions in non-permissive environments and high-intensity warfare. To establish itself as a credible actor in global security, the EU must transition from limited peacekeeping to more assertive peace enforcement. This shift requires not only a change in strategic posture but also a significant expansion of force size. A realistic and effective target would be the establishment of two brigades, doubling the RDF's current capacity. These brigades would not only support complex operations such as hostage rescues but also enable the EU to intervene credibly in conflict zones and sustain prolonged deployments if necessary.

The two brigades must consist of EU soldiers equipped entirely through EU procurement, ensuring consistency, interoperability, and independence from external suppliers. Funding for

this effort should come from the EPF, designed to enhance the EU's operational capabilities. In addition to salaries and personal equipment for the troops, these brigades require a robust array of assets to support their missions effectively, including land assets such as infantry fighting vehicles, tanks, anti-air systems, artillery, and drones, maritime assets like transport ships and naval vessels for deployment and logistical support, and air assets providing reconnaissance, air support, and logistical capabilities through transport aircraft, helicopters, and combat platforms. Lasty, as it has been said, the EUMS should be empowered with a real command and control system beyond the current MPCC and its budget and personnel adjusted accordingly, with the creation of a real EU Military Headquarters (EUMH).

Establishing these brigades requires creating a comprehensive defence environment to support them. The EUMH should assess the operational requirements of the brigades and oversee procurement processes to ensure that forces are equipped with capabilities tailored to the specific challenges they are likely to encounter. These brigades must operate under EU-defined rules of engagement (ROE) decided by the European Council. Initially, the EU will rely on Member States for air and maritime assets, utilising a rotating system similar to that of the current RDF to enable contributions without immediate large-scale investments.

Over time, the EU should aim to reduce dependency on Member States by fully integrating critical assets into its force structure, ensuring immediate and cohesive capabilities for deployment. Incorporating land assets directly into the EU force from the very beginning is a vital step towards autonomy and operational effectiveness. Given the present difficulties in procurement, the EU could buy from the Member States equipment that will be shortly replaced by the new wave of upcoming material, waiting for a proper procurement for its own. In any case, while pooling and sharing air and maritime assets might suffice in the short term, land components must be fully integrated into the EU's command as soon as possible to guarantee readiness; without those force multipliers any real military operation would be impossible.

The European Army

Beyond article 42.2 TEU for Common Defence or when art. 42.2 TEU remains inactive due to lack of unanimous agreement in the European Council, a separate Treaty establishing a European Army as the core of the European Defence System could be undertaken by willing Member States, based upon the merging of (parts of) the national armies of the participating countries following the model of the European Defence Community.

Abolishing Article 41 TEU and MFF

Article 41 TEU, which prohibits the EU from directly financing military missions, must be repealed. This reform would allow for direct EU funding of defence initiatives, enabling the establishment of a fixed budget for military operations. Soldiers serving in the RDC would become EU employees, ensuring accountability and professionalism. Furthermore, EU citizens, through their elected representatives in the European Parliament, would have a direct say in defence spending, including decisions to either empower or reduce it.

Incorporating defence spending into the MFF would unlock greater resources for the RDC, particularly for acquiring autonomous assets such as air, naval, and cyber capabilities. Under the current off-budget financing system, resources are limited, and the RDC's operational scope

is likely to remain constrained. Furthermore, the resources of the EPF are unpredictable and can shift together with the changing landscape of EU politics, and not necessarily in the larger countries that contribute more to its budget. By contrast, integrating defence into the MFF would provide the financial foundation necessary to develop and sustain an effective initial force of 5.000 troops and related autonomous EU assets, with the capacity to expand over time.

<u>The European Defence System as the European Pillar of NATO</u>

The possibility for Europe to defend itself is the cornerstone for its strategic autonomy. In this regard, there are two foundational tenets: first, the necessity of a common European defence, and second, the coordination of this defence within NATO. These principles, enshrined in Article 2 of the original EDC Treaty, continue to hold relevance in today's geopolitical climate.

In the short term at least, coordination with NATO remains indispensable for deploying a credible and effective maritime, air, and land force to address these scenarios. Thus, the EDS should focus on fostering closer coordination and resource-sharing mechanisms that enhance collective capabilities, acting as the European pillar of NATO, designed to enhance Europe's strategic autonomy while maintaining alignment with the alliance's objectives. This second leg would enable European nations to coordinate their defence efforts more effectively, fostering greater cohesion and capacity within the NATO framework. That means as a minimum using NATO standards and manuals, and exchange of classified information, and ensuring continental military mobility for both NATO and EDS forces.

Such an approach has garnered support from both academic and political circles, emphasising the need for a European pillar that complements NATO's transatlantic dimension. Under this model, an EU oversight mechanism would play a crucial role in ensuring that Member States' contributions align with collective security objectives.

As Europe undertakes deeper coordination and integration within NATO, this process is bound to profoundly alter the organisation's nature. For Europeans, this transformation must be guided by three key priorities: preserving allied commitment, ensuring efficiency and rationality, and building reliability to establish a credible European pillar within NATO. First, it is essential that European integration does not undermine the commitment of non-EU allies, such as the United States, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. NATO's strength lies in its unity, and any EU-led initiative must avoid sidelining these key players. Second, any European initiative must prioritise efficiency and rationality. Creating redundant bureaucratic structures or introducing excessive red tape would compromise NATO's operational effectiveness. Lastly, European efforts must focus on building reliability and credibility, both within NATO and on the global stage. Internally, Europe must demonstrate its ability to defend the continent effectively, even in the absence of direct support from allies such as the US, by ensuring robust capabilities and seamless interoperability. Externally, Europe must establish itself as a credible actor in global security, capable of deterring threats and projecting stability. Balancing minimal bureaucracy with maximum effectiveness is crucial to achieving this goal.

The North Atlantic Council could be restructured into two distinct committees: a North Atlantic Committee for non-EU Member States and an EU Committee. These committees would operate separately for deliberation and coordination but convene together when decisions impacting the

entire Alliance are required. In this model, decision-making would rely on reaching agreement within each committee. The North Atlantic Council will act if both committees agree.

However, in cases where agreement is achieved only in the EU committee, the EU will be able to activate the EDS and take independent action, following the principle "together when possible, alone when necessary. This structure would even solve a present NATO's institutional conundrum which is the veto power, since the European branch of the Alliance can act autonomously, the members which desire to join an operation could follow the lead of the EU Committee.

The accession of the EU as such to the North Atlantic Treaty (but not the military structure as such) could also be envisaged.
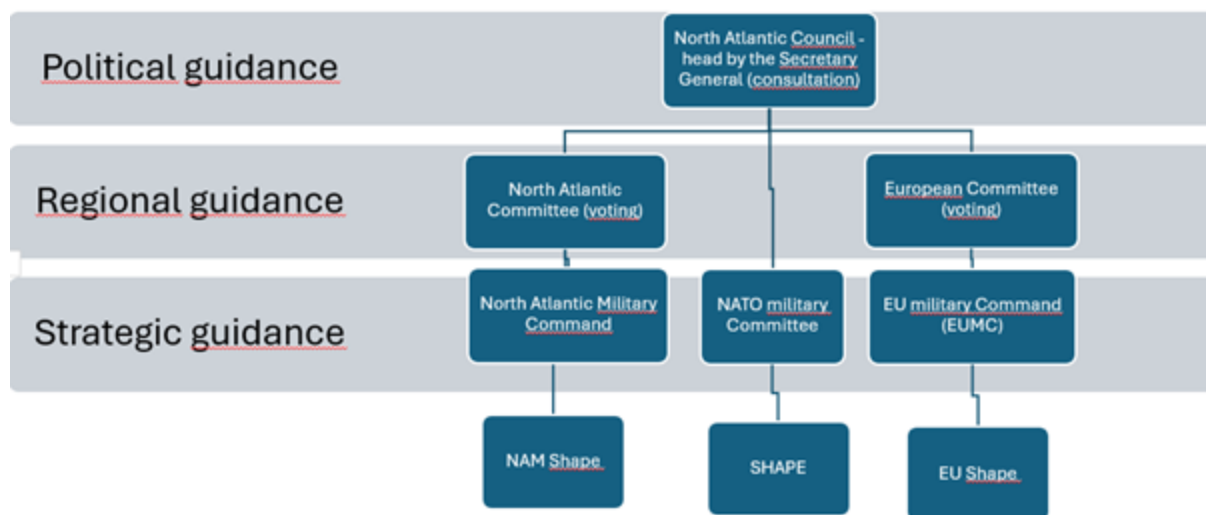
While it is evident that the defence of Europe would be less effective without the entire structure of NATO, it is equally clear that the EU cannot overlook a plausible scenario simply because it may seem unpleasant. The EU military committee representatives to NATO should be the same diplomats who participate the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC). The EU Committee within NATO should maintain regular and structured communication with the European Commission. This collaboration will ensure that Member States' troops are equipped with autonomous, cutting-edge assets, particularly in strategic areas such as space and cyber, giving substance to the previous EDA recommendations.[15]

The EU-led NATO branch must align with existing EU defence structures at the highest level, particularly the EUMC. This novelty should come natural as many members of the NATO military committee have already today a double-hat as both EUMC and NMC members.

Finally, the urgency for EU Member States to increase their defence spending, expand recruitment and invest heavily in procuring advanced air and naval assets cannot be overstated.

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[15] European Defence Agency, 2023 *EU Capability Development Priorities* (Brussels: European Defence Agency, 2023), https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/brochures/qu-03-23-421-en-n-web.pdf.

Without these measures, the credibility and effectiveness of European contributions to NATO and the proposed EU-led branch will remain limited. In addition to addressing traditional military domains, the EU must also focus on emerging domains such as space and cyber, where it holds a comparative advantage in leveraging economies of scale. Unlike conventional forces, where national contributions dominate, these domains present opportunities for the EU to act collectively, enabling Member States to pool resources and reduce costs.

<u>Nuclear Deterrence</u>

The autonomy of the two "legs" provides more leeway for nuclear deterrence: from this configuration a new doctrine may arise decoupling conventional and nuclear threats. NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) would continue to operate with its existing functions and composition. As a cornerstone of NATO's deterrence strategy, the NPG provides a forum for consultation on nuclear policy, planning, and posture. The NPG should be ready to assess the threats of a nuclear escalation for all NATO allies, disconnecting them from a conventional attack.

The Industrial Dimension: A Means to an End

As far as defence industry is concerned, the path forward is largely guided by existing recommendations, such as those outlined in the Draghi Report. This report emphasises three key elements: the establishment of a secure line of financing through EU own resources, investments to trigger technological innovation, and a shift in mentality towards a more integrated and strategic approach to defence.[16] Similarly, the Niinistö Report echoes the need for a comprehensive approach to security, extending from industry to society, all in the name of achieving strategic autonomy. To build on these foundations, the EU must enable the European Commission to take a more prominent leadership role in the defence industrial sector. This can be achieved through a series of measures, including the promotion of collaborative programmes under the EDF.

The EDF can serve as a catalyst for innovation and cooperation among Member States, fostering the development of cutting-edge technologies and creating synergies that individual states cannot achieve alone. The EU Commission must ensure that the EU military growth technologies are shared among Member States and not exploited by national companies to wage unfair competition inside the bloc. Additionally, efforts should focus on strengthening European defence champions, leading defence companies within the EU to enhance their global competitiveness and capacity to export. This involves not only supporting their operations but also protecting the EU defence industry from the acquisition of strategic assets by non-EU entities. Such protective measures are vital for preserving European strategic autonomy and safeguarding critical technologies. Moreover, facilitating common procurement among EU Member States would create economies of scale, reducing costs while increasing efficiency. For companies unable to compete effectively in the public armaments market, mechanisms should be put in place to compensate or redirect them toward other sectors, as it is already happening in other fields.

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[16] Mario Draghi, *Report of the High-Level Group on Own Resources* (Brussels: European Commission, 2021)

Something that the Commission is expected to address is the slowness of arms manufacturing in Europe. On one hand, this slowness reflects a system suited to peacetime democracies, where procurement is demand-driven. European armed forces would typically order new equipment, such as tanks or artillery, every 15 years, with ships being procured occasionally. This approach allowed forces to stay relatively updated without the urgency of a wartime economy. Manufacturing timelines were extended, and financing was spread out over long periods, leading to a system where production was not continuous but reactive to individual demands.

Today, however, this model is increasingly inadequate. The European Union can no longer afford to take years to produce essential equipment such as one million rounds of ammunition or decades to assemble new tanks or aircraft. The situation demands a shift to a more rapid and proactive production framework, one that mirrors the readiness required during wartime without the direct destruction of assets on the battlefield. Europe must move closer to a system akin to the US, a democracy that continuously orders military equipment and accumulates it to ensure preparedness. The importance of such accumulation has been starkly highlighted by the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Both sides have relied heavily on stockpiles of ammunition, vehicles, and weapons to sustain their military operations. For the West, particularly Europe, the lesson is clear: a robust defence strategy depends not only on advanced capabilities but also on the sheer availability of assets. Accumulation provides a buffer, ensuring that forces can maintain their operational tempo during prolonged crises without immediate production bottlenecks.

The transition to a rolling production model, akin to the American system, would require several critical changes. First, European defence manufacturers need secure and predictable financing mechanisms, ideally coordinated at the EU level, to avoid reliance on fluctuating national budgets. The EDF could play a pivotal role in this regard by guaranteeing long-term investments in the defence industry. Second, regulations and bureaucratic hurdles that delay production and procurement must be streamlined. The Commission should lead in standardizing requirements and certifications to reduce fragmentation and inefficiency in the defence supply chain. Additionally, the EU must prioritise the scalability of its production lines. This means not only ensuring that factories can ramp up production quickly in times of need but also maintaining a baseline level of output that keeps supply chains active and skilled workers employed. Establishing centralised European hubs for specific types of equipment, such as ammunition or armoured vehicles, could further enhance efficiency and interoperability among Member States.

By embracing a model of continuous production and strategic accumulation, Europe can address the shortcomings of its current procurement system. This shift would not only strengthen the continent's ability to respond to emerging threats but also ensure that its armed forces are consistently well-equipped, effectively bridging the gap between peacetime readiness and wartime demands. In this regard, it is imperative to achieve a speedy adoption of the EDIP regulation that is set to foster joint capability development and procurement.

The EDA, given its limited resources and personnel, should focus in interoperability. By prioritising this area, the EDA can support the Commission in designing a cohesive plan to make EU armies fully interoperable—a critical requirement for effective joint operations. Interoperability is not merely a technical goal but a strategic necessity for ensuring that European

forces can operate seamlessly within the EU-led NATO framework. To achieve this interoperability, the EDA should work closely with NATO, which can help translate interoperability goals into operational requirements. This collaboration would serve as a bridge between EU defence needs and NATO's broader objectives, ensuring alignment and mutual reinforcement. By operationalising interoperability requirements, the EDA can play a pivotal role in facilitating the standardisation of equipment, communications, and procedures across Member States, thereby enhancing both EU and NATO readiness.

In order to catalyse the necessary financing for increasing the joint development of capabilities, we propose the creation of a "European Rearmament Bank" with a front load of 10 billion euro for a subscribed amount of available financing of 100 billion euros, to be raised by EU joint borrowing issued by the European Commission in the financial markets.

Finally, defence investments could be excluded from the deficit and debt calculations under the SGP as far as they refer to joint European projects.

Conclusion

During the Cold War, Europe was deeply concerned about the threat of a Soviet invasion, prompting the creation of the European defence framework. Today, we face similar anxieties, not only from Russia but also from the instability emanating from Asia, and Trump´s unpredictability. Beyond upholding liberal democracy and European values, the European Union's core interest lies in maintaining stability and countering the territorial ambitions of Russia. The US increasing focus on Asia risks leaving Europe's eastern flank—stretching from Tallinn to Nicosia—exposed to escalating turmoil. This includes the ongoing war in Ukraine, unrest in Syria and Palestine, and the spread of Cold War-like dynamics into Africa. To address these challenges and fulfil its fundamental obligation to protect its citizens, the EU must take the lead in defence. A realistic and strategic approach is necessary, one that complements NATO while building strategic autonomy. It is no longer acceptable for Europe's security to rely disproportionately on citizens and resources from other nations.

A key proposal is the creation a European Defence System as the European pillar of NATO, capable of acting without US involvement in the field of territorial defence. This pillar would possess political and strategic autonomy and manage its own assets independently from non-EU allies. As it currently stands, this European force would consist of the combined armed forces of EU Member States, ensuring a cohesive defence strategy while maintaining NATO's overarching role, and a revamped Rapid Deployment Capacity. It would be recruited directly by the EU and operate under strategic command of the HRVP and the EU Military Committee (EUMC), and tactical direction of the EU Military Staff (EUMS) and MPCC, integrated into the new EU Military Headquarters.

Europe must undergo a profound shift in its perception of security. Policymakers must communicate, and citizens must accept, that the war in Ukraine is not an anomaly but a warning of the dangerous multipolar and unpredictable world we now inhabit where borders are redrawn, and power struggles intensify. To safeguard its future, EU nations must commit to strong military coordination, develop autonomous capabilities to protect their global interests, and align their priorities under a unified strategy. A critical step in this process is adopting majority voting within

the Council on foreign policy matters, overcoming the current unanimity requirement that hampers decisive action. Such reforms could form part of a broader treaty revision designed to ensure the security and defence of EU citizens in this volatile era. Only through solidarity and foresight can Europe secure its place in an increasingly dangerous world.

Summary of the policy proposals

Create a European Defence System of territorial defence

I. Activate article 42.2 of the TEU to make operational article 42.7 (mutual assistance clause) to set up the Common Defence, by incorporating national armies in a common command, planning, and control structure.

II. Convert the EUMS and MPCC into an EU Military Headquarters (EUMH).

III. Revamp the RDC, expanding to two brigades to handle non-permissive environments, with a view to reach the Helsinki headline objective, as an integral part of the EDS alongside national armies.

IV. Equip the RDC through EU procurement funded by mechanisms like the European Peace Facility (EPF).

V. Change Article 31 TFUE and transition defence decision-making from unanimity to majority voting within the Council.

VI. Repeal Article 41 TFUE to enable direct EU funding for military operations.

VII. Include defence spending in the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to make it accountable and ensure predictable and adequate resources.

The EDS as the European Pillar of NATO

VIII. Incorporate the EU to the North Atlantic Council

IX. Empower the EUMH with the responsibility of being the Supreme Command for the European leg of NATO and create a completely detachable capacity.

The industrial dimension

X. Focus on innovation and capacity production through joint development and procurement.

XI. To this effect, create a European Rearmament Bank of 100 billion euros subscribed capital though an EU bond issuance.

XII. SGP exemptions only to joint defence investments.

About the European Movement International

Set up in 1948 to advocate European reconciliation and cooperation, we have worked for the past 75 years to promote peace, democracy and closer integration. Today we bring together the biggest and most diverse network of national and European organisations, representing stakeholders and citizens across society, in pursuit of innovative ideas for the future of our Union.

For more information, check our website: **https://europeanmovement.eu/**