



**Nicolò Murgia and
Alessandro Marrone**

› The European Defence Industry Programme: The Last Piece of the EU Defence Puzzle?^{*}

- › EDIP completes the EU's emerging defence-industrial toolkit, offering a modest 2026-2027 budget but a scalable framework that will shape larger post-2028 instruments.
- › EDIP's value lies in structuring longer-term cooperation – especially “projects of common interest” – to complement SAFE's urgent, loan-backed procurement and avoid fragmented, off-the-shelf purchasing.
- › Prioritising a small number of flagship projects, notably integrated air and missile defence, could convert EU financing into operational capability, industrial resilience, and more credible strategic autonomy.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

On 8 December 2025, the Council of the European Union adopted the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) regulation,¹ which represents the last piece of the puzzle of the EU toolbox for defence industrial policy – and may be the most effective one for the sake of European cooperation and integration in this field.

A regulation for a small but growing budget

The EDIP regulation has been negotiated on the basis of the proposal put forward by the first von der Leyen Commission in March 2024. This instrument, the most recent part of a wider array of EU tools introduced in support of the European Defence Technological Industrial Base (EDTIB), provides for the allocation of 1.5 billion euro grants for the period 2026-2027, of which 300 million will constitute the Ukraine Support Instrument. Over the short term, it is a very limited funding; however, it represents the blueprint for a much larger endowment in the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), as the Commission proposed 131 billion euros for defence and space for that timeframe.² The EDIP builds on instruments already adopted

^{*} Brief produced in the framework of the project “New challenges for Italian strategic communication: Ukraine and European security”. This paper is realised with the support of the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning and Historical Documentation - Directorate General for Political Affairs and International Security of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in accordance with Article 23-bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

¹ Council of the EU, *European Defence Industry Programme: Council Gives Final Approval*, 8 December 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/08/european-defence-industry-programme-council-gives-final-approval>.

² European Commission website: *The 2028-2034 EU Budget for a Stronger Europe*, https://commission.europa.eu/node/42716_en.



»» As for EDIP, three priorities will guide its implementation: competitiveness of the European defence industry, the timely availability of products, and the efficiency and resilience of the supply chain

with a view to supporting common procurement, in particular the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), and to strengthening production capacities, such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), with the aim of rationalising them through greater structuring and longer timelines.

The Commission's way to become a defence actor

As such, EDIP regulations show a recurring Commission's pattern in this policy field: it begins with a new regulation entailing a limited budget to set up and test the legal and institutional framework, and then it refines and empowers the tool with a larger financial envelope. It happened already in the 2010s with the 90-million-euro Preparatory Action Defence Research (PADR), followed by the 7,3-billion-euro European Defence Fund (EDF). Such an incremental approach also enables the Commission to manage and overcome disagreements and oppositions, while building in-house human resources capacities through the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS). One decade after the 2016 decision to launch the PADR, the Commission is nowadays a powerful and recognised actor in the defence domain, featuring even a Commissioner for Defence and Space, whose power is set to further grow via EDIP and the next MFF. Therefore, from an Italian perspective, it is important to actively participate from the outset through to the negotiation and final implementation of each tool, such as EDIP, given both their importance in themselves and their future evolution within the EU defence industrial toolbox.

The potential of EDIP flagship projects

As for EDIP, three priorities will guide its implementation: competitiveness of the European defence industry, the timely availability of products, and the efficiency and resilience of the supply chain.³ They are, in turn, reflected in four funding streams.⁴ The first concerns common procurement initiatives, which must be undertaken by at least three countries, of which at least two member states. The second focuses on strengthening the production capacities of critical products, with the aim of making the defence industry able to quickly respond to the demand of such products. The third involves the launch of European Defence Projects of Common Interest, also known as flagship projects, namely collaborative development projects for critical military capabilities. The European Commission has so far identified four projects of such kind, namely the European Drone Defence Initiative, the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield, and the European Space Shield.⁵ Finally, the EDIP will finance support activities aimed at fostering interchangeability and interoperability, as well as activities designed to facilitate the entry of SMEs,

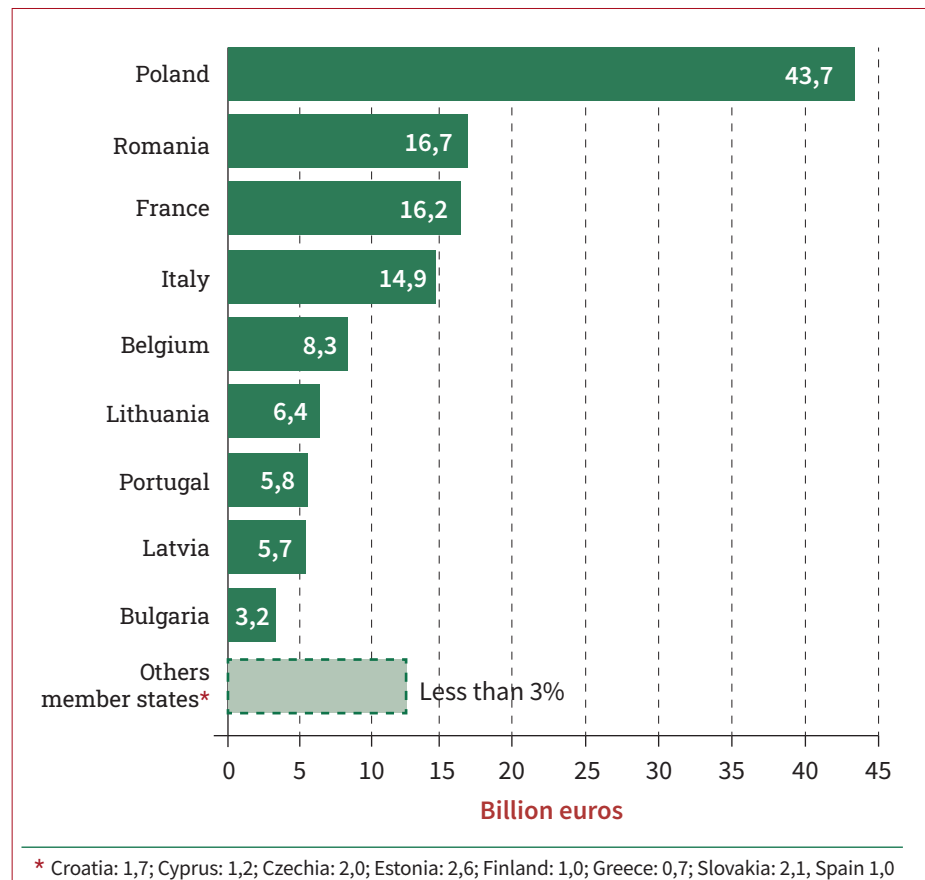
³ Council of the EU, *European Defence Industry Programme*, cit.

⁴ European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Regulation (EU) 2025/2643 of 16 December 2025 Establishing the European Defence Industry Programme and a Framework of Measures to Ensure the Timely Availability and Supply of Defence Products* ('EDIP Regulation'), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2025/2643/oj/eng>.

⁵ Blockmans, Steven and Daniel Fiott, "European Defence Projects of Common Interest: From Concept to Practice", in *European Parliament Studies*, January 2026, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXAS_STU\(2026\)775284](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXAS_STU(2026)775284).

FIGURE 1 SAFE programme tentative allocations

mid-caps and start-ups into the defence market.



>> The flagship projects are particularly important, considering another EU tool for defence industrial policy

The flagship projects are particularly important, considering another EU tool for defence industrial policy: the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme, which will lend 150 billion euros to member states to be invested in defence equipment by 2030. The tentative allocation sees around 43,7 billion for Poland, 16,7 for Romania, 16,2 for France, 14,9 for Italy, 8,3 for Belgium, 6,4 for Lithuania, 5,8 for Portugal, 5,7 for Latvia, 3,2 for Bulgaria,⁶ and less than 3 billion euros for another handful of member states (Figure 1). National governments have presented their industrial plans to spend the requested loans in November 2025, and they are being validated by the Commission. Considering the tight timeline to both apply for loans and spend them, it is likely that much of the fund allocated will go to existing procurement projects, whether national, bilateral or mini-lateral, as well as to commercial-off-the-shelf acquisitions. Actually, SAFE regulations are meant to satisfy urgent requirements to fill priority gaps through the procurement of state-of-the-art capabilities, not to launch pan-European cooperative procurement. The latter should, rather, be the exact goal of EDIP flagship projects. Indeed, planning in 2026 those projects to be implemented in the 2028-2034 timeframe makes it possible to achieve the political, military and industrial convergence necessary for ambitious procurement of next-generation capabilities which single member states are not able to develop and procure on a national or bilateral basis.

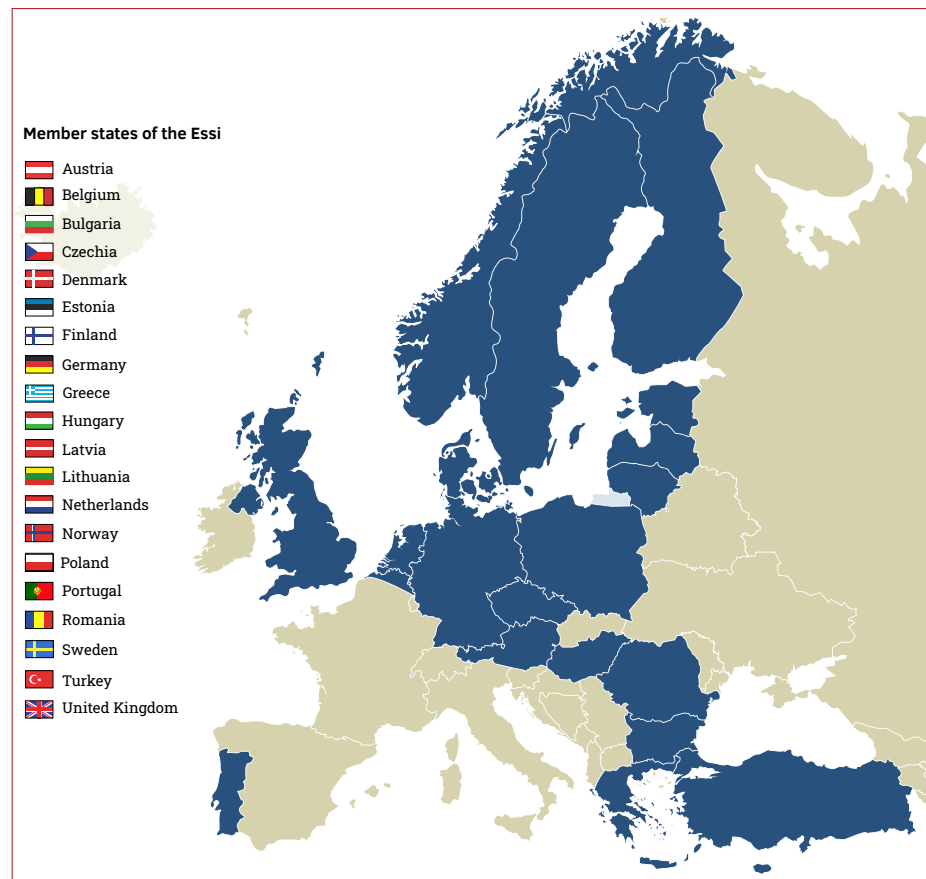
⁶ European Commission DG for Defence Industry and Space website: *SAFE | Security Action for Europe*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/node/832_en.



The case of integrated air and missile defence

A perfect example in this regard would be an ensemble of capabilities for the Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) of Europe against a broad array of threats, ranging from drones to hypersonic missiles. Regardless of buzzwords such as “Drone Wall” and alike, Europe’s IAMD is already organised and well-functioning in operational terms within the NATO framework, as proven by the shot-down of drones entering the Polish airspace from Belarus in September 2025.⁷ The EU should not reinvent the wheel, but rather co-fund the cooperative development and procurement of sensors, effectors and command & control systems by European companies for European armed forces, to be federated according to NATO standards within the allied IAMD. That would be the most effective way to allocate the bulk of EDIP funding for a flagship project serving both the operational needs of Europe’s defence and European strategic autonomy in technological and industrial terms.

FIGURE 2 Member states of the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI)



From Italy’s point of view, EDIP is complementary to SAFE insofar as it encourages European defence cooperation in the mid-long term, and there is a dire necessity to upgrade and expand Italian IAMD capabilities. Moreover, through MBDA, Leonardo and their supply chain, the Italian defence industrial base is able to both contribute to an EDIP flagship project and benefit from its investments. The position of Germany is crucial in this regard, for two reasons. First, Berlin increased its defence budget by 30 per cent from

⁷ Marrone, Alessandro, “Estonia: i Mig russi, gli F-35 italiani ed una NATO più europea”, in *AffarInternazionali*, 20 September 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=114147>.



»» **The rearmament of Germany, mostly on a national basis, is set to change in the mid-long term the military and industrial balance within the EU**

2024 to 2025, and it will reach 83 billion euros in 2026. Second, the German government launched already in 2022 the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) for the joint procurement of IAMD capabilities (Figure 2) – however most of such capabilities are from the US and Israel, with a negative impact on the perspective of autonomously developing the technologies that enable them. The rearmament of Germany, mostly on a national basis, is set to change in the mid-long term the military and industrial balance within the EU,⁸ and both Brussels institutions and other member states have to take it into account to find win-win solutions, starting from the IAMD case. This is particularly important from an Italian perspective, considering the growing industrial cooperation with German companies in the land, missile and space sectors.

The EDIP transatlantic balancing act

To ensure that EDIP is genuinely geared towards strengthening European production capacities, a clause has been introduced stipulating that the cost of components originating outside the EU and partner countries, and, with regard to the Ukraine Support Instrument, Ukraine, must not exceed 35 per cent of total costs.⁹ Moreover, no component may originate from non-partner countries that are in conflict with the European Union's defence and security interests: a rather nuanced clause that places important political choices on participating member states and EU institutions when it comes to the selection of trusted non-EU suppliers, i.e. from the US. That percentage has been a thorny issue, causing much of the delay in approving the regulation.

Italy has strongly advocated for the 65-35 per cent balance, in order to safeguard important supply chains involving the UK, Norway, Canada and the US. The interdependence with the US is both a technical and political issue, considering the tensions brought by the Trump administration in the transatlantic relations and the EU's quest for a higher degree of strategic autonomy. Considering the EDTIB's multiple dependencies on American supplies, the 65-35 per cent balance allows a robust growth of intra-UE industrial capacities without creating the huge increase of costs and timelines for the military customers – and thus the EU taxpayers – that would be caused by a total closure of existing extra-EU supply chains. Moreover, such a balance did fit well with the Italian – and largely European – balancing act to avoid a trade war with NATO's most important ally.

A two-way street with the Ukrainian industry

As previously mentioned, a significant share of the EDIP funds, amounting to 20 per cent of the total, will be allocated to the Ukraine Support Instrument, whose objective is to support and modernise the Ukrainian defence industry and to promote its greater integration into the European defence industrial ecosystem.¹⁰ Although modest in absolute terms, this sum represents

⁸ Nones, Michele, "Quo vadis Germania?", in *AffarInternazionali*, 23 December 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=115569>.

⁹ Council of the EU, "European Defence Industry Programme", in *Explainers*, updated 8 December 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-industry-programme/#ramp-up>.

¹⁰ Ibid.



»» *The combination of EDIP and SAFE truly represents a quantum leap in terms of European investments in defence: a total of 281 billion euros has been tabled from 2026 to 2034*

a significant share of the allocation envisaged for the EDIP. This choice demonstrates, on the one hand, that military support to Ukraine through the backing of its defence industry remains, at present, a priority for Europe. On the other hand, it highlights how that same Ukrainian industry represents an opportunity for the EDTIB to integrate, as far as possible, innovation, technologies, processes and expertise developed within an industrial sector directly involved in the conflict with Russia.

Finally, a novel element introduced by the EDIP Regulation is the establishment of an EU-level security of supply regime aimed at ensuring the availability of defence products even in the event of shocks, thereby increasing the resilience of the system. Such a regime had previously been discussed in several formats, including within the European Defence Agency, and linking it to EDIP funding may increase the possibilities of making it real. This approach will, in theory, take the form of a set of measures designed to ensure that defence products, as well as the related components, raw materials and critical services required for their production, remain available even in times of crisis.¹¹

A puzzle or a patchwork? Prioritisation as mitigation

In conclusion, the combination of EDIP and SAFE truly represents a quantum leap in terms of European investments in defence: a total of 281 billion euros has been tabled from 2026 to 2034, providing the kind of long-term visibility which enabled defence industries in Europe to make their own investments in production capacities. In addition, the activation of the Stability Pact escape clause for defence investments, up to 1,5 per cent of GDP with respect to the 2021 threshold, allowed by the second von der Leyen Commission and activated by 16 member states including Germany (Figure 3),¹² enables more national investments in this sector.

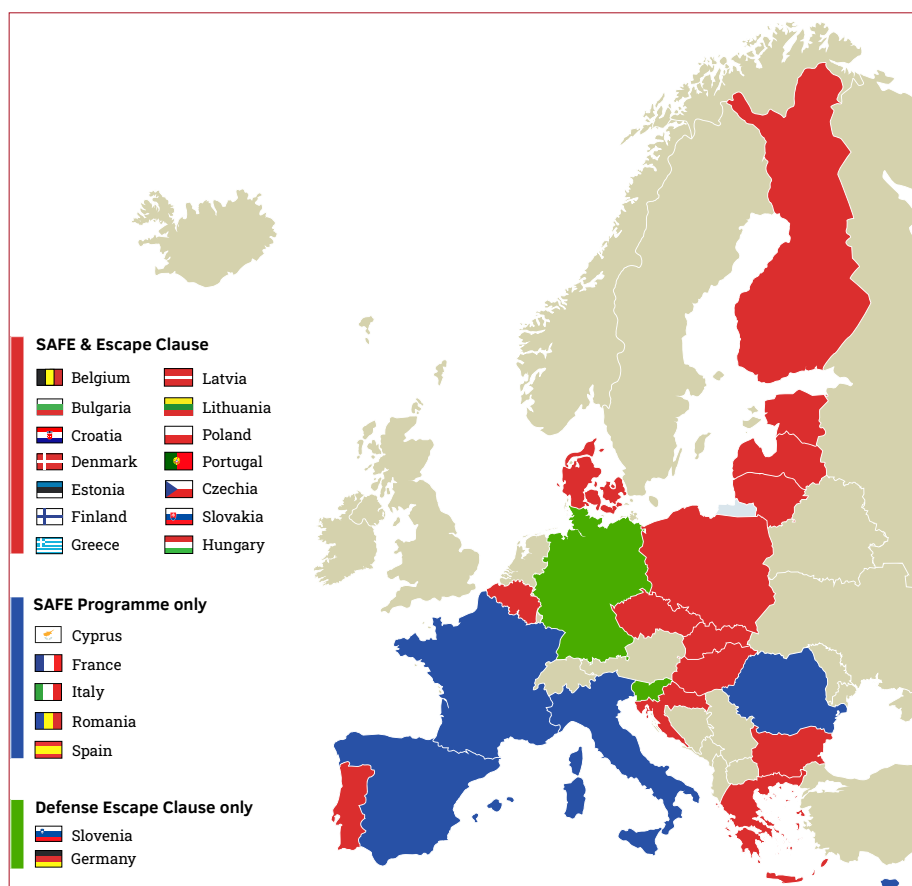
However, despite the flourishing of strategic documents in 2024-2025¹³ – not to mention pre-existing initiatives like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD) or EDF – the EU toolbox for defence industrial policy still looks more like a patchwork of stand-alone elements than a coherent puzzle. Such a fragmented reality is here to stay, and no quick-fix solution is available. Against this backdrop, each member state will continue to make its own procurement choices within the perimeter of targets set by the NATO Defence Planning Process, according to military, industrial and political evaluations on a national basis.

¹¹ European Parliament and Council of the EU, *Regulation (EU) 2025/2643 of 16 December 2025*, cit.

¹² Council of the EU, “National Escape Clause for Defence Expenditure”, in *Explainers*, updated 10 October 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/national-escape-clause-for-defence-expenditure-nec/#which>.

¹³ European Commission, *A New European Defence Industrial Strategy: Achieving EU Readiness through a Responsive and Resilient European Defence Industry* (JOIN/2024/10), 5 March 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celeX:52024JC0010>; European Commission, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030* (JOIN/2025/120), 19 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0120>; European Commission, *Preserving Peace - Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030* (JOIN/2025/27), 16 October 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0027>.

FIGURE 3 Activation of the Stability Pact escape clause and request of SAFE loans



The only mitigation of such persistent European fragmentation may come from flagship projects, depending on their implementation in 2028-2034. If EDIP will distribute and dilute its financial firepower on a number of small projects, by following the EDF negative example, it will not benefit in a meaningful way Europe's military capabilities, nor its industrial capacities. In contrast, if it prioritises most of the budget on IAMD and a maximum of another couple of pan-European priorities, it will make the difference by becoming the most effective element of the EU puzzle – or patchwork – for the sake of European cooperation and integration.

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Sfide e interrogativi della coalizione dei volenterosi

Nicolò Murgia

19 Febbraio 2026

ANALISI EUROPA

Sono continuati anche nel 2026 gli incontri della “Coalizione dei volenterosi”, per discutere delle iniziative di supporto all’Ucraina messe sul tavolo dai paesi leader del gruppo, Francia e Regno Unito, in particolare il possibile invio di una “[forza multinazionale](#)” per svolgere attività di peacekeeping e training delle forze ucraine.

La posizione dei Paesi europei e la missione in Ucraina

Una missione europea su territorio ucraino rappresenta l’iniziativa più dibattuta e divisiva all’interno della coalizione, tanto che nel comunicato dell’ultimo vertice di gennaio si prospetta un contributo di “volenterosi tra i volenterosi”, ossia di un gruppo ristretto all’interno della coalizione. La Coalizione dei volenterosi presenta un formato, quello per l’appunto descritto dal nome, reso necessario dalla prospettiva dell’imposizione di un veto di Paesi come Ungheria e Slovacchia in ambito UE, e da un rifiuto americano di un coinvolgimento diretto della NATO, rispetto ad un’iniziativa di supporto all’Ucraina come quella messa sul tavolo dal Regno Unito e dalla Francia.

La coalizione include formalmente anche paesi che condividono le posizioni di fondo del gruppo, in particolare l’importanza della capacità dell’Ucraina di difendersi e il primato della sua sovranità come pilastro di un accordo di pace, ma che non hanno intenzione, per ragioni diverse, di mandare truppe in territorio ucraino. L’Italia è un [esempio eminente](#) di questa categoria di Paesi. Per quanto concerne quindi l’impiego di personale militare, che sia in ambito terrestre, navale o aereo, si profila l’emergere di una coalizione di volenterosi all’interno della coalizione dei volenterosi, con alla guida [Francia e Regno Unito](#). L’iniziativa si presenta dunque come una piattaforma di carattere multilaterale all’interno della quale costruire consenso e adesione circa un’iniziativa potenzialmente più incisiva come l’invio di truppe, con un coinvolgimento di altri membri in formato ridotto.

La coalizione non è la sola novità multilaterale fuori dai quadri NATO e UE quanto a sicurezza dell’Europa emersa negli ultimi anni. Dalla fine del 2024 i Ministri della Difesa, e a volte degli Esteri, di Francia, Germania, Italia, Polonia e Regno Unito – il [cosiddetto formato E5](#) – hanno iniziato a incontrarsi regolarmente per discutere di Ucraina e non solo. Il fatto che tre capitali del formato E5 – Berlino, Roma e Varsavia – rimangano al momento fuori dalla paventata missione di peacekeeping, oltre che rilevante sul piano politico per il peso di questi Paesi, esclude il contributo della prima potenza economica e di alcune delle principali potenze militari in Europa. In particolare, la Germania, nella persona del cancelliere Merz, si pone in modo molto cauto rispetto ad un [rischio di escalation con la Russia](#), pur confermando il proprio significativo supporto di carattere economico, mentre per la Polonia si tratta di una

valutazione strategica, che riserva l'impiego delle proprie forze armate per la propria difesa nazionale a fronte di un attacco russo ritenuto possibile se non probabile nell'orizzonte del 2030.



Le implicazioni dell'assenza di USA e NATO dalla partita

Il rifiuto o il tentennamento di diversi paesi rispetto all'invio di truppe in Ucraina è da imputare in parte significativa anche all'incertezza del supporto americano, dato che rimane indefinito se e come si manifesterebbe, sia nel contesto operativo di una missione di peacekeeping sia in caso di escalation da parte della Russia. Un altro importante ostacolo a livello operativo, oltre all'incertezza di poter contare sugli abilitatori strategici forniti dagli Stati Uniti come, ad esempio, le capacità di intelligence e ricognizione, deriva dalle complessità di pianificare e dispiegare una simile missione fuori dalla NATO, senza dunque un comando militare integrato ed una struttura di staff civile già esistenti su cui poter contare. A questo si aggiunge poi che un eventuale invio di truppe non rientrerebbe negli attuali piani regionali di deterrenza e difesa collettiva dell'Alleanza Atlantica, e richiederebbe dunque uno sforzo ulteriore rispetto al robusto contributo già fornito dagli stessi Paesi europei alla postura difensiva NATO.

In questo contesto, uno sviluppo positivo rispetto alle ipotesi iniziali, che prevedevano sostanzialmente una forza esclusivamente di terra, è l'allargamento della missione anche ad altri domini operativi, navale ed aereo, che permette contributi mirati da parte di più Paesi allargando così il bacino di forze disponibili. Il contributo, ad esempio, della Turchia si sostanzierebbe in assetti navali, mentre quello della Svezia nel dispiegamento dei propri velivoli da combattimento.

Negoziati di pace e forza di peacekeeping

Un ulteriore elemento di complessità deriva per gli stati europei dal fatto di essere stati finora di fatto marginalizzati nelle negoziazioni, a guida americana, per raggiungere il cessate il fuoco che è necessario per procedere poi con la missione di peacekeeping. Questo contribuisce infatti a rendere ulteriormente incerte le prospettive di questa missione. Non essere pienamente coinvolti nella negoziazione di un accordo, e avere dunque un'influenza limitata sulla definizione di quest'ultimo, significa non poter influenzare lo scenario nel quale un'eventuale operazione militare della coalizione dovrebbe operare. Non è possibile, ad esempio, considerare scollegati due elementi come i termini di un eventuale accordo tra Russia e Ucraina e le regole di ingaggio a cui dovrebbero sottostare le forze dei Paesi europei. A settembre 2025 Putin ha affermato che truppe europee dispiegate in Ucraina sarebbero un [bersaglio legittimo](#) per le forze armate russe. Questa posizione si riflette nel più volte reiterato rifiuto manifestato dal Cremlino rispetto ad un eventuale dispiegamento di truppe NATO in Ucraina nel quadro delle garanzie di sicurezza richieste da Zelensky. Essere parte dei negoziati per un accordo di pace potrebbe invece profilare i paesi europei come interlocutori da tenere in altra considerazione, contribuendo a rendere più robusta la posizione della missione di peacekeeping che seguirebbe. In altre parole, un'accettazione da parte della Russia di truppe europee in Ucraina dovrebbe necessariamente passare per la negoziazione del cessate il fuoco.

I rischi per l'Europa di una ripresa dell'offensiva russa

Dispiegare una forza simbolica nel numero a fini di deterrenza rispetto ad una possibile ripresa dell'offensiva russa in Ucraina post-cessate il fuoco è una scommessa pericolosa nel momento in cui l'Europa non si considera pronta ad affrontare un conflitto con la Russia. Data inoltre la scarsa fiducia che gli stessi europei esprimono a tal riguardo, il bluff rischia di essere chiamato troppo facilmente da Mosca, rendendo la missione di peacekeeping uno strumento puramente simbolico, destinato a svanire nel momento in cui Putin dovesse decidere di tornare ad attaccare l'Ucraina. Se così fosse, un'eventuale ritirata europea dall'Ucraina alla ripresa delle ostilità russe avrebbe conseguenze estremamente più gravi per la credibilità dell'Europa quanto a sicurezza e difesa, e per la stessa pace e stabilità del Vecchio Continente, del ritiro NATO dall'Afghanistan nel 2021. Infatti, abbandonare Kyiv dopo essersi esposti in loco per difenderla, aumenterebbe il rischio che il Cremlino, una volta caduto malamente il velo della missione di peacekeeping, voglia testare direttamente la coesione della NATO e dell'Unione Europea con un attacco ad uno Stato membro.

Tornando alla situazione attuale, i risultati della coalizione dei volenterosi fino ad ora potrebbero limitarsi ad aver sottolineato i limiti dell'UE per via degli impedimenti ad un *decision making* unanime e coerente a causa di paesi come l'Ungheria e la Slovacchia, e ad un esercizio di *political signaling*, per dimostrare agli Stati Uniti che l'Europa vuole e può assumersi la responsabilità della propria difesa e sicurezza. Ma se questa volontà, che si dimostra comunque frammentata su aspetti cruciali come l'invio di truppe sul terreno, non dovesse riuscire a convertirsi in capacità, il potenziale della coalizione si esaurirebbe prima del raggiungimento di risultati concreti.

Questo articolo è stato scritto nell'ambito del progetto L'Europa della difesa: cooperazione industriale, governance UE e pilastro europeo della NATO, con il supporto del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, della Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, e della Fondazione Centro Studi sul Federalismo.

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Nicolò Murgia

› The European Pillar of NATO in the Era of US Disengagement*

- › A stronger European pillar within NATO is becoming indispensable to deter Russia and preserve the credibility of the Alliance amid gradual US disengagement and increasingly transactional transatlantic relations.
- › Trump-era decoupling of US and European security is accelerating intra-European debates on burden-sharing, efforts to build political cohesion and mini-lateral formats to sustain collective defence responsibilities.
- › Strengthening the European pillar requires coordinated European defence-industrial integration, joint capability development and reduced dependence on US systems through common procurement and strategic industrial cooperation.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

The Trump administration's gradual disengagement from Europe and its adoption of an increasingly hostile rhetoric towards European NATO allies are profoundly reshaping transatlantic relations. Less than a year and a half into Trump's second presidency, the instances confirming this trend are incredibly numerous and worrying, unfolding at an unprecedented pace and with sheer unpredictability.

A shifting transatlantic balance

Already at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Vice President J.D. Vance clearly indicated that Washington's primary perceived threat was not so much Russia or China, but rather an internal values-based fracture within the West.¹ This ideological dimension has progressively overlapped with strategic assessments and appears increasingly to be asserting itself over the latter. At the same time, US priorities are shifting ever more towards the Western Hemisphere and the Indo Pacific, as stressed by the 2025 National Security Strategy,² and towards power projection capabilities tailored to that specific theatre, therefore not necessarily relevant to the European one. In addition,

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¹ Franke, Benedikt (ed.), *Munich Security Conference 2025: Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions*, Hamburg, Mittler, 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/key-speeches-volume-ii-jd-vance-msc-2025>.

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.



>> The European pillar does not aim to replace NATO, but to strengthen its European component

the diplomatic crisis among NATO allies over Greenland in early 2026 has put the Alliance's very cohesion at risk. Meanwhile, the US administration has shown itself willing to undertake military interventions in Venezuela and Iran, without properly consulting European allies, and in the Iranian case carry highly negative and uncertain consequences.³ To add, following Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for the US and Israel military campaign, Trump threatened to withdraw the US from NATO out of discontent with the European allies' refusal to send military vessels to reopen the strait by force.⁴ All these elements place strain on transatlantic relations, political cohesion, mutual trust, and thus on the very foundations of the Atlantic Alliance.

This does not foreshadow a sudden US withdrawal from NATO – an unlikely scenario in the short term, not least given Washington's own interests, and the place Europe still holds in its grand strategy, even if diminished – but it does make a scenario of gradual and partial disengagement a reality, as confirmed by the withdrawal of 5,000 American troops from Germany announced by Trump at the beginning of May.⁵ In this context, the issue of the European pillar of NATO becomes pivotal.

The European pillar as a pragmatic response

First and foremost, a simple but relevant point must be clarified: the European pillar of NATO does not configure as a European army nor does it have as its future objective the establishment of such a force. The idea of a European army implies full political-military integration, a unified chain of command and shared sovereignty in defence matters, a set of conditions which, under the current EU treaties, is not realistically achievable except in the very long term and at enormous political cost.

The European pillar, by contrast, represents a pragmatic and incremental approach. It does not aim to replace NATO, but to strengthen its European component. It does not presuppose full strategic autonomy, but rather a greater European capacity to act, sustain military effort, and, if necessary, initially withstand the impact of a Russian attack on the Eastern flank. It is a realistic response to a dual constraint. On the one hand, European countries can no longer continue with a business-as-usual approach to transatlantic relations, NATO and the defence of Europe, also in light of the developments mentioned above; on the other, full autonomy cannot be pursued, as it is not currently achievable in practical military and technological terms.

It should also be noted that the European pillar already exists to some extent, insofar as 23 states are members of both the EU and NATO. Therefore, the issue is not to establish it from scratch, but to frame it clearly from a conceptual standpoint, strengthen it and make it coherent and strategically oriented.

³ Edwards, Christian, "Europe Didn't Want an Iran War, Yet Trump Is Saddling It with the Consequences", in *CNN*, 2 April 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/04/02/europe/europe-nato-iran-war-trump-consequences-intl>.

⁴ Irish, John and Steve Holland, "Trump Threatens NATO Exit, Scaling Up Tensions with Allies", in *Reuters*, 1 April 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/trump-threatens-nato-exit-scaling-up-tensions-with-allies-2026-04-01>.

⁵ Lister, Tim, "The Loss of 5,000 US Troops in Germany Is Just the Tip of the Challenge Facing Europe", in *CNN*, 3 May 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/05/03/europe/germany-trump-troops-europe-intl>.



>> A tangible indicator of the already ongoing strengthening process of European responsibilities is the recent redistribution of commands within the Alliance's military structure

From burden-sharing to responsibility-sharing

A tangible indicator of the already ongoing strengthening process of European responsibilities is the recent redistribution of commands within the Alliance's military structure. For the first time, operational-level commands will shift from US to European leadership. Italy will assume the command of the Joint Force Command (JFC) Naples, while the United Kingdom will lead the JFC Norfolk, and Poland and Germany will alternate at the head of the JFC Brunssum.⁶ This is not merely an organisational adjustment: it represents the concrete expression of a shift in military responsibilities within NATO. The United States retains leadership of the three theatre components command – taking up responsibility for Allied Maritime Command in Northwood from the United Kingdom, and maintaining leadership of Allied Land Command in Izmir and Allied Air Command in Ramstein – and of the overall command chain, but direct leadership of key operational commands will be entrusted to European allies. This process is taking place in a context of a gradual relative reduction of the US presence in Europe and increasing European operational capacity. Interestingly, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) remains however under US leadership.

This overall development is not just a political signal, but also carries strategic and practical implications: it gives European forces a greater voice in NATO planning and execution, and creates a base of experience and credibility that can foster further integrated strategic capabilities at the European level.

A more urgent political debate

At the political and strategic level, the need to strengthen the European pillar is becoming more and more evident. The Greenland crisis represented a turning point, particularly for the Nordic, Baltic and Eastern European states, historically more cautious about strengthening the European dimension of defence out of fear of weakening ties with Washington and thereby undermining US security guarantees against the immediate Russian threat. After the Greenland crisis, precisely because they have always relied predominantly on the US vis-à-vis the Russian threat, these same countries are those feeling most urgently the need to uphold the guarantees of Article 5 even in the absence of any actual American contribution, or in the event of a significant downsizing. At the same time, they remain the most willing to accommodate Trump's demands, despite the difficulty in deciphering the US president's conflicting requests.⁷

The perception that US security guarantees under the Trump administration are no longer as solid as in the past – also in light of a softer stance towards Moscow and attempts to normalise US-Russia relations – altered the intra-European debate.⁸ Adding to this is Trump's adoption of positions which

⁶ NATO, *European Allies to Take on New Leadership Roles in NATO's Command Structure*, 6 February 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/02/06/european-allies-to-take-on-new-leadership-roles-in-natos-command-structure>.

⁷ Hartog, Eva, "We Don't Know what Trump Wants from Us, Estonia's Defense Minister Protests", in *Politico EU*, 1 April 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=8210024>.

⁸ Erlanger, Steven, "What Europe Learned from the Greenland Crisis", in *The New York Times*,



»» **Europeans are not yet fully aligned on the assessment of the structural US disengagement from Europe**

are highly controversial and deeply unpopular in Europe, on sensitive issues such as the allies' commitment to the NATO mission in Afghanistan.⁹ Shared sacrifice, in terms of casualties in the conflict, has always been a unifying factor between the United States and its allies, despite the discontent caused by the unilateral withdrawal of American forces from the country completed during the Biden administration. Furthermore, from a European perspective, that sacrifice demonstrated the alliance's readiness to intervene in support of one of its members under Article 5 commitment, activated following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

It must be underlined that the US call for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own defence, reducing dependence on American armed forces, is not new to the Trump presidency. Previous administrations, starting in particular with that of Barack Obama, which made the "Pivot to Asia" a conceptual cornerstone of its foreign policy, had already signalled to European countries that a greater contribution to defence was demanded from them.¹⁰ The innovative element of the Trump administration's posture towards European NATO members, beyond its bargaining rhetoric, is the decoupling of US security from that of Europe, dismantling a foundational aspect of the Euro-Atlantic relationship as it had been understood since World War II.

The key issue, however, remains the perception of the transatlantic relationship. Europeans are not yet fully aligned on the assessment of the structural US disengagement from Europe, including its features, timing and implications, nor on the extent and forms to which they should prepare to assume direct responsibilities. However, for the European pillar to be credible, political cohesion is essential.

The role of formats such as the E5 – Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Poland and Italy – may turn out to be fundamental in building critical mass at this stage, given the political, economic and military weight of the countries involved. It represents an example of minilateralism outside of pre-existing institutions, where different sensitivities and interests can lead to vetoing dynamics that significantly reduce their effectiveness.

However, difficulties in Franco-German relations, illustrated for instance by the complexities surrounding the Future Combat Aircraft System (FCAS) programme, demonstrate how challenging it is to maintain cohesion even within such a limited core group.¹¹ Similarly, fragmentation within the "coalition of the willing" regarding a possible European-led peacekeeping mission in Ukraine highlights the persistent political challenges to achieving an adequate level of unity.¹² Last but not least, the European politico-strategic response to the blockade of the Hormuz Straits seems to get traction within a smaller

24 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/24/world/europe/sovereignty-european-union-nato.html>.

⁹ Edwards, Christian, "Trump Angers Allies with Claim NATO Troops 'Stayed a Little Back' from Front Lines in Afghanistan", in *CNN*, 23 January 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/23/world/trump-nato-afghanistan-frontlines-intl>.

¹⁰ Gardner, Andrew, "Freedom is Not Free, Obama Tells Europe", in *Politico EU*, 26 March 2014, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=145289>.

¹¹ Lunday, Chris et al., "France and Germany's Next-Generation Fighter Jet Project Is 'Dead'", in *Politico EU*, 6 February 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=7899219>.

¹² Murgia, Nicolò, "Sfide e interrogativi della coalizione dei volenterosi", in *AffarInternazionali*, 19 February 2026, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=116139>.



»» **The posture of the Trump administration on defence industry issues introduces an additional ambivalence**

format involving France, Germany and the UK.¹³ The proliferation of ad-hoc groupings, including different European countries, and possibly like-minded countries from NATO or the Indo-Pacific, signals Europe's efforts to adjust to US disengagement from consultation within the Alliance through other mini-lateral formats. Such an adjustment may favour the build-up of a European pillar of NATO, but there is no automatism in this regard.

Capabilities, industry and credibility

Against this backdrop, the EU has also changed and developed its approach to defence, with a focus on capabilities and defence industrial policy. European Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius has emphasised the need to develop not merely national capabilities assigned through NATO targets, but also pan-European capabilities, particularly strategic enablers that currently depend heavily on the United States: strategic airlift, air-to-air refuelling, missile defence, space-based intelligence and command-and-control capabilities.¹⁴

In this context, instruments such as the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), introduced at the end of 2025, and its flagship defence projects are potentially transformative. Joint projects such as the European Air Shield and the European Drone Defence Initiative can concretely strengthen the European pillar through the joint development of critical capabilities, limiting external dependence while fostering industrial cohesion and interoperability.¹⁵ In certain areas, such as counter-drone systems, US technological maturity is not necessarily dominant, and the operational requirements are evolving quickly. This opens space for European technological leadership, potentially avoiding the emergence of structural dependence.

In this regard, the economic dimension is fundamental. Increases in national defence budgets, the approval of European programmes such as the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and flexibility regarding military spending within the EU's 3 per cent deficit threshold are clear prerequisites in creating the conditions for strengthening the European pillar.¹⁶ However, caution is warranted: increased investments in Europe are only a prerequisite. If new resources are absorbed into national procurement, fragmentation will increase and dependence on the United States will remain high. The issue is not only quantitative, that is, burden sharing, but qualitative: which strategic capabilities to develop, and to what degree of integration.

The posture of the Trump administration on defence industry issues introduces an additional ambivalence. On the one hand, Washington calls on Europeans to

¹³ France and UK, *Joint Statement by President Macron and Prime Minister Starmer, Co-chairs of the International Summit on the Strait of Hormuz*, 17 April 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/04/17/joint-statement-by-president-macron-and-prime-minister-starmer-co-chairs-of-the-international-summit-on-the-strait-of-hormuz>.

¹⁴ European Commission, *Commissioner Kubilius's speech at the European Defence Agency Annual Conference*, 22 January 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_313.

¹⁵ Murgia, Nicolò and Alessandro Marrone, "The European Defence Industry Programme: The Last Piece of the EU Defence Puzzle?", in *IAI Briefs*, No. 26 | 02 (February 2026), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/21481>.

¹⁶ European Commission website: *Acting on Defence to Protect Europeans*, https://commission.europa.eu/node/37191_en.



»» *The objective cannot be to “emancipate” themselves from the United States, but rather to become indispensable*

spend more to take responsibility for Europe’s defence; on the other, it expects that much of this strengthening will occur through increased purchases of US equipment.¹⁷ Furthermore, an additional complication arises from the impact that military operations such as the one currently underway in Iran have on the delivery of the very American systems that Trump is urging Europeans to purchase. The need for the United States to deploy these weapons and ammunition against Iran has a negative impact on the timeframe within which the European countries that have made these purchases will receive their deliveries.¹⁸ This, in turn, generates further mistrust in Europe concerning the reliability of both US supplies and the American security umbrella.

Here lies a structural tension: strengthening the European pillar also means developing an increasingly autonomous industrial base, but without alienating US military support to Europe. In the short to medium term, Europeans cannot operate without certain American strategic enablers. For this reason, the objective cannot be to “emancipate” themselves from the United States, but rather to become indispensable, or at least more important, in Washington’s eyes, transforming dependence into interdependence. A strong European pillar must make Europe a credible military interlocutor capable of assuming primary responsibility in the event of a crisis on the continent, and therefore more influential in the changing transatlantic relations.

From dependency to interdependency: The path to readiness and relevance

A scenario in which Russia decides to test Article 5 during a phase of gradual US disengagement and still incomplete European capability development represents a concrete possibility, as highlighted by the intelligence services of several European countries.¹⁹ It is plausible that a Trump administration decision on how to respond to a Russian attack would not be immediate, but embedded in a negotiating logic aimed at extracting benefits from European interlocutors and/or Russia. In such a critical contingency, the readiness of the European response would be decisive, not only militarily, but politically: to withstand Russian escalation and to signal to Washington that Europe is a responsible and militarily capable actor worthy of support and less vulnerable to pressures.

Strengthening the European pillar of NATO means recognising the evolution of the transatlantic relationship towards a more transactional approach and a more limited US support, and adapting the European posture and might accordingly. It requires greater and shared European responsibilities within NATO, investment in common capabilities and human resources, greater EU-NATO coordination and an increase in industrial production capacity, while

¹⁷ Kayali, Laura, “Pentagon Aggressively Lobbies EU against Buy European Weapons Push”, in *Politico EU*, 19 February 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=7969080>.

¹⁸ Adamowski, Jaroslaw, “Baltic Nations Brace for Impact of Iran War Delaying US Weapons Shipments”, in *Defense News*, 20 April 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/04/20/baltic-nations-brace-for-impact-of-iran-war-delaying-us-weapons-shipments>.

¹⁹ Nöstlinger, Nette, “German Spy Chief: Russia Could Test NATO Loyalty to ‘Mutual Defense’ Clause”, in *Politico EU*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=5791815>.



bearing in mind that for Europe the Russian threat remains the priority. A European pillar is not an alternative to NATO; on the contrary, it is a *conditio sine qua non* for preserving the Alliance's credibility, effectiveness and usefulness in a more uncertain international security environment.

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The Future of European Defence: Industrial Ambition, Operational Constraints and Flexible Partnerships

FEDERICO CASTIGLIONI AND LUCA CINCIRIPINI

The debate over the future of European defence has accelerated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the EU seeks to become a real geopolitical actor, Brussels sits in a difficult position, having to reconcile loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance, cooperation with pivotal extra-EU partners such as the UK, and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. European defence has long developed along two strands: an operational-military pillar and an industrial-technological one. Today the latter appears the more active, through the European Defence Fund and the European Defence Industry Programme, while ReArm Europe supports the financing of national rearmament. These instruments, however, generate capabilities that remain largely national. Making them European is a largely unresolved issue, for which two routes are available: Treaty reform or the optimisation of the existing institutional architecture, each with its own constraints. This paper maps the current proposals for change, including the ambitious establishment of a European Security Council. It assesses how European governments could reconcile the EU's industrial and financial activism with the Union's institutional constraints, building defence formats flexible enough to function yet capable of making Europe more autonomous.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has accelerated a broader transformation in European defence governance. The question is no longer whether the European Union should do more in defence, but how European cooperation can be organised in a strategic environment marked by capability shortfalls, industrial fragmentation, the urgency of supporting Ukraine and uncertainty over how burdens will be distributed across NATO. This new ambition operates within an architecture that remains highly intergovernmental and dependent on national choices.¹ Discussions at political and academic levels have captured several partially overlapping pathways for the evolution of European governance: a more European NATO, a new European multilateralism and EU-led defence cooperation.² European defence governance is potentially not moving towards a single institutional model but towards a layered system that combines EU instruments, NATO frameworks, minilateral formats and structured partnerships with third countries. This evolution influences how the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) should be framed. The following analysis will assess the European defence architecture, highlighting the main proposals for transformation, and

¹ Scazzieri, Luigi, "Towards an EU 'Defence Union'?", in *CER Policy Briefs*, January 2025, <https://www.cer.eu/node/11298>.

² Blockmans, Steven et al., *More Europe in Defence – Three Pathways*, Task Force Report, May 2026, <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=57966>.

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taking into account current relationships with extra-EU countries that are pivotal to the Union's security such as UK. The document will finally present some recommendations for Italian policymakers.

1. European defence architecture: Industry and CSDP governance

The EU has a complex and multi-layered defence governance. The process, traditionally developed at the edge between intergovernmentalism and ambitious common goals, has not been linear: operational capacity, framed by the intergovernmental logic of the CSDP, and the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), increasingly influenced by policies at supranational level, have developed unevenly and advanced more in reaction to external shocks than by design. The following sections trace this trajectory, from the first capabilities assembled outside the Treaties to the most recent proposals, underlining the contradictions and the potential of the existing common frameworks.

1.1 The long pathway of the EU defence policy

Since the early 1990s, European defence developed along two distinct tracks: an operational-military pillar, connected with the intergovernmental logic of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and an industrial-and-research strand, initially marginal but lately more dynamic. The operational branch was initially built outside the Treaties. The first step was the Franco-German Brigade, set-up in the late 1980s, which was a binational army unit of roughly 5,000 troops aimed at being the first concrete attempt to build a European military capacity outside both NATO's integrated command and the Community framework.

The brigade then grew into a new formation, the Eurocorps, established at the 1992 La Rochelle summit and subsequently enlarged to include as framework nation Belgium, Spain and Luxembourg, followed by the accession of Poland in 2021. The Eurocorps functions as a permanent multinational corps headquarters, based in Strasbourg. The organisation holds no standing forces of its own: only the staff and command structure are permanent, while the troops are committed by the member states on a case-by-case basis, when a deployment is decided. Because the corps can be placed at the disposal of both NATO and the EU, it never became, strictly speaking, an EU body, but remained an instrument owned by its member nations.³

In early 2001, the EU defence mechanism became institutionalised, moving beyond multilateral cooperation. In order to underpin the Union's level of ambition while keeping it grounded in intergovernmentalism, three structures were created: the Political and Security Committee (PSC, still widely known by its French acronym COPS), formed of ambassador-level national representatives; the EU Military Committee, composed of the member states' Chiefs of Defence which provides military advice to the PSC within the Council; and the EU Military Staff, today embedded in the European External Action Service and staffed by senior (three-star) officers, tasked with early warning and – through the Military Planning and Conduct Capability set up within it in 2017 – with the command of the Union's non-executive military missions. The Treaty of Lisbon, in 2009, gave these three institutions an organic framework with the launch of the CSDP.

The 2009 Treaty also introduced the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which was activated in 2017 and represents the only Treaty-based form of differentiated integration in the field of defence. Provided for by Articles 42(6) and 46 TEU and Protocol No. 10, PESCO allows those member states that are willing and able to make more demanding commitments on the development of defence capabilities to cooperate more closely within the EU framework, without requiring all member states to advance at the same pace.⁴ On the one hand, it is embedded in the intergovernmental logic of the CSDP and depends on commitments undertaken by member states. On the other, it is organised around collaborative capability development projects, interoperability and defence planning, and therefore connects directly with the EU's

³ Daniel Fiott, *Defence Industrial Cooperation in the European Union. The State, the Firm and Europe*, London/New York, Routledge, 2019.

⁴ PESCO Secretariat website: *About PESCO*, <https://www.pesco.europa.eu/about>.



broader effort to reduce fragmentation and strengthen the EDTIB. Its project-based structure has also made it relevant for cooperation with selected third countries, as shown, for instance, by the participation of Canada, Norway, the UK and the US in the PESCO Military Mobility project.⁵ PESCO's launch was therefore significant because it institutionalised a form of variable geometry inside the CSDP itself.

Alongside these governance structures, the Union also sought to provide itself with deployable forces autonomous from – but coordinated with – NATO. The first attempt was the rapid-reaction force envisaged by the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal: up to 60,000 troops, drawn from voluntary national contributions and meant to be deployable within sixty days, set as a target for 2003 but never actually built. The second was the EU Battlegroups – rotational units of some 1,500 troops, kept on standby and declared operational in 2007 – designed for rapid intervention but never deployed. The Union's actual availability of military forces, therefore, remained mostly voluntary and channelled through member states ad hoc contributions for CSDP missions devoted to peace keeping, security force assistance, countering piracy and disruption of illicit trafficking.⁶ In the last years, the EU has deployed several missions under this framework, such as the European Union Training Missions in Somalia and Mali, the Atalanta naval operation, launched in 2008 off the Horn of Africa, the European Union Military Assistance Mission in Ukraine or Operation Aspidos, launched on 19 February 2024 to protect commercial shipping routes in the Red Sea against Houthi attacks.

While this first operational pillar was expanding, the second strand of European defence – industrial and research policy – followed an inverse trajectory. The first timid step for building an EU autonomous industrial and technological base was the creation of a dedicated structure, the European Defence Agency (EDA), set up in 2004 as an intergovernmental body to mainly support the identification of capability development priorities. The EDA had the specific mandate to secure a stronger European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) by strengthening EU competitiveness in this sector. However, since its very beginning, the organisation was undermined by structural problems, mainly related to lack of investments, resources and empowerment.⁷ As a result, while the EU ambition in CSDP was growing and multiple missions were launched, investments in the EDTIB remained constrained. However, in 2009 the European Commission adopted two directives respectively on defence procurement and intra-EU transfer in order to move towards a European defence market, representing a significant first move by the supranational body into the defence industry sector via its single market competences.

The 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine changed this course. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea, the European Council activated PESCO among willing states as envisaged in the Treaties and the Commission launched a strategy of joint defence investment, the European Defence action plan.⁸ The Commission's plan was channelled through the Preparatory Action on Defence Research and the European Defence Industrial Development Programme, then transformed in 2021 into the European Defence Fund (EDF). The aim was to strengthen European readiness by funding military research and joint capability development.⁹ Over the years the EDA supported the Commission in establishing, and to some extent implementing, this first far-reaching research and development programme, financed and managed at the Union level. As defence research grew in importance, a dedicated Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS) was created in 2020 and a Defence and Space Commissioner appointed in 2024,¹⁰ consolidating the Commission's competences in the sector and significantly increasing the resources

⁵ Council of the EU, *PESCO: Canada, Norway and the United States Will Be Invited to Participate in the Project Military Mobility*, 6 May 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/06/pesco-canada-norway-and-the-united-states-will-be-invited-to-participate-in-the-project-military-mobility>.

⁶ Major, Claudia and Christian Mölling, "EU Battlegroups: What Contribution to European Defence?", in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 8 (June 2011), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/eu-battlegroups-1>.

⁷ Howorth, Jolyon, *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union*, 2nd ed., Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

⁸ European Commission, *European Defence Action Plan: Towards a European Defence Fund*, 30 November 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_16_4088.

⁹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 28 June 2016, <https://europa.eu/!Tr66qx>.

¹⁰ Bolognesi, Pilar Maria, "The New EU Commissioner for Defence and Space", in *UK in a Changing Europe Blog*, 13 January 2025, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/?p=59645>.



available at EU level, in growing coordination with the EDA. In 2025, the Commission launched ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030, a programme that aims to issue 150 billion of SAFE loans and provide fiscal incentives for more national spending, largely through the activation of the national escape clause from the Stability and Growth Pact with the stated purpose to make the Union defence-ready by the end of this decade. As rearmament moves up the political agenda, including investments made on a purely national basis, the Commission is positioning itself as a facilitator of national defence planning: it sets the conditions for the use of 150 billion loans and future EU budget, support national prioritisation and definition of the timelines, while procurement and force generation remain a prerogative of member states.¹¹

This expansion of EU role on defence industrial policy reverses the trajectory long assumed for European defence. Integration was expected to deepen through the operational pillar – common missions, command structures, deployable forces – with industry following demand; instead, the financial and industrial machinery has advanced fastest while the operational pillar has stalled. The Union therefore struggles to translate its industrial ambition into operational weight: the capacity to finance and to produce is moving ahead of the capacity to plan, command and deploy together.

1.2 The Strategic Compass and the future of the operational pillar

In 2022, after the Russian armed forces advanced on Kyiv and failed to take it in a swift blitzkrieg, the EU adopted the long-awaited Strategic Compass, a document conveying a new urgency for the bloc to become a defence actor. The Compass sets a new realistic ambition for European defence, notably establishing a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of up to 5,000 troops drawn from member states' forces. Unlike the EDF and other current industrial programmes, the RDC was not focused on procurement but rather on the operationalisation of European capacities, and therefore within the mandate of the CSDP structures and the supervision of the Political and Security Committee.¹² The RDC – conceived to finally make usable a rapid-reaction instrument the EU had long held on paper – was the third attempt to actually field an operational EU rapid-deployment force after the aforementioned Helsinki Headline Goals and the EU battlegroups. The repeated failure of past EU initiatives of such kind on defence was due to a double constraint to consider.

The first was the heavy national commitment their implementation demanded. The interpretation of Article 41(2) TEU concerning military operations so far barred the Union budget from financing those expenditure, and thus the operational costs of any deployment would fall on the contributing states under the “costs lie where they fall” principle, apart from a small fraction of common costs under the so-called Athena mechanism.¹³ This limitation in financing is translated in the European Union Military Staff chronic under staffing, which is today at odds with the increased responsibilities of this Command, enshrined by the activities of the Clearing House Cell which matches Ukraine's equipment requests against the offers of the member states.

The second hindrance was the unanimity the Council requires to launch a CSDP mission under Article 42(4) TEU; according to this article, the Union can act only as a bloc, and every member state holds a veto over activation. The Treaty does foresee a more flexible route, since Article 44 TEU allows the Council to entrust a task to a group of willing and capable member states, yet this provision has never been used. Combined, the two constraints ensured that no government was willing to trigger and fund a deployment the others could block, thereby limiting the CSDP ambition.

The RDC was meant to ease both problems and especially the reliance on national contributions. The lever exploited was the European Peace Facility, created in 2021 precisely to bear the common costs of military operations and exercises, leaving less burden on the willing member states and providing military

¹¹ European Commission, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030* (JOIN/2025/120), 19 March 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0120>.

¹² Rehr, Jochen (ed.), *Handbook on CSDP. The Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union*, 4th ed., Vienna, Austrian Ministry of Defence, 2021, https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/handbook_on_csdp4.pdf.

¹³ Council of the EU website: *Athena - Financing Security and Defence Military Operations*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/athena>.



support to third countries instrumental to the Union's security. On the force side, the 5,000-strong format lowers the threshold of national commitment, asking states for contingents far less strategically costly than that demanded by a full battlegroup rotation. However, the second constraint, unanimity, remained substantially unchanged, despite the aspiration of the Compass for a wider recourse to qualified majority voting.¹⁴ The underlying hope of the RDC was to respond to sudden crises, like the chaotic evacuation of Afghanistan in 2021, without leaving exposed member states to act alone. Annual live military exercises (MILEX) have already been conducted in the framework of the RDC, with the first one taking place in 2023. Besides this effort, a force of this size is plainly inadequate to provide substantial help in a large-scale war on Europe's neighbourhood, let aside to contribute to EU collective deterrence and defence: two tasks openly beyond the RDC ambition. To address this gap and strengthen EU defence,¹⁵ the last three years have produced several proposals to raise European deterrence and achieve at least closer coordination among national armies, against rising international tension and a NATO increasingly felt as volatile, due to the evolution of the transatlantic relationship sparked by the second Trump administration. The current debate on EU defence outlines two main alternatives to solve both the lingering financial problem and the conundrum related to the force's activation. The first is Treaty reform, a long and contested process likely to meet resistance from some member states and public opinion. The second, where member states' effort is in fact concentrating, is the optimisation of existing legal tools.

On the first option, the European Parliament has drafted a comprehensive proposal. In its resolution of 22 November 2023, which triggered the ordinary revision procedure under Article 48 TEU, Parliament proposed a revision of Article 42(3) TEU establishing a Defence Union whose forces would include a permanent rapid deployment capacity under the operational command of the Union. This force would be a standing force commanded by the EU rather than one assembled from rotating national contingents. The package matches it with generalised qualified-majority voting for CFSP and CSDP, which would dissolve the unanimity constraint, and a new Article 42(4a) TEU requiring Parliament's consent to any civilian or military mission.¹⁶

On the second option, which seems currently more viable, there is a growing attention for the potential of Article 44 TEU, which allows the Council to entrust the implementation of a CSDP task to a group of member states that are willing and have the necessary capability to do so.¹⁷ According to the Article, a defence initiative could be launched by a unanimous Council decision but conducted by the group of member states that showcase availability. This avenue was linked with a possible operationalisation of the RDC, which the Strategic Compass already flagged. In this framework, unanimity remains a pillar of the EU decision-making on defence (since Article 31(4) TEU excludes decisions with military or defence implications from moving to qualified-majority voting) but it allows for the inclusion of multinational operations in the EU defence architecture. The result would be a differentiated integration in which an inner group commits more, alongside member states that, while not opposing the broader strategic goals, are unable or unwilling to follow.

On 29 January 2026, ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council, the Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski explored the feasibility of a "European Legion", initially of brigade size, open to citizens of the member states and possibly of the candidate countries, and financed from the EU budget, under the political control of the Political and Security Committee.¹⁸ Sikorski conceived the force not for the deterrence of Russia but

¹⁴ Lațici, Tania, "Qualified Majority Voting in Foreign and Security Policy. Pros and Cons", in *EPRS Briefings*, January 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)659451](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2021)659451).

¹⁵ The simultaneous reflection going on in Europe about a European pillar of NATO and/or its Europeanisation is beyond the scope of this paper since it would not enhance the EU defence discussed here. In this regards see, among others, Murgia, Nicolò, "The European Pillar of NATO in the Era of US Disengagement", in *IAI Briefs*, No. 26|19 (May 2026), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/22223>.

¹⁶ Meijer, Karsten and Arjen Klein, "A Proposal Towards a European Defence Union. Legal Implications of the European Parliament's Proposal for Treaty Reform in the Area of Defence", in *Verfassungsblog*, 23 April 2024, <https://verfassungsblog.de/?p=80408>.

¹⁷ Bakker, Anne et al., "Spearheading European Defence. Employing the Lisbon Treaty for a Stronger CSDP", in *Clingendael Reports*, September 2016, <https://www.clingendael.org/node/5465>.

¹⁸ Anwer, Ammar, "New EU Force? Sikorski Proposes 'European Legion' to Counter Growing Threats", in *TVP World*, 30 January 2026, <https://tvpworld.com/91331538/>.



for lower-intensity crises, such as those in North Africa or the Balkans, underlying how the EU should de facto accept to lay military personnel with common budget. The distinctive trait of this proposal, which would align it with article 31, is that its personnel would be recruited directly, not seconded as national contingents, which is what makes it a first step towards an EU army even if Sikorski rejects that label. Yet, this is also where the proposal meets its legal limit: a standing military force financed from the EU budget collides with article 41(2) TEU, which keeps military operational expenditure off the Union budget. The financing problem, in this case, would be only postponed, as the budget for the military staff (the legion itself) would not be usable in a deployment phase.

2. Cooperation with non-EU member states

When discussing military cooperation, the distinction between EU member states and non-member countries remains legally and institutionally relevant. Yet it should not necessarily be seen as an obstacle to developing structured partnerships and flexible cooperation models. In a strategic environment marked by common threats, capability shortfalls and growing pressure on Europe's defence-industrial base, cooperation with like-minded partners has become increasingly necessary, particularly where there is a convergence of interests, objectives and values.

2.1 Coalitions of the willing and minilateral formats of defence cooperation

One of the clearest consequences of the post-2022 international security environment has been the growing relevance of coalitions of the willing and minilateral defence formats. Smaller groups of able and willing states can often move faster than EU-wide formats, especially when cooperation is organised around concrete outputs such as military assistance to Ukraine, ammunition supply, air defence, training, procurement or specific capability gaps.¹⁹ The added value of these coalitions is their problem-solving function. They allow politically aligned states to act without waiting for unanimity and can be tailored to specific regional or functional needs. In this sense, bilateral and minilateral defence clusters can be considered one of the most realistic ways to strengthen European military capabilities where EU-wide solutions are difficult. Existing or emerging examples include the Joint Expeditionary Force, Nordic-Baltic formats, the European Air Transport Command, the German-Dutch military integration experience, the Common Armoured Vehicle System and Ukraine-related capability coalitions.²⁰ At the same time, coalitions of the willing may create institutional risks. They may improve responsiveness, but they can also reinforce intergovernmentalism and fragment the CSDP if they remain disconnected from EU priorities.²¹ The relevant question is, therefore, not whether such coalitions should exist, but how they can be linked to a broader European defence ecosystem. The EU can play an enabling role by financing cooperation, aligning projects with capability priorities, supporting joint procurement and ensuring that clusters strengthen rather than duplicate European defence objectives.

One of the most interesting and discussed ideas to reform the EU defence governance came in January 2026 and was advanced by the Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius. The Commissioner published a paper on the "Europeanisation" of European conventional defence, arguing that funding and industrial capacity are not enough and that the main obstacle is the absence of a leadership platform able to decide quickly, given the unanimity that still governs the CSDP. The proposal was to formalise the informal E5 format (France, Germany, UK, Italy, Poland) into a permanent European Security Council (ESC), an idea already advanced by Macron in 2017 and Merkel in 2018. Kubilius coupled it with the idea of a standing European force of around 100,000 troops, meant to substitute the US military backbone

¹⁹ Scazzieri, Luigi, "The Power of the Few: How Clusters Can Strengthen European Defence", in *EUISS Briefs*, No. 3/2026 (February 2026), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/3753>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Maurice, Eric, "Coalitions of the Willing Is Not the Silver Bullet – Core EU Alignment Is", in *EPC Flash Analysis*, 12 February 2026, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/coalition-of-the-willing-is-not-the-silver-bullet-core-eu-alignment-is/>.



within a strengthened European pillar of NATO, and with an effort to give operational content to the mutual-assistance clause of Article 42(7) TEU. This proposal carries several problems and has already met resistance. One of the most relevant issues is institutional. The proposed ESC would be, at least according to the latest proposals, outside the existing CSDP structure and its relationship with the EU is therefore yet to be clarified. The ESC would rest on the informal E5 format with the addition of Norway and other countries; it would sit alongside the Union rather than within it.

The growing reliance on coalitions of the willing, minilateral clusters and third-country partnerships raises a central governance problem for European defence: flexibility has become necessary, but it does not automatically produce coherence. Coalitions can mobilise political will, resources and capabilities more quickly than EU-wide formats, especially in response to urgent crises such as the war in Ukraine. Yet their effectiveness often depends on the persistence of a shared threat perception and on the political commitment of a limited number of governments. Once the immediacy of the crisis recedes, such formats risk losing momentum, remaining disconnected from EU instruments, or adding to the already fragmented landscape of European defence cooperation.²² The trajectory of the European Intervention Initiative illustrates this risk. Launched by France in 2018 as a flexible and non-binding forum of able and willing European states, it was designed to foster cooperation in strategic foresight, planning and operational support. Yet its limited operational follow-through showed the limits of minilateral formats when they are not backed by sustained political commitment or connected to more durable institutional structures. It is in this context that the debate on an ESC has gained relevance. It would provide a more regular political framework for steering European security cooperation across different institutional formats. In its most useful formulation, an ESC would address the gap between ad hoc coalitions and formal institutions: it could help maintain continuity between summits, align threat perceptions, connect minilateral initiatives to EU and NATO processes, and give political backing to coalitions of willing and able states. Therefore, it could represent a more flexible but still politically coordinated way of organising European defence cooperation. A central feature of the debate is the need to involve key non-EU European security actors, notably the UK, Norway and Ukraine – bearing in mind the diversities among them. Their participation is widely regarded as essential, although its form would vary depending on whether the ESC will be conceived as an EU-anchored body, a parallel intergovernmental format, or a looser political forum.²³

However, the institutional design of such a body remains contested. A lighter model would regularise existing informal formats among key European actors, without creating a new organisation, possibly combining permanent participation by core security actors with more flexible participation by others depending on the agenda. A more ambitious model would connect the ESC to the EU through the European Council, giving it stronger institutional anchoring and a clearer link with EU instruments on defence capabilities, procurement and industrial policy.²⁴ A third model would place it outside the EU framework, closer to a new “Western European Union” or “European G7”, allowing those non-EU actors to participate more directly alongside EU member states.²⁵ Each option involves trade-offs: EU anchoring would strengthen institutional coherence but limit flexibility; an external forum would be more inclusive but potentially weaker in connecting decisions to EU instruments; informal formats would be agile but less transparent and less durable.²⁶

²² Tocci, Nathalie, “Towards a European Security Council”, in *IEP@BU Policy Briefs*, No. 56 (March 2026), <https://iep.unibocconi.eu/node/1243>.

²³ Ciolan, Ionela, “Europe Needs a Security Council of Its Own”, in *European View*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (April 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1177/17816858261450693>.

²⁴ Tocci, Nathalie, “Towards a European Security Council”, cit.

²⁵ Whitman, Richard G., “Time for a European Security Council?”, in *RUSI Commentaries*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/time-european-security-council>; Scazzieri, Luigi, “A European Security Council: Between Strategic Need and Institutional Realities”, in *EUISS Commentaries*, 11 February 2026, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/3750>.

²⁶ Scazzieri, Luigi, “A European Security Council”, cit.



2.2 Cooperation with third countries: Norway and Canada as reference models

Beyond cooperation among EU member states, the evolution of European defence governance also requires closer attention to the Union's partnerships with non-member countries. In recent years, the EU has increasingly relied on Security and Defence Partnerships to structure cooperation with like-minded third countries, including Norway, the UK, Canada, Japan and South Korea.²⁷ These arrangements show that cooperation with external partners is becoming a more regular component of European defence governance. However, third-country cooperation does not follow a single model. The degree of involvement varies according to each partner's institutional relationship with the EU, level of regulatory alignment, participation in CSDP missions and operations, access to defence-industrial instruments and broader strategic relevance for European security.²⁸

Norway and Canada are particularly relevant for the purposes of this analysis because they represent two different levels of third-country association. Norway stands out as the most advanced case of functional integration with EU defence structures. Canada, by contrast, represents a looser but increasingly operational model: its partnership with the EU is primarily political and strategic in nature, but its subsequent connection to SAFE shows how Security and Defence Partnerships can also become gateways to concrete defence-industrial cooperation with trusted third countries. Taken together, these two cases help clarify the range of options available when structuring cooperation with like-minded non-member countries.

On the one hand of the spectrum, Norway is the most advanced reference model. Its cooperation with the EU rests on a dense set of arrangements developed over more than two decades: the European Economic Agreement links Norway to the EDTIB and European strategic value chains; the 2004 agreement on the exchange of classified information facilitates cooperation in security and defence and the 2006 administrative arrangement with the EDA allows Norway to take part in selected Agency's activities, including research, joint training and industry-related projects. Norway has also participated since 2021 in the PESCO military mobility project and contributes to EU CSDP missions and operations under the 2005 framework participation agreement.²⁹ Most importantly for defence-industrial cooperation, Norway enjoys a status that goes beyond ordinary third-country partnership: it is currently the only non-EU country associated to the EDF,³⁰ while its broader association with the EU's defence-industrial toolbox allows Oslo to contribute financially to EU instruments and enables Norwegian companies to access relevant funding opportunities.³¹ The May 2024 EU-Norway Security and Defence Partnership further consolidates this model by covering support for Ukraine, CSDP participation, defence initiatives, maritime and space security, cyber, resilience, countering foreign information manipulation and EU-NATO cooperation.³² Norway therefore represents the closest example of advanced functional association with EU defence structures: formally outside the Union, but deeply connected to its operational, industrial and political security framework.

Canada illustrates a different model. Unlike Norway, whose relationship with the EU rests on a dense set of arrangements, the EU-Canada Security and Defence Partnership signed on 23 June 2025 appears closer to a flexible political framework for strategic alignment and security cooperation. The partnership

²⁷ Council of the EU website: *Security and Defence Partnerships*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/security-defence-partnerships>.

²⁸ Becker, Max et al, "Third-State Participation in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Opportunities and Conditions for the United Kingdom", in *SWP Working Papers*, No. 02/2025 (February 2025), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Third-State_Participation_in_CSDP_Becker_Flach_Ondarza.pdf.

²⁹ Leclerc, Gabija, "EU-Norway Relations", in *EPRS Briefings*, November 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)779213](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)779213).

³⁰ Lawrenson, Tim and Ester Sabatino, "The Impact of the European Defence Fund on Cooperation with Third-country Entities", in *IISS Research Papers*, October 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/10/the-impact-of-the-european-defence-fund-on-cooperation-with-third-country-entities>.

³¹ Scazzieri, Luigi, "How the UK and the EU Can Deepen Defence Co-operation", in *CER Policy Briefs*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.cer.eu/node/11392>.

³² EEAS, *EU-Norway Security & Defence Partnership*, 28 May 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/442078_en.



is described as a tailor-made and non-legally binding framework for dialogue and cooperation across the security and defence spectrum, and its importance lies above all in connecting Canada more closely to European security priorities,³³ including Ukraine, crisis management, cyber, maritime and space security, and defence-industrial cooperation.³⁴ Its connection with SAFE is particularly relevant: in December 2025, the Council endorsed the agreement on Canada's participation in the instrument, making Canada the first non-European country to be granted access to SAFE.³⁵ As mentioned before, this is significant because it shows how Security and Defence Partnerships can serve as gateways to more concrete defence-industrial arrangements with trusted third countries.

Norway and Canada can be considered relevant reference models because they show how the EU has developed structured defence cooperation with like-minded third countries that share similar strategic objectives, belong to NATO and the same broader Euro-Atlantic security community, and cooperate closely with the Union on Ukraine, allied interoperability and defence-industrial resilience. Against this background, the UK emerges as the most consequential and complex case. Despite Brexit, it remains an essential actor for European defence because of its military capabilities, defence-industrial base, intelligence assets and central role within NATO. At the same time, its post-Brexit institutional position makes it difficult to identify an appropriate model of cooperation.

2.3 The UK as a strategic case for differentiated external cooperation

Brexit created an institutional gap in EU-UK security and defence relations, as the Trade and Cooperation Agreement did not establish a structured foreign, security and defence policy cooperation framework.³⁶ This gap was strategically problematic given the UK's status as one of Europe's leading military powers, its previous participation in CSDP missions and operations, a nuclear-armed NATO ally, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a major defence-industrial actor. The war in Ukraine altered the strategic context. The EU and the UK converged strongly in support for Kyiv, while the broader deterioration of European security made the absence of a structured EU-UK defence relationship increasingly difficult to justify.³⁷ London remained embedded in European security through NATO, intelligence cooperation, bilateral defence agreements (e.g. Lancaster House Treaties), PESCO military mobility and coalition-based initiatives supporting Ukraine.³⁸ This duality, institutionally external to the EU but strategically indispensable to European defence, is what makes the UK analytically relevant for the future governance of the CSDP. The UK also differs from many other partners because its defence-industrial culture has traditionally emphasised international partnerships and extra-European markets, including close ties with the United States and other partners such as Australia and Japan. Therefore, UK industry is both closely connected to Europe and globally oriented, making the UK not only a political but also an industrial strategic partner.

The EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership concluded in May 2025 marks an important development, but it should not be overstated. It does not reintegrate the UK into the CSDP, nor does it settle questions of access to EU defence-industrial instruments. It does, however, establish a framework for regular dialogue

³³ Canada Government, *Prime Minister Carney Secures Canada's Participation in the European Union's Security Action for Europe*, 1 December 2025, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/node/51968>.

³⁴ EEAS, *Security and Defence: EU and Canada Sign Security and Defence Partnership*, 24 June 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/454062_en.

³⁵ Council of the EU, *SAFE: Member States Endorse Agreement on the Participation of Canada*, 19 December 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/19/safe-member-states-endorse-agreement-on-the-participation-of-canada>.

³⁶ Cinciripini, Luca, "If London Is Calling, Is Brussels Answering? The Future of EU-UK Foreign and Security Cooperation", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|33 (June 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18664>.

³⁷ Scazzieri, Luigi, "EU-UK Co-operation in Defence Capabilities after the War in Ukraine", in *CER Policy Briefs*, 9 June 2023, <https://www.cer.eu/node/10425>.

³⁸ Scazzieri, Luigi, "What Is the Perception of Defence Industrial Partnerships with the EDTIB by Non-EU Countries? The Case of the United Kingdom", in *ARES Comments*, No. 109 (February 2025), <https://www.iris-france.org/en/what-is-the-perception-of-defence-industrial-partnerships-with-the-edtib-by-non-eu-countries-the-case-of-the-united-kingdom>.



and cooperation on Ukraine, crisis management, cyber, maritime security, resilience, hybrid threats and wider foreign and security policy coordination.³⁹ At the current stage, it is a pragmatic political framework whose impact depends on subsequent implementation and additional agreements.⁴⁰ The most sensitive question concerns UK participation in EU defence-industrial initiatives. This is where the tension between strategic autonomy and openness to trusted partners becomes most visible. The EDF was designed to strengthen the EDTIB and reduce dependence on non-EU actors, and its rules make participation by “third-country entities” (established outside the EU) extremely difficult in practice. The obstacles include lack of EU funding for such entities, export-control constraints, intellectual property issues, security-of-supply requirements, reduced incentives for EU consortia and likely disadvantages in evaluation criteria.⁴¹ British firms and capabilities are relevant to many European shortfalls, but broad access to EU instruments without safeguards would be politically difficult for member states concerned with protecting the EDTIB and the logic of EU-funded industrial policy. A realistic approach could be selective and conditional participation: cooperation on specific projects, procurement mechanisms or capability areas where UK involvement strengthens European security without undermining EU industrial objectives. SAFE has become a key test for the limits of EU-UK defence-industrial rapprochement. As a loan-based instrument supporting joint procurement and defence readiness, it could in principle bridge EU-led industrial policy and cooperation with trusted non-EU partners. Yet the breakdown of UK-EU negotiations in November 2025 shows that political alignment on European security is not sufficient to secure access to EU defence-industrial tools. The disagreement centred on the financial contribution London would have had to make and on the conditions attached to participation.⁴²

The future EU-UK defence relationship could follow several trajectories. A first, minimal model would consolidate the current partnership as a consultative framework, institutionalising strategic dialogue without granting significant access to EU defence instruments. This would be politically manageable but limited in terms of capability generation. A second model would involve selective participation in EU defence-industrial initiatives. The UK could be associated with specific procurement schemes, capability projects or industrial programmes where its contribution is strategically valuable. This would require clearer rules on intellectual property, export controls, security of supply and financial contribution.⁴³ A third model would rely on minilateral and coalition-based formats. The UK could cooperate with groups of EU member states, NATO allies and other partners in capability coalitions, Ukraine-related initiatives or regional security formats. This pathway would not require deep integration into EU structures, but it could still make the UK a central actor in European defence governance.⁴⁴ A fourth, more ambitious scenario would involve a form of quasi-association: a structured partnership situated between external cooperation and partial institutional integration. This would resemble the Norwegian-style association or a bespoke “pay-to-play” model, participating in EU consortia without accessing to EU funding.⁴⁵

3. Conclusions: Future scenarios and Italian national interest

In a fast-moving political and international security landscape, there are many possible evolutions for EU defence, each pointing towards a different institutional outcome. The most noticeable gap is the growing disconnect between the Commission’s activism and the Council’s more restrained deliberations.

³⁹ UK Government, *UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership*, 19 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-eu-security-and-defence-partnership>.

⁴⁰ Maślanka, Łukasz and Piotr Szymański, “Breaking the Deadlock: The EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership”, in *OSW Analyses*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/33246>.

⁴¹ Lawrenson, Tim and Ester Sabatino, “The Impact of the European Defence Fund on Cooperation with Third-country Entities”, cit.

⁴² Martill, Benjamin, “The UK Will Not Join the EU’s New Defence Fund. Can the UK–EU Security Reset Still Succeed?”, in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 15 December 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/37705>.

⁴³ Becker, Max et al, “Third-State Participation in the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy”, cit.

⁴⁴ Scazzieri, Luigi, “The Power of the Few”, cit.

⁴⁵ Scazzieri, Luigi, “How the UK and the EU Can Deepen Defence Co-operation”, cit.



This has translated into an asymmetry between the industrial and operational pillars that has widened rather than closed in recent years. The industrial-and-research strand, more marginal until 2016, has acquired institutional weight, a dedicated administration through DG DEFIS and growing resources, with the Commission emerging as a facilitator of national planning through instruments such as the EDF, EDIRPA, ASAP, SAFE and EDIP. The operational pillar has not followed the same pace. The Rapid Deployment Capacity is still bounded by the same two constraints: the interpretation of Article 41(2) TEU, which keeps operational military expenditure off the Union budget, and the unanimity required under Article 42(4) TEU to activate a mission. The European Peace Facility and the 5,000-strong format ease the first constraint and lower the threshold of the second, but neither dissolves them. In comparison, industrial ambitions have, so far, proved easier to translate into actionable programmes, framed under the Commission's industrial competence.

Consequently, the proliferation of flexible formats such as E5 has shifted the central governance problem, while multinational cooperation, outside the EU framework, is compensating for the EU lack of tools (and therefore credibility) in defence. The ability to keep these formats aligned with EU capability priorities and connected to NATO is one of the main challenges that member states will have to face. The proposals that have dominated the debate over the past three years can be read as different answers to this coherence problem. Treaty reform, as set out in Parliament's November 2023 resolution, would resolve it through generalised qualified-majority voting and a standing Union force, but to be implemented would still require a pan European consultation that member states deem too costly and inefficient. The optimisation of existing tools, principally Article 44 TEU, offers an easier route leading to differentiated integration in which an inner group acts on behalf of the Union without abolishing unanimity. The European Legion and the European Security Council are hybrid attempts to make a recruitable force outside the existing CSDP structures and both, in different ways, run into the same limits, whether Article 41(2) for the Legion or the unsettled relationship with the Union for an E5+-based ESC.

The third-country dimension confirms the same logic. Norway and Canada mark two ends of an emerging model of association (functional integration in the first case, flexible political framework that became a gateway to SAFE in the second) while the UK remains the decisive case, where strategic indispensability coexists with political and industrial competition. Taken together, these cases show that the boundary between members and non-member is becoming less relevant to EU governments and is being managed case by case, according to national priorities and reciprocal security. Flexible formats that reconnect with the EU/non-EU divide work in the same direction: the E5, or variable-geometry arrangements organised around a hard core (as in the E5+ basis envisaged for the ESC), keep strategically indispensable extra-EU states inside the continental security architecture without requiring formal memberships. The future of European defence depends heavily on these competing formats. For Italy, this means that the choice of one format over another may either strengthen or marginalise its contribution to European defence; the more flexible the format, the more participation turns on criteria such as the political willingness to spend on or engage in defence, a consideration Rome will have to weigh.



Acronyms

ASAP	Act in Support of Ammunition Production
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DG DEFIS	Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space
E5	European Group of Five (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, UK)
E5+	E5 plus other countries
EDA	European Defence Agency
EDF	European Defence Fund
EDIP	European Defence Industry Programme
EDTIB	European Defence Technological and Industrial Base
ESC	European Security Council
EU	European Union
MILEX	Military exercises
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PSC	Political and Security Committee
RDC	Rapid Deployment Capacity
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UK	United Kingdom

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PODCAST IAI

Come sta cambiando l'Europa della difesa?

Come sta cambiando l'Europa della difesa e quali strumenti servono per renderla davvero efficace e credibile?

Ne hanno parlato Alessandro Marrone, responsabile del programma Difesa, sicurezza e spazio, e Nicoletta Pirozzi, responsabile del programma UE, politica e istituzioni, in una conversazione su NATO, capacità militari, politica industriale e deterrenza nucleare.

Il podcast è stato realizzato nell'ambito del progetto "L'Europa della difesa: cooperazione industriale, governance UE e pilastro europeo della NATO".

Link: <https://www.iai.it/it/iai-news/come-sta-cambiando-leuropa-della-difesa>