



European Defence in the Face of War

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Summary

- * *Since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the European Union (EU) has changed its strategy and rhetoric in the area of defence. While the EU had begun to assume more responsibilities in international security since the end of the Cold War, the war in Ukraine led to the realization that Europe must be ready to defend itself. This conceptual leap is compelling Europe to rearm.*

Background/Challenges

- Long before Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU had presented several initiatives to strengthen European defence.
- Brexit—the departure of the United Kingdom from the EU—allowed the European Commission to take on a greater role. The Commission proposed the European Defence Fund and set up a Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space. Brexit also encouraged the development of capabilities, which contributed to the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence and the Permanent Structured Cooperation.
- Donald Trump's first term as President of the United States (US) increased pressure on EU member states to invest more in defence amid uncertainty over US support. It also strengthened the case for the EU and its member states to consolidate their strategic autonomy.
- In its Strategic Compass (2022), the EU stated that Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine marked the return of war to Europe and constituted “a tectonic shift” obliging the EU to review its relationship with power. The Strategic Compass defined the goal of building European defence capacities to protect the EU. With the growing threat from the East and uncertainty over US support after Trump's return to the White House, the EU is now preparing for the worst by 2030.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◊ At the national level, EU member states have **invested heavily in their defence**. Some have reintroduced military service, for the time being mainly on a voluntary basis. Several member states have made profound strategic changes, such as Finland and Sweden joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Denmark ending its opt-out from the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and most importantly, Germany ending its culture of restraint.
- ◊ At the European level, the EU's new defence strategy marks the **end of several taboos**. The EU's willingness to define itself as a defence actor is evident in the appointment of a Commissioner for Defence and Space, its support for Ukraine's acquisition of military equipment through the European Peace Facility and the Ukrainian Assistance Fund, as well as the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine regardless of the ongoing war.
- ◊ The **White Paper for European Defence—Readiness 2030** by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy identifies capability requirements and proposes financial mechanisms to support Europe's rearmament.
- ◊ As proposed in the White Paper, the EU created a new instrument, the **Security Action for Europe (SAFE)**, to support member states' rearmament and the European defence industry through common procurement. The White Paper also proposed using of the national escape clause in the Stability and Growth Pact to allow member states to increase defence spending and to boost funding by the European Investment Bank in the defence sector.

KEY FINDINGS (continued)

- ◊ The White Paper draws on a series of earlier **ambitious initiatives adopted in recent years**, such as the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) and the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) to boost defence production.
- ◊ Until recently, the Russian threat seemed to be limited to Ukraine, but the increase in drone flights over critical civilian and military infrastructure in several EU countries now clearly demonstrates **Russia's hybrid threat to the EU**. The reactions of EU representatives and member states were immediate and unequivocal in condemning these unprecedented violations of European airspace by Russia.
- ◊ In this context, two roadmaps already outlined in the White Paper take on particular significance. The **Preserving Peace—Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030** presented in mid-October 2025 outlines four key European readiness flagships: the European Drone Defence Initiative, the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield, and the European Space Shield. To deal with repeated violations of airspace, the first two flagships are being implemented as a priority.
- ◊ In addition, the **EU Defence Industry Transformation Roadmap: Unleashing Disruptive Innovation for Defence Readiness** was presented in mid-November 2025 to complement the previous roadmap. It aims at preparing the European defence industry for modern warfare shaped by innovation and emerging disruptive technologies.
- ◊ An additional component of the EU's response to the growing threat has focused on **strengthening its international partnerships**. This includes enhancing relations with NATO in a range of areas, including emerging technologies. The approach also includes bilateral co-operation. With Canada, a Security and Defence Partnership was adopted at the summit in June 2025; it forms the foundation for Canada's participation in the SAFE program that was agreed in December 2025.



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Policy Implications

- While the EU claims that it remains a peace project, the means of preserving peace in Europe are changing. This process is accelerated because the US under Trump is becoming less reliable as a security provider.
- This EU's strategic shift is evident in a new narrative of taking responsibility for Europe's defence, in partnership with allies such as NATO and Canada. It signals a transformation of the nature of European integration. The EU's contribution to peace is no longer defined as being based solely on economic interconnections, but also on military capability and deterrence.
- The EU correctly perceives that it may benefit from Ukraine's expertise gained during the war, for instance in the use of new technologies. However, the EU must remain cautious about learning from Ukraine's model, which may not be fully transferable to its own situation.
- The EU's new defence strategy may also be impacted by the rise of the far right, leading to growing divisions within the EU. Furthermore, Trump's pressure on the EU to adopt more deferential policies towards Putin's Russia could also intensify by 2030.

Further Reading

Sam Paquette (2025) Readiness 2030: Europe's Ambition Plan to Ramp Up its Defence Industrial Capacity, <https://carleton.ca/eetcn/2025/readiness-2030-europe-s-ambition-plan-to-ramp-up-its-defence-industrial-capacity/>



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