




POLICY PAPER

Why Implementing an Ambitious EU Defense Strategy is Essential for the EU Strategic Autonomy?

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WHY IMPLEMENTING AN AMBITIOUS EU DEFENCE STRATEGY IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY?

Background

EU defence policy has a Russian-style story, no pun intended. After much back and forth about a common defence strategy among the Member States of the European Union (EU), Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought the discussion to a new level.

Historically, the European opinions have been highly heterogeneous in terms of threat perceptions, industrial prioritisation, and political interests. When the United Kingdom (UK) was still part of the Union, it remained a fervent defender of the NATO model and against a too cohesive EU defence policy. When Germany is seeking for a federal framework with a shared sovereignty over the army, France seeks for a more ambitious vision, where Member States are deeply collaborating¹.

Although the concept of 'strategic autonomy' was raised at European level since the speech of the French President, Emmanuel Macron, at La Sorbonne in 2017, it really gained in interest at the time of the Covid crisis, then the high-intensity war in Ukraine and Russia's pressure against the continent. This concept refers to the capacity of an entity to act autonomously in strategically important policy areas, without being dependent on other countries. This holistic approach of European policies considers not only the economic, industrial and energy security, but also the military deterrence, allowing EU member states to gain more influence, independency, and strength for their projects. Even though this idea of developing a stronger and more resilient EU has been discussed since decades, this concept has taken European objectives to even higher expectations.

With the beginning of the high intensity war in Ukraine, European countries rose their military share in their annual national expense. In 2022, "Military expenditure in Europe saw its steepest year-on-year increase in at least 30 years" write the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in a study from April 2023². This document also explains how these global military budget increases depicts a growing sense of geopolitical insecurity in Europe and around the world.

The study adds that "Military expenditure by States in Central and Western Europe totalled \$345 billion in 2022. In real terms, spending by these states for the first time surpassed that of 1989, as the Cold War was ending, and was 30 per cent higher than in 2013". Regarding the EU Member States only, the military expenditure reached a record €240 billion in 2022, up 6% on the previous year, according to the European Defence Agency (EDA)³.

Politically, the 'Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', adopted by the Council in March 2022, has been an important step in the development of the EU strategic autonomy. This initiative sets out a common understanding of the main threats and challenges facing Europe in the short and medium term, committed EU leaders to strengthening the EU's defence readiness and further developing the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). It's an actionable framework for the EU's security and defence until 2030, setting out concrete actions and timelines. The policy emphasises on strategic partnerships in security and defence, and aims at developing an EU force that can be deployable quickly⁴.

¹ John STEVENS, "Pour une plus grande coopération militaire entre la France et le Royaume-Uni", on *Robert Schuman* [online], 2 Novembre 2010. [URL](#)

² "World military expenditure reaches new record high as European spending surges", on *SIPRI* [online], 24 April 2023. [URL](#)

³ "Record high European defence spending boosted by procurement of new equipment" on *European Defence Agency* [online], 30 Novembre 2023, [URL](#)

⁴ "A Strategic Compass for the EU", on *EEAS* [online], 2023. [URL](#)

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However, the EU remains too exposed to geopolitical events threatening its security. A number of barriers still need to be removed to enable the development of a European military deterrent. To work on an ambitious EU defence strategy can only be benefiting for the EU, the EU Member States, and their industries. Three main interests can be identified in this common effort: the cost sharing for expensive and innovative equipment, the support for the European defence industry, and the interoperability of national armies.

Indeed, the proliferation of joint EU defence industrial projects has already been crowned with success, leading to significant reductions of the costs and the risks for the R&D and the production. A concrete example is the European integrated manufacturer, MBDA group. The French Court of Audit observed that mass production of missiles benefited from a 10% reduction in cost thanks to the joint efforts of the participating states, compared to a scenario with several separated national productions. Similar successes have been also observed thanks to the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR)'s programmes, with the ASTER missile, developed and used by France, Italie and the UK for naval anti-aircraft defence⁵. OCCAR aims at delivering defence capabilities to nations through cooperation in a cost-efficient way. On the industrial level, it helped European military industries to develop their R&D department as well as cooperation programmes in Europe⁶.

Nevertheless, these common interests can be easily disrupted by operational requirements, the lack of industrial predictability for certain projects, the lack of a unified project management, and by political agendas. For instance, the European military transport aircrafts A400M programme was planned to deliver new aircrafts by 2009 to its members. Because of industrial production problems and engineering mistakes, the programme had numerous delays and unplanned additional costs⁷. On the political level, the strict rules imposed by Berlin regularly stand in the way of French and European defence projects in cooperative programmes.

In 2019, the cancellation of exports of heavy-duty towing vehicles by the German company Rheinmetall to Saudi Arabia has severely penalised the French subcontractor Nicolas Industrie, cutting employment at the small company by half and forcing it into bankruptcy⁸. More recently, the European Peace Facility (EPF) efforts to Ukraine are frequently subject to delays because of the opposition of Hungary⁹.

Considering these various issues with the European defence policy, this paper will focus on answering the following question: why implementing an ambitious EU defence strategy policy is essential for the EU strategic autonomy?

⁵ Cour des Comptes, "La coopération européenne en matière d'armement", 17 April 2018, p. 43

⁶ Established in 1996, OCCAR gathers Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom as Members, as well as other countries for specific programmes (Finland, Lithuania, Poland, The Netherlands who announced in November 2023 that they wanted to join the organisation as Member, and Türkiye). It manages complex and cooperative armaments programmes within Europe and abroad. It focuses on the stages of development and production. This organisation aims at delivering defence capabilities to nations through cooperation in a cost-efficient way. It has helped European military industries to develop their R&D department as well as cooperation programmes in Europe.

⁷ Laurent LAGNEAU, "Les moteurs de l'avion de transport A400M posent toujours des problèmes à l'armée de l'Air et de l'Espace", on *Zone militaire* [online], 7 January 2024. [URL](#)

⁸ Sylviane ASTRAIT, "Vente d'armes : la menace allemande", on *Ecole de Guerre Economique* [online], 16 January 2023. [URL](#)

⁹ Alexandra BRZOZOWSKI, "EU foreign ministers meet in Kyiv in show of support to Ukraine", on *Euractiv* [online], 2 October 2023. [URL](#)

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Current State of Play

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the Europe's gravest security crisis in decades, as the continent was unprepared for a war. Although few Eastern European countries have been considering Russia as a fully-fledged military threat since many years, it has prompted the whole Union to take unprecedented decisions to level the playing field and to work on a holistic policy against all kind of external threats, following the notion of the EU strategic autonomy. Therefore, the urge for an up-to-date security and defence policy came back to the forefront of the European institutions.

Few examples can depict this shift. The 'Joint Procurement Task Force' showed that the EU could react quickly and concretely to some issues of defence industry cooperations. Established by the Commission in May 2022, it aims at avoiding a race to secure orders and spiralling prices by coordinating the very short-term procurements needs of the Member States¹⁰. Thanks to its close work with the EDA, the first-ever move to use the bloc to purchase weapons collectively was made in September 2023, with a €1 billion worth of joint procurement of ammunition for Ukraine. It is also planned that EDA shall ramp up EU's defence industry.

On top of that, the 'European defence industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act' (EDIRPA) adopted by the Council in October 2023 consists of a partial reimbursement from the EU budget to the joint purchasing of defence products based on consortium of at least three Member States. This tool aims at fostering "the competitiveness and efficiency of the European defence-related technological and industrial base" with a budget of €300 million¹¹. Additionally, €5,6 billion has been allocated to Ukraine through the EPF as of October 2023¹². In August 2023, the EU delivered 223 800 shells to Ukraine. In the meantime, European countries are also ramping up their support, individually, to Ukraine thanks to multi-year packages¹³.

The EU is also looking for more partnerships between Member States. The first edition of the Schuman Security and Defence Forum took place in Brussels, the 20 and 21 March 2023, has fostered conversation on improving defence cooperation at the European level¹⁴. A major challenge is the heterogeneity of the European defence landscape, with vast differences in capabilities, resources, and military culture among EU Member States. To foster EU defence initiatives despite these differences, the European Defence Fund (EDF) focuses on multiplying European projects, with a €2.7 billion budget to fund collaborative defence research. An addition of €5.3 billion budget aims at funding collaborative capability development projects complementing national contributions for the 2021-2027 period.

Together with other initiatives, these efforts are paving the way for a more ambitious EU defence policy frame. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced an EU defence industrial strategy during the Speech on the Status of the EU in September 2023. This announcement is aligning not only with the EU strategic autonomy regarding security and defence,

¹⁰ "EU: Council establishes new working party on defence industry as part of military push", on *State Watch* [online], 31 August 2022. [URL](#)

¹¹ "EDIRPA: Council greenlights the new rules to boost common procurement in the EU defence industry", on *Consilium Europa* [online], 9 October 2023. [URL](#)

¹² Alexandra BRZOZOWSKI, "EU foreign ministers meet in Kyiv in show of support to Ukraine", on *Euractiv* [online], 2 October 2023. [URL](#)

¹³ e.g., Germany, Norway, Denmark, UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal, and Lithuania.

Dr. Christoph TREBESCH, "Ukraine Support Tracker: Europe clearly overtakes US, with total commitments now twice as large", on *Kiel Institute* [online], 7 September 2023. [URL](#)

¹⁴ Josep BORRELL, "Why we created the Schuman Security and Defence Forum", on *EEAS* [online], 22 March 2023. [URL](#)

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but also with the “defence matters” slogan from the former President, Jean-Claude Juncker. The Commissioner for the Internal market, Thierry Breton, is involved in the search for an effective regulatory framework that can guarantee the security of supply for defence equipment and clearer objectives¹⁵.

The EDA Annual Conference of December 2023 proved that this ambition is still alive and kicking. The EU institutions remain determined to develop a solid and comprehensive EU defence strategy, and not just in the context of support for the war in Ukraine or the Israeli-Palestinian war. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, advocated for €600 billion in defence investment over the next years. This urge for a new framework is also felt within the Member States. Among these initiatives, five solutions need to be studied in order to implement an ambitious EU defence strategy, strengthening the EU strategic autonomy.

- Longer frameworks and an improved capability planning will make EU defence projects easier to implement for EU Member States.
- A unified project management will solve many problems that current industrial and military cooperation project are suffering of.
- Intensifying EU-NATO Research, Development & Innovation cooperation will strengthen the EU strategic autonomy.
- France, Germany, and Italy have the power to reshape the EU military industry by creating a powerful core at its centre.
- The EU and its Member States need to tend towards a mutual and clearer definition of the EU defence policy.

Policy Recommendations

1. Longer frameworks and an improved capability planning will make EU defence projects easier to implement for EU Member States.

The defence industry is facing delays for most of its projects in the context of aid to Ukraine. Indeed, these projects are facing a paradox composed of extensive administrative requirements and tight timelines for most of them. Annual programmes are suffering from the lack of predictability regarding the logistic. For instance, the Commission launched the ‘Preparatory Action on Defence’ (PADR) in 2017, a three-year programme to help increase the competitiveness and innovation of the European defence industry and with a budget of €90 million. One of its purposes was to pave the way for the EDF, during the 2021-2027 period. Yet, the time needed to finalise the grant agreements for these annual work programme has been longer than expected and caused numerous delays for the projects. So much so that most of the PADR projects were still ongoing when the EDF was established in 2021. Due to time constraints and limited results, the overall objective of the PADR was revised and reduced¹⁶.

The notions of cooperation and partnership are at the core of a viable EU defence strategy. However, the frequent problems that these projects are encountering result in a decline in the attractiveness of such intents. The Strategic Compass recently adopted is not fully integrated in the capability planning of participating Member States (pMS)’ armies. Conversely, they do not send enough means to the CSDP engagements to reach its military level of ambition. In 2022, the EDA reported that the

¹⁵ Aurélie PUGNET, “Breton confirms delay of EU defence strategy proposal to 2024”, in *Euractiv* [online], 17 October 2023. [URL](#)

¹⁶ M. APELBLAT, “Lack of EU strategy on defence spending delays military support to Ukraine”, on *The Brussels Times* [online], 27 April 2023. [URL](#)

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“Defence planning by pMS continues to be done mostly in isolation, not utilising the EU defence initiatives to their full potential”¹⁷.

- ❖ Based on the PADR experience, multiannual programmes ensure the continuity of the effort and the chance to have the project finished on time. While elaborating more precisely the programme, it would give more flexibility for unplanned changes, improving its resiliency and its final quality. Setting the priorities and developing these multiannual programmes should be done in full coherence with other EU defence initiatives, and with the intent to lighten the legislative process. Indeed, it is often perceived as time-consuming and tedious, which slows down the overall dynamic.
- ❖ Embedding more efficiently pMS’ capability planning will help mitigating shortfalls and develop the next generation of high-end defence capabilities. One way to do so is through the anchoring of the common procurement culture, allowing Member States to purchase ammunition in accordance with their own national needs, to keep supporting Ukraine and to reduce costs through economies of scale.

2. A unified project management will solve many problems that current industrial and military cooperation project are suffering of.

The European defence landscape is heterogenous and economically inefficient because of significant differences in the European industrial integration. PMS’ perceptions of EU defence projects are not always exactly aligned. Member States often consider the interest for a European project only when it coincides with their national plans. These incoherences and the capability gaps between EU Member States lead to a fragmentation that can be seen up until the management issue of such projects¹⁸.

The lack of clear communication between stakeholders is damaging many EU defence projects, leading to problems of mutual understanding. This affects not only the progress of these projects, but also the trust given by the stakeholders and external partners for future EU defence initiatives. Some EU Member States remain little convinced by them. Although European defence landscape has been developed positively for the last three decades, a significant number of EU defence projects continue to fail or to operate not exactly as planned.

- ❖ The *ad hoc* creation of a structured body to manage each project could be a significant change. This body would be composed of each pMS’ management team (itself composed of industrial representatives and political representatives), with the advantage to have the EDA as advisor. After few successful experiences, this logic could be extended to a permanent body, for frequent bilateral or multilateral projects between EU Member States, composed of the pMS and a fully integrated EDA. Indeed, EDA is benefiting from an extensive experience in this field, while not mentioning its institutional position in this matter.
- ❖ Stemming from a deeper involvement of each stakeholder, it is particularly important to develop a habit of clear exchanges throughout every phase of the project to avoid further problems. PMS must take full account of the differences in capabilities, industry, and policies of each stakeholder in order to progress successfully within each EU defence project. A combination of effective communication and holistic organisation of the project regarding the stakeholders’ capabilities, the objectives, the fund, and the timelines will help the project to meet its deadlines, as well as incentivizing the European defence ecosystem for other future

¹⁷ “2022 Coordinated Annual Review On Defence Report”, on *European Defence Agency* [online], Novembre 2022. [URL](#)

¹⁸ Sean MONAGHAN, “Solving Europe’s Defense Dilemma: Overcoming the Challenges to European Defense Cooperation” on *CSIS* [online], 1st March 2023. [URL](#)

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cooperation projects. Developing the mutual trust, by avoiding the exposure to national political crises, will also ease the overall management of a project.

3. Intensifying EU-NATO Research, Development & Innovation cooperation will strengthen the EU strategic autonomy.

NATO is playing an important role at protecting EU against military threats, while developing their partnership. Thanks to NATO's projects and inertia, the EU and its Members are benefitting from a positive framework to develop their industries and their partnerships. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is defining his Strategic Compass as "complementary to NATO, which remains the foundation of collective defence for its members"¹⁹. In addition, the "Berlin Plus Agreement", stemming from the NATO's Washington Summit (1999), is giving the EU, under certain conditions, access to NATO assets and capabilities²⁰.

The 2023 Vilnius Summit's Communiqué underlines NATO's will to further develop the industry cooperation in Europe, thanks to its Defence Programme Action Plan, putting Europe as "convener, standard-setter, requirement setter and delivery enabler to promote sustainable defence industrial capacity". As a matter of fact, the 'Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic' (DIANA) brings together universities, industry, and governments to work with start-ups and other innovators to solve critical defence and security challenges. EU will benefit from participating in the development of the 'NATO Strategic Concept' within its Members. This could be coupled with the EDF which has a €8 billion budget for 2021-2027.

- ❖ By fully endorsing this role through the DIANA and the EDF programmes, not only will European industries increase their number of major contracts, but they will also considerably enhance their capacity and their competitiveness²¹. The EDTIB will highly benefit from this dynamic. Furthermore, the notion of interoperability is common between both organisations and must continue to influence future EU defence initiatives.
- ❖ Based on NATO's model, EU Member States should intensify joint exercises. These are excellent opportunities to bring two armies, or more, closer together and share practical operational experience, which is another way of incentivizing indirectly the European industries to work together. This intensification could lead Member States to consider a unified commandment, with limited power at the beginning. NATO's army is a proof that European armies could operate together, under a body with a significant power.

4. France, Germany and Italy have the power to reshape the EU military industry by creating a powerful core at its centre.

The European defence core composed of France, Germany and Italy have been growing stronger for the last three decades. Rome and Berlin reinforced their long-awaited bilateral deal in November 2023, the 'Action plan' to deepen cooperation across many sectors, defence policy included. In addition, the Franco-German consortium KMW+Nexter Defence Systems and the Italian defence company Leonardo announced a "strategic alliance" to build a generation of tanks in December

¹⁹ "A Strategic Compass for the EU", on EEAS [online], 2023. [URL](#)

²⁰ "About EUFOR", on EUFOR In BiH [online], 25 April 2023. [URL](#)

Thanks to this comprehensive package of agreements, EU took over NATO's capabilities during the 'European Union Force' (EUFOR) Concordia in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (2003) and the EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004). This cooperation is still going up to this day, with approximately 1,100 troops from 22 countries, EU member countries and non-EU "Troop Contributing Countries"

²¹ "Vilnius Summit Communiqué", in NATO [online], 19 July 2023. [URL](#)

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2023²². This has been done in a general context of an important defence spending among many EU Member States in 2022²³. Echoing to the need of “defence bonds” in the EU, advocated by Charles Michel during the 2023 EDA Annual conference, this dynamic is nourishing the idea of a France-Germany-Italy framework to boost prospect of the EU defence²⁴.

Among others already mentioned, these three countries are home to major defence enterprises: Naval Group in France, Rheinmetall and TKMS in Germany, Fincantieri in Italy. And they are already cooperating closely on a number of key sectors. France, Germany and Italy are showing signs of shared political and industrial agendas regarding the EU defence strategy. Based on these industries and projects, France, Germany and Italy are benefiting from a positive aura within the EU and in the world.

- ❖ They should use this aura to foster the proliferation of technological and industrial cooperation between EU Member States, bilaterally or multilaterally²⁵. They have the power to convince other EU Member States of the merits of deeper and more ambitious Europeans-only industrial and military cooperation projects. Not just industrial projects, they should also advocate for more military joint exercises which is the foundation for further operational deployment, for example, in the time of a military crisis. At every step of a project, from the Research & Development to the final management, they should help European defence cooperations between EU Member States. The gain is developing a more European centralised industry with producers and buyers gathered in the same organisation, while developing this common culture of exercise and operations.
- ❖ They should use their national industries part of MBDA and their pMS position in the OCCAR to further develop European projects. A product of European integration, MBDA has succeeded in becoming an international competitor in the field of missiles. In the meantime, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war has less impacted OCCAR’s programmes than others, thanks to the fact that its programmes’ supply chain relies more on local, or participating, States than on global suppliers²⁶. Despite the fact that few problems have been observed in previous projects, OCCAR already proved its role as a key actor for European defence cooperations. Bringing more interest and funding to the EDTIB will also reinforce each European stakeholder, strengthening by the same occasion the EU strategic autonomy.

5. The EU and its Member States needs to tend towards a mutual and clearer definition of the EU defence policy.

The American support cannot be taken for granted and may be reduced, notably in the case of the help brought to Ukraine, leading the EU to make up for this shortfall. Moreover, some EU Member States are criticizing the lack of coherence between the actions taken the EU institutions towards the EU defence industry²⁷.

²² “Italy’s Leonardo and Franco-German KNDS to create tank alliance”, on *Reuters* [online], 13 December 2023. [URL](#)

²³ For instance, the highest allocation of their overall defence expenditure to investment were Luxembourg (53.5%), Hungary (48.1%) and Greece (42.6%).

“Record high European defence spending boosted by procurement of new equipment” on *European Defence Agency* [online], 30 Novembre 2023. [URL](#)

²⁴ This agreement is composed by structural deals and close cooperation on strategic sectors

²⁵ Benjamin Albert MORAGA (rapporteur), Marcel CHILLAUD, Julien DUPRÉ, Léa LELY, Lila TILSON et Océane LEMASLE, “Le rôle structurant des coopérations inter-étatiques”, on *Revue Défense Nationale* [online], 2019. [URL](#)

²⁶ Vivienne MACHI, Joachim SUCKER, “Seven questions with the head of international arms manager OCCAR”, in *DefenseNews* [online], 8 September 2023. [URL](#)

²⁷ Aurélie PUGNET, “EU defence industry pressures Commission, EU countries to step up financing” on *Euractiv* [online], 27 June 2023. [URL](#)

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As the number of European defence projects is growing, the future of the EU defence strategy needs to tend towards a mutual and clearer definition of the EU defence policy among Member States. The ‘European Defence Industrial Strategy’ from the Commission should bear this holistic approach of the policy, as Ursula von der Leyen stated “Peace needs security” during the 2023 EDA Annual Conference.

- ❖ The EU and its Member States need to work on the condition for an organisation in charge of defining an EU defence policy. This organisation would be composed of representatives from each Member States, from the Parliament and with the help of external partners such as NATO and OSCE. Preliminary works must be carried out to ensure a good understanding of national interest regarding security and defence issues within each Member States. Working on such projects will affect positively the European defence landscape. One of the challenges is to break taboos about the pros and cons about a European defence policy concretely defined, notably about the share of technology and skills.
- ❖ An ambitious EU defence strategy will be only viable if the bigger frame works well and is balanced. Indeed, the strategic autonomy is a concept that takes into consideration the political framework, the economic framework, the industrial framework, etc. A competitive and a politically strong European continent, will be a positive background to further develop the EU strategic autonomy and the EU defence strategy

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