Taking Security into its own Hands: European Defence Self-Reliance in an Era of Global Competition

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Abstract

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

Introduction

Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine, in combination with the return of the Trump administration and its new approach to Europe, have dramatically altered the security landscape of the continent, prompting what French President Macron has called a "profound strategic awakening" (Jaque et al., 2025). At no time has the asymmetrical dual challenge to European security emanating from Moscow and Washington been more palpable than at the Trump-Putin Summit in Anchorage, in August 2025. Against the backdrop

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of the Russian President's apparent full rehabilitation – despite ongoing US sanctions and an outstanding international warrant for war crimes – the optics and atmospherics of the summit pointed to a strategic realignment between the two leaders. This unfolded in the backdrop of the US' continued decoupling from Europe, not only in terms of commitments but also on a shared normative framework. Remarkably, neither President Zelensky nor any European representative were invited to what turned out to be a 'strikingly convivial reunion' (Baker and Rogers, 2025) – one in which the future of Ukraine and the security of Europe would be discussed.

Because of its aggressive and revisionist foreign policy, Russia remains a clear and present danger to Europe. It is determined to erase Ukraine's statehood, unravel the post-Cold War security architecture, and drive a wedge between the US and its European allies. Transatlantic strains are no less troubling. American open hostility toward Europe led the Munich Security Conference Chairman Christoph Heusgen to warn in his 2025 closing remarks that 'our common value base is not that common anymore' (The New Yorker, 2025). This was an early signal of what subsequent events would confirm: the urgency for Europe to accelerate on its path towards defence self-reliance, within NATO, if possible, outside it if necessary (Glancy, 2025). [1]

That the security of Europe starts in Ukraine is a conviction that has been consolidating in European political and defence circles since the Russian full-scale invasion. Many leaders, such as former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, have framed the European support to Kyiv as a matter of "self-interest" (The Economist, 2025b). Finland, together with other Northern and Eastern European countries, has demonstratively enforced a "Ukraine is Europe's first line of defence" narrative by donating weapons from its own national defensive stockpiles (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2022; Folketinget, 2022; Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 2022; Kallas, 2023).

US Vice President JD Vance's momentous speech in Munich signalled a change in the transatlantic environment: the US administration's announcements that Europe would not be involved in peace talks between Washington and Moscow and a US force posture review entailed a potential drawdown from the continent because of new strategic realities. Europe, both at the EU and pan-European level, has been confronted with what UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer called 'a generational challenge' (The Economist, 2025a).

[1] On the debate about the European role in NATO see Droin et al., 2024; Daalder, 2025.

The US pivot away from Europe is – in the view of one realist thinker – part of a "natural shift" in US foreign policy preferences, the end of an 80-year cycle created after World War II and now perceived as obsolete (Friedman, 2025; Autocracy in America, 2025). US impatience with continued European defence underspending has been consistently signalled, making it unlikely for the current course of action to be significantly reversed, regardless of the White House's occupancy (Bergman, 2024). This is a harsh reality that the Europeans have come to reckon with.

Unexpectedly, swift decision-making has followed in both EU and NATO formats, aimed at demonstrating to the US administration the relevance of European security while genuinely reinforcing capabilities in the face of unrelenting Russian threat.[2] At the same time, a whirlwind of diplomatic initiatives – spanning from the Weimar Plus to the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine, to bilateral security arrangements – have been plotting out a network of alternative security guarantees should the US commitment to Article 5 wane (Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, 2025; Élysée, 2025; Marsh and Piper, 2025; Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, 2025; Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 2025a). Most remarkably, France and the UK have started discussing deeper nuclear coordination to ensure that any extreme threat to Europe would prompt a joint response (Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, 2025b; The Economist, 2025c).

The future of European security lies in both diplomacy and hard realities – weaponry, manpower, and willpower (Glancy, 2025). While a crucially important debate rages on military spending, other lesser discussed matters deserve wider attention. Of these, the modernisation of the European defence industry and the streamlining of finance and procurement procedures to stimulate innovation are key aspects of capability

[2] To reverse the decline engendered by years of post-Cold war defence neglect, the European Council endorsed in March 2025 the 'White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030', proclaiming urgency in accelerating defence readiness over the next five years. In May, the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) fund to finance joint procurement of defence projects was approved, with a majority 'buy European' clause (Council of the European Union, 2025a; Council of the European Union, 2025b; European Council, 2025a; European Council, 2025b). In June, the NATO Summit in The Hague concluded with landmark commitments: a new 5 % of GDP defence spending target for member states (3.5 % in core military needs, 1.5 % on broader security-related costs, including support to Ukraine), a reaffirmed 'ironclad commitment' to Article 5, the acknowledgement that Ukraine's security enhances NATO's own (NATO, 2025).

and preparedness-building. The establishment of a coherent and effective European military command and control structure and the development of societal preparedness and resilience is what the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to.

MULTIDOMAIN Command and Control

Public debate in Europe has so far centred on raising budgets and stimulating the defence industry. While indispensable, these measures alone cannot guarantee deterrence, which depends above all on the capacity to transform resources into effective and deployable capabilities, applied coherently in support of shared political objectives. In this respect, Europe still faces a critical weakness: although in 2024 EU Member States collectively spent €343 billion on defence (Council of the European Union, 2025c) – more than twice Russia's estimated wartime expenditure of $149 billion (SIPRI, 2025) – the continent continues to lack the structures – the central "brain" – that would allow these resources and forces to be employed coherently and decisively.

This shortcoming is not new. NATO and national militaries have long pursued capability development as a systemic process, combining equipment, doctrine, training, leadership, and logistics into a functioning whole. The EU, by contrast, has been constrained by treaty provisions and the persistence of national priorities, which have prevented the emergence of a comprehensive military system able to protect the Union in its entirety. The institutions that have been created – the EU Military Staff, the European Defence Agency, and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability – perform useful functions, but their mandates were established at different times to address distinct challenges. These predated the EU's still recent and not uncontroversial assumption of a defence role; consequently, their mandates and scale are suited only to limited operations. They remain, therefore, inadequate in the face of strategic threats.

The ongoing development of Europe-wide initiatives on the industrial front – the European Defence Fund, the European Defence Industrial Development Programme, the more recent European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act, the Strategic Compass, and the 2025 White Paper on Defence Readiness – are of great importance and reflect a clear ambition to consolidate Europe's defence base. Yet, as the

European Court of Auditors already warned in 2022, the operational return on such investments will require time, common standards, and – above all – an overarching political direction. Similarly, the EU's operational record demonstrates both professionalism and limitations (European Court of Auditors, 2022). The Union has twenty-one ongoing missions, twelve civilian and nine military, involving some 4,000 participants (European External Action Service, 2025). While generally effective in fulfilling their mandates, these missions remain marginal to the continent's emerging strategic environment.

The paradox is therefore evident. Europe possesses substantial resources, credible military forces, and a growing array of industrial and institutional initiatives, yet it lacks the one element that would bind them together: a permanent command structure. The EU Concept for Military Command and Control already recognised this in 2019 when it noted that 'the EU does not have a standing military Command and Control (C2) structure for military executive operations; therefore, clear and effective C2 arrangements are needed to ensure the successful planning and conduct of military CSDP missions and operations'. Without such a structure, Europe cannot convert potential into power. Europe urgently needs a permanent joint operational command, with its own land, maritime, air, space, and cyber components, as clearly articulated by Special Advisor on European Competitiveness Mario Draghi and former Head of the French Armed Forces Thierry Burkhard (Draghi, 2024; The Economist, 2025).

A permanent Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) command would address this gap.[3] By integrating land, maritime, air, space, and cyber components, it could undertake strategic and operational planning for the European theatre, oversee joint exercises, and identify capability shortfalls. More broadly, it would serve as a driver of integration: aligning budgetary

[3] In Multi-Domain Operations, command and control is understood as a distributed and interconnected system rather than a linear hierarchy (NATO C2 Centre of Excellence, 2021): strategic leaders set goals, effects and rules of engagement, operational commanders synchronise actions across domains, and tactical units act with delegated authority to seize fleeting opportunities. This requires cyber, space, ISR, fires, and electronic warfare nodes linked through federated networks and shared data services that connect sensors, effectors and decision-makers into one decision ecosystem. Automation, AI, and decision-support tools accelerate the human-machine cycle, while political and interagency structures ensure governance of cross-domain effects, data sharing, and interoperability, especially in the information environment and in cyberspace, with active civilian contributions (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023).

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

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

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

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

More importantly, an effective EU command would provide a powerful response to the appeal for the Union to finally 'do something' as it was first launched in the Draghi Report: a demonstration of self-belief, a credible first step toward deterrence, and a clear signal to allies and competitors that Europe is taking full responsibility for its own security (Draghi, 2024). Such a profoundly political act need not be construed as directed against any specific opponent, but rather as the essential security enabler of the strategic autonomy the EU requires – one commensurate with its global role (Biscop, 2019). At the same time, it would answer recent and insistent American calls for Europe to assume a larger share of the transatlantic defence burden. Framed in this light, the initiative would be a complement to NATO's command-and-control system – inevitably involving further investment

and some overlap yet delivering greater resilience and strengthening Europe's ability to manage multiple contingencies – including those that could arise should a US pivot to Asia create opportunities for adversaries to test European security in Washington's absence.

The NATO-EU Berlin Plus arrangements remain conceptually valid and would allow a new structure to complement NATO operations under agreed mandates (Council of the European Union, 2002; NATO, 2003). Ideally, all twenty-seven EU Member States would participate. In the case that unanimity proves elusive, Article 20 of the Treaty on the European Union provides for enhanced cooperation by a coalition of the willing. Including the United Kingdom would be both strategically desirable and politically prudent: despite Brexit, London remains one of Europe's principal military actors, and convergence on defence goals is clear and valuable.

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

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

Civilian Preparedness and Societal Resilience

That the armed forces are only one aspect of defence and resistance is one of the many lessons-learned from the war in Ukraine. When in 2014, Russian unmarked forces infiltrated the Donbas, Kyiv was undergoing a phase of great institutional fragility. Debilitated by years of corruption and mismanagement, the central administration was unable to react promptly. As a result, the onset of hostilities propelled into action individuals and civil society organisations in support of and, if necessary, *en lieu* of the state to perform tasks the state was unable to attend to (Puglisi, 2018; Puglisi, 2024). Hundreds of "little hands" took upon themselves the 'multiple and at times minuscule functions, which, combined, constitute the social fabric of the defence' (Lebedev, 2025, p. 13). Participation in what a Ukrainian volunteer defined 'co-construction of the national defence' transformed individuals' perception of their role as citizens filling with new meaning the very idea of civic engagement (Lebedev, 2025, p. 30).

The defence system that has emerged in Ukraine spontaneously and intuitively, through a set of trials and errors in the interplay between state and society, echoes aspects of Nordic countries' total defence. The Commander of Finland's Armed Forces – a super-power in the matter – describes it as a set of structured relations where not only every ministry has clearly articulated responsibilities to fulfil in case of war, crisis, or conflict, but every organisation, public and private, and every individual is trained and equipped, well-aware of the place to take. Additionally, Finland – a country of 5 million – counts 700 thousand trained reservists and active military personnel ready to take up defence positions. This is part of the country's 'social contract' and constitutes the backbone of societal resilience (The Telegraph, 2025).

The Russian strategy of massive attacks to civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine has spurred a convergent debate on societal preparedness also in European circles. Building on the EU's experience in civil protection, crisis management, and CSDP operations, the 2025 European Preparedness Union Strategy frames resilience as both a strategic and societal bedrock of EU security. A whole of government/whole of society approach integrates civilian and defence instruments across all governance layers and societal actors into action points ranging from foresight and population preparedness to civil-military coordination and public-private cooperation (Niinistö, 2024; European Commission and

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025).

A whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach is one of the centrepieces of the 2025 UK Strategic Defence Review (SDR), where domestic resilience is cited as an integral pillar of national and deterrence security. Military preparedness and societal responsibility intertwine in the SDR setting in motion a 'concerted, collective effort involving – among others – industry, the finance sector, civil society, academia, education, and communities' (UK Government, 2025, p. 93). The defence of the homeland – an obligation rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty requiring that Allies maintain their capacity to resist armed attacks – implies a change of mindset in the way we think about defence – the SDR argues (UK Government, 2025). [4]

Recent opinion polls across Europe indicate both rising concern for security and persistent national divergences in threat perception and defence preferences. Security and defence rank as the top priority for EU action with an overall 77% viewing Russia's war in Ukraine as a direct threat to the EU. Despite a high support for a stronger EU role, nonetheless, national preferences on specific policies diverge sharply within the continent. Majorities in Spain, Britain, and France back a European peacekeeping force for Ukraine, against a prevailing opposition in Germany and Italy. The UK tends to support a European army, and France and Germany favour reintroducing conscription. Significantly, only a minority considers defence spending too low, with only 23% supporting the use of EU funds for military purposes and highest rates registered in Estonia, Finland, and Lithuania – respectively 50%, 46%, and 46% (European Commission, 2025a; European External Action Service, 2025; Institut Jacques Delors, 2025; YouGov, 2025).[5]

[4] NATO frames societal resilience as encompassing the ability of governments, civil society, individuals, and the private sector to withstand, recover from, and adapt to major shocks. The NATO Seven Baseline Requirements adopted at the 2016 Warsaw Summit guide this effort, focusing on continuity of government, essential services, and critical infrastructure (NATO, 2016). For a more detailed analysis of NATO's evolving concept of societal resilience, linking civil preparedness and defence, and a review of the Seven Baseline Requirements (Christie and Berzina, 2022).

[5] The spring 2025 Eurobarometer shows that 78% of EU citizens are concerned about the Union's capacity to safeguard peace over the next five years, and an overwhelming 81% support a common EU security and defence policy – the highest level recorded since 2004 (European Commission, 2025a). For more data and analysis on European public opinion trends on relations with the US under Trump, relations with Russia, the war in Ukraine, and its more likely outcomes (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; Puglierin et al., 2025).

Although an overall majority appear clear-eyed about the risks emanating from Russia – an average of 48% defines Moscow as an adversary – country variations span from 14% in Bulgaria to 74% in Denmark (Puglierin et al., 2025).

Mainly determined by historical and geographical circumstances – proximity to the Russian border and exposure to Russian domination, but also permeability to Russian disinformation narratives – differences in threat perceptions and defence spending preferences are also impacted by patterns of public communication. Research highlights a substantial shift in news reporting on security and defence issues, framed primarily in national terms before the Russian full-scale invasion and increasingly as a European concern after. This indicates the potential for increased European integration in the defence sphere face to shared security risks (Fernandez et al., 2023).

A contrario, poor information and ineffective communication dilute public awareness, undermine preparedness, and represents a security risk in itself. With Europe confronting its gravest threats since the end of the Cold War, hard choices on alignment, alliances, defence spending, military readiness, and civilian engagement loom large. In this context, unserious or ineffective messaging hampers essential debate, confuses public opinion, gives divisive populist forces space to weaponise the defence narrative, and opens the door for Russian disinformation to polarise societies.

The uproar caused in Italy and Spain by the initial branding of the European Commission's defence initiative 'Re-Arm Europe', – criticised by the Italian Prime Minister as misleading and overly militaristic – could have been avoided if a language more mindful of national sensitivities had been employed. [6] Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's comment to President Emmanuel Macron – 'put your helmet on, your jacket, your rifle, and go to Ukraine' – demonstrates how populist theatrics can derail critical policy debates, in this case undermining discussions on security guarantees for Ukraine (Reuters, 2025b).[7]

Populist parties can be expected to exploit European voters' resistance towards rearmament and deeper security integration, by crafting messages that prioritise immediate economic and social benefits against long-term difficult, but necessary strategic commitments. As a result, Europe may

[6] The ensuing criticism prompted the Commission to rename the initiative 'Readiness 2030', with the specific funding programme retitled 'SAFE' to better reflect its comprehensive scope (Euronews, 2025)

[7] On why mainstream leaders must frame issues like European defence compellingly to prevent populist distortion and agenda-setting (Chatham House, 2024).

falter not because of a lack of leadership, but because public opinions remain fragile and easily manipulable (Ganesh, 2025).

The Ukrainians still reproach their government for having failed to adequately prepare the country for war on the eve of the full-scale invasion – failure to inform, failure to instruct and failure to arm (Lebedev, 2025, p. 35). This is a lesson of enduring relevance, and one Europe would do well to heed as it considers how to strengthen its own resilience.

Conclusions

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

Despite its dwindling economy, Russia is set on a path of protracted confrontation with Europe, preparing for a permanent state of war, with Ukraine being only the first front (Lucas, 2025). Should a ceasefire in Ukraine be achieved, Moscow would be able to reconstitute its military capacity and launch a large-scale attack against a neighbouring country within five to ten years, as various national intelligence services predict. Long-term rearmament plans further point to the Kremlin's preparations for a potential future conventional war against NATO (Institute for the Study of War, 2025, p. 27). Yet hybrid aggressions have been occurring with increasing regularity – targeting critical infrastructure across the continent, from undersea cables sabotage in the Baltic Sea to cyber-attacks on the UK National Health Service – and are expected to increase (Verhelst, 2025). Russia remains a clear and present danger for Europe, but it is not the only one in an international context marked by power competition, where the reliability of longstanding allies can no longer be taken for granted.

Achieving defence self-reliance is an urgent task for Europe – demanding, but not impossible. It requires above all a significant shift in mindset, one that embraces a more comprehensive understanding of security. Industrial modernisation is essential to fill the gaps left by years of post-Cold War

underfunding, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. As the war in Ukraine demonstrates, in increasingly complex and interdependent societies, security is a much broader objective: it encompasses energy independence, connectivity, financial and economic structures, robust infrastructures, and social protection systems (Letta, 2025). It also entails societal cohesion in the face of emergencies and resilience against disinformation and the risks of polarisation. At the core of these efforts lie policy harmonisation and relentless coordination, based on a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach that brings together military and civilian sectors, enhances effectiveness, and ensures full preparedness. The establishment of a European multidomain command-and-control system and the development of national strategies to foster greater societal participation in defence and security stand as the two immediate priorities to reach these objectives.

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