

The Three Foundational Flaws that Hinder the Creation of a European Army

David Cardero Ozarín

Senior Geopolitical Analyst

Istituto Analisi Relazioni Internazionali

SUMMARY / ABSTRACT

The idea of a “European Army” is as old as the EU itself. However, the three “original sins” that have long been identified by military personnel and rank-and-file troops — the lack of shared military doctrines, the logistical headache for pan-European cooperation, and the cultural and linguistic diversity of the old continent — have never been adequately remedied and continue to impede its creation.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s statement at the Munich Security Conference on February 2025 about the need to create a European army, given a United States administration increasingly perceived as a rival rather than an ally, sparked broad debate. In recent years, the concept of European strategic autonomy has been discussed, but the definitive trigger was the outbreak of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, which threatens the post-Cold War European security architecture and represents Europe’s greatest geopolitical challenge since the dissolution of Yugoslavia — all taking place within a broader transition of the international order marked by growing great-power competition and the crisis of the multilateral model.

In a climate of open distrust and friction with Washington after Donald Trump’s return to the White House and the recurrent fluctuations in the U.S. position regarding support for Ukraine’s defence, Europe faces an uncertain scenario in which it must safeguard its own security. In this complex and unprecedented framework, it is evident that Europe must develop credible deterrent capabilities *vis-à-vis* external rivals, since diplomatic and economic power alone have proven to be insufficient.

The idea of militarily integrating Europe and creating a possible “European Army” dates back to the draft European Defence Community and Pleven Plan of 1950¹. Yet, from those early moments three major problems have been repeatedly identified by military experts, policymakers and armed forces personnel: doctrinal divergences among European nations, logistical complexity, and cultural and linguistic barriers.

Seventy-five years on, these three “original sins” (which prevent serious talk about a unified, operational European Army) persist, even as the recent publication of the White Paper on European Defence and the Joint Declaration on the EU legislative priorities for 2026² promises solutions to some of these problems.

¹ [Common Foreign and Security Policy | EUR-Lex](#)

² [EU institutions define priorities for 2026 - Consilium](#)

But how complex are these challenges? How realistic is it to contemplate a European Army without addressing these three major obstacles?

THE “FIRST SIN”: LACK OF A COMMON DOCTRINE

It must be understood that the European project itself does not constitute a unified political entity in the way the United States is, or, to a lesser extent, the Swiss Confederation. The inherent nature of the European Union, situated midway between an economic union and a true multinational confederation, renders the pursuit of a coherent security and diplomatic policy particularly complex.

Each of the 27 Member States has its own strategic culture and vision of its armed forces, forged by its history, geopolitical context, security perception and its own concept of military force (understood in this context as the set of technical and human military capabilities, the foundations for the employment of armed forces, mission sets and operational experience used to achieve objectives).

Thus, within the EU coexist realities such as the Italian or Spanish models — nations with essentially Mediterranean projection and long naval traditions, which prioritize security interests and the fight against irregular migration in North Africa — alongside France’s more expeditionary approach focused on overseas intervention to assert national interests (for example, *Operation Barkhane* in the Sahel) with competent expeditionary forces; and the Polish and Baltic perspectives oriented toward deterrence of Russia, combat capability in extreme cold, and a preference for collective defense over force projection, by way of example. Each Member State also reflects its own strategic idiosyncrasies and regional dynamics, as exemplified by Greece, which must balance a complex relationship with Turkey, simultaneously a strategic rival in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cyprus dispute, and an ally within NATO.

At the other extreme, countries such as Austria, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus maintain different conceptions of their armed forces — closer to self-defence forces — and would likely have to abandon their neutrality stances to become meaningful contributors to any configuration of a European Army (or to strengthen pan-European defence cooperation). The recent election of Irish President Catherine Connolly, and her commitment to preserving the country’s long-standing neutrality and pacifist tradition, illustrates the deep reluctance of national decision-makers to endorse substantial shifts in their respective national defence postures.

At the administrative and institutional level, although progress has been made through important EU initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund, together with the publication of the White Paper on defence (which for the first time outlines a roadmap and concrete measures for strategic defence conception at the EU level and a greater vocation for integration), we are still far from forming a true structure for a unified European Army.

This scenario is further complicated by the ambiguity of Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty³, which restricts NATO's collective defence clause to territories located in Europe and North America, thereby excluding Spain's North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla from its automatic protection. A similar issue would arise in the case of a hypothetical attack on France's overseas departments, which fall outside the geographical scope of NATO's founding charter.

THE "SECOND SIN": THE ACHILLES' HEEL OF LOGISTICS AND INTEROPERABILITY

The image of Russian tank columns destroyed or immobilized for lack of fuel in the early stages of the war -which doomed the offensive against the Ukrainian capital- perfectly illustrates how indispensable logistics and reliable supply chains are in modern warfare.

European nations would face difficulties moving troops, equipment, materiel and supplies across a continent of more than 4,000,000 square kilometres with highly heterogeneous transport infrastructure and geography. Today, large-scale logistics rest on maritime assets (very high cargo capacity but slow) and airlift (expensive and limited capacity). A European Army would need to move forces rapidly and efficiently by land as well.

Unfortunately, the EU's free movement of goods and people does not apply to military convoys: on average, a Member State must notify a planned cross-border movement 45 days in advance to obtain transit permission from another EU country — deadlines that are utterly unacceptable for the agility and rapid deployment required in case of attack.

Logistical problems highlighted by the European Court of Auditors include movement prohibitions arising from divergent regulations on vehicle weight on motorways and forced rerouting due to infrastructure unsuited to heavy military vehicles. However, there are also reasons for optimism: the Rail Baltica⁴ project, which aims to convert the Baltic states' 1,520 mm Soviet-era railway gauge to the European standard of 1,435 mm, will facilitate the full integration of the Baltic nations into the wider European rail network. This strategic initiative represents a major step forward for continental military mobility and defence logistics. Similarly, new transport links between northern Finland and Norway, connecting the city of Kemi with the port of Narvik⁵, are being planned to improve access to the Norwegian Sea. Both initiatives, developed under the umbrella of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) approved by the European Commission⁶ on 18 July 2024, are promising examples of genuine efforts to strengthen Europe's strategic mobility infrastructure, although much remains to be done.

Interoperability must also be considered: although NATO membership has driven significant standardization, in practice each national army operates under its own standards for vehicles, communications systems and operational protocols. A telling example is the diversity of main battle tanks: German *Leopards*, French *Leclercs*, Italian *Arietes*, and American *Abrams*. While the U.S. Army operates a single primary tank model, European armies field up to 17 different types. Not to mention the increasing

³ [NATO - Official text: The North Atlantic Treaty, 04-Apr.-1949](#)

⁴ [About the project - RB](#)

⁵ [Finland begins planning standard gauge rail connection to Norwegian sea | UIRR](#)

⁶ [Trans-European Transport Network \(TEN-T\) - Mobility and Transport](#)

tensions between France and Germany arising from technical and operational divergences in the development of the FCAS stealth fighter. This heterogeneity becomes a liability rather than an asset, since each model requires its own spare parts, repair procedures and technical specifications, complicating the formation and maintenance of an integrated multinational unit. These difficulties also surface during Alliance exercises, where system and procedural diversity pose a major obstacle to full interoperability and operational coordination.

Moreover, interoperability is conditioned by the strong dependence on the United States for advanced arms procurement: building a European military-industrial complex and shared development of capabilities is central to achieving autonomy from Washington. There are positive examples, such as the Airbus consortium, which has established a competitive pan-European assembly and industrial network in the strategic aeronautics sector, or the development of Ukraine's defence industry (driven, of course, by necessity) and its advanced combat drones. Nonetheless, currently more than 55% of advanced weapons systems originate in the United States, a dependency that must be significantly reduced to avoid being constrained by the vicissitudes of the transatlantic relationship.

This could be addressed by strengthening European industrial capabilities or by replacing U.S. suppliers with other reliable partners, such as Sweden, Japan (which already participates in the GCAP⁷ programme alongside Italy and the United Kingdom) or South Korea.

THE “THIRD SIN”: THE LACK OF A COMMON MILITARY CULTURE

Unlike the United States, where a single language and shared national culture allow both a common military force and state-level National Guard structures, the European Union is a mosaic of 27 nations, each with its own language and military culture shaped by distinct histories. Constructing a supranational military entity would require ceding the most fundamental portion of national sovereignty: security and territorial independence...sovereignty embodied in the principal symbol of state power, the national armed forces.

This would be the most consequential political change, especially at a time when ideological debate among major European parties remains stuck between proponents of a “Europe of nations” (opposed to further transfer of competences to the EU) and those who advocate deeper community integration. This ideological tension is the core problem, not only in defence matters but in the EU's political project's broader fate and viability.

It is also necessary to consider each nation's military capabilities and the development level of its defence industry: France — the only European nuclear power — possesses offensive and deterrent capacities far greater than most other countries. Germany, for example, until very recently, has historically adopted a pacifist and anti-militarist approach, maintaining comparatively modest armed forces given its status as Europe's leading economic power, for historical and ideological reasons.

⁷ *Global Combat Air Programme*

The most evident cultural barrier is linguistic diversity, which turns any pan-European cooperation into a true Tower of Babel. This problem already challenges NATO procedures: although English is the lingua franca in most operations, officers and mid-level commanders often struggle to communicate with foreign counterparts, compromising operational effectiveness and battlefield interaction — key elements in any combat situation.

Initiatives such as reinforcing multinational exercises, expanding exchanges between military academies (a kind of “*Erasmus for soldiers*”) and improving English language training could help mitigate these differences and foster a genuine pan-European military culture.

THE “FOURTH SIN”: WHAT TO DO ABOUT NATO?

Although tensions between Europe and the United States may appear to be a recent phenomenon linked to the Trump administration, already in 2000 President George W. Bush urged European partners to increase defence spending, and it was Barack Obama who in 2015 formalized the “*Pivot to Asia*” doctrine to respond to China’s geopolitical rise. Trump merely accelerated a deeper trend of “decoupling” between Europe and the United States by demanding that Europeans assume a larger role in defending their own continent. Now, with the recent publication of the National Security Strategy⁸ (NSS), it is crystal clear that Washington perceives a united Europe within the EU framework as an ideological rival, and that primary defense and security resources from the United States will be immediately relocated to the Western Hemisphere, as determined by the *Trump Corollary*.

One of the major issues in conceiving a European Army is its potential conflict or duplication of NATO’s role with regard to collective European defense. Thus, it is necessary to consider what the relationship between European nations and the Atlantic Alliance should be. This implies revisiting the so-called “3Ds” (*Don’t Duplicate, Don’t Discriminate, Don’t Disconnect*), first articulated by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright⁹ during the NATO leaders’ summit on 8 December 1998 in Brussels.

These precepts were conceived in direct response to the Franco-British Saint-Malo declaration of the same year, in which UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac openly discussed the need for an exclusively European military capability to defend the EU’s geopolitical interests. The “3Ds” have served as NATO pillars in the post-Cold War era:

- Close alignment of the Alliance with U.S. strategic interests to reinforce internal cohesion.
- Non-discrimination toward non-EU partners such as Turkey, Canada or the United States in participation in multinational exercises.

⁸ [2025-National-Security-Strategy | DocumentCloud](#)

⁹ [12/8/98 Albright Statement to the North Atlantic Council](#)

- Absence of privileges in the development of armament systems by European companies, intended to avoid duplication of expenditure (and also to avoid creating competition for the American defence industry).

Some experts add a fourth “D”: the political dimension of the Alliance, closely linked to the dynamics of the transatlantic pact, closely linked to the dynamics of the transatlantic pact and to the degree of compatibility between the geopolitical objectives and interests of the United States and the European Union (which, again, with the current administration acquires even more importance).

Therefore, it becomes essential to comprehensively review these pillars to adopt a more Europe-centred approach, both within NATO and in order to advance more decisively toward an autonomous European defence policy.

The 2022 adoption of the Strategic Compass — the first roadmap for strengthening the EU’s defence and security policy — was full of good intentions and declarations, yet it still lacks depth and its real impact remains limited. Many steps remain necessary to improve armed forces’ threat analysis capabilities and move toward a common military doctrine. Moreover, the document did not provide for the creation of a High-Level Defence Group nor a unified European command responsible for strategic planning.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: A MOMENT OF TRUTH... BUT WITH REALISM

Despite President von der Leyen’s announcement of the Re-Arm Europe programme and the publication of the European White Paper on Defence, we are still far from solving the three major problems that have historically prevented the creation of a European Army. Nevertheless, Europe’s realization of the need to take charge of its own security perhaps represents the most important paradigm shift.

Strengthening EU initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) ,and the example of the Franco-German Brigade, the first operational multinational brigade, together with the best practices developed over decades of NATO cooperation and the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) external missions, constitute a reasonable point of departure.

The path toward a genuine European defence is still long and strewn with political, strategic and logistical obstacles, yet the recognition of the need to move forward is, in itself, a crucial step for the future of the European project and the end of the pacifist lethargy that has too long afflicted the continent. The creation of a European Army, understood in its most comprehensive sense, remains an elusive objective given the complexity of the challenges analyzed. However, there is fertile ground for developing small-to medium-sized multinational units with rapid-deployment capability and high operational readiness, able to provide security guarantees to Europe. These units could also benefit from the invaluable combat experience of the Ukrainians against Russian forces.

Opening an institutional and military debate on the role of France’s extended nuclear deterrent, together with a commitment to revitalize the European military-industrial

complex, could bear fruit. Meanwhile, it is essential to listen to military experts and troops themselves to understand their needs and the solutions they propose to address these three major problems discussed here.

The confirmed trend of an increasingly unstable transatlantic pact and a more confrontational relationship with Washington, combined with a Russia emboldened in its irredentist ambitions, places Europe at a crucial geopolitical crossroads.

Historically, crises have been true catalysts for significant change, as shown by the evolution in economic crisis management during the pandemic and the EU's collective support for Ukraine. Only decisive actions, adopted jointly and accompanied by strategic and intelligent defence investments, will allow the European Union to guarantee its own security.

At a time when remaining “economic giants, political dwarfs and military worms” would bring the Old Continent to the edge of disaster, dependence on Washington is no longer a reliable option. As Churchill said: “A pint of sweat today will save a gallon of blood tomorrow.”

Bibliography

- European Court of Auditors. (2025). *Special report: EU military mobility — Full speed not reached due to design weaknesses and obstacles in route*. European Court of Auditors. https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2025-04/SR-2025-04_EN.pdf
- Spanish Ministry of Defence. (2025). *El difícil equilibrio en el triángulo transatlántico 2025*. https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2352431/el_dificil_equilibrio_en_el_triangu_lo_transatlantico_2025_dieeea15.pdf/a760b1f4-03c9-18d3-2819-351609858429?t=1740058783319
- Arteaga, F. (2024). *Europa en guerra y la defensa europea: ¿cómo siempre?* Real Instituto Elcano. Retrieved from <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/europa-en-guerra-y-la-defensa-europea-como-siempre/>
- European Court of Auditors. 2025. *Special Report: EU military mobility — Full speed not reached due to design weaknesses and obstacles in route*. European Court of Auditors. https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2025-04/SR-2025-04_EN.pdf
- Gnesotto, Nicole (Institut Delors). 2025. *Defence 25: thinking outside the box*. Geopolitics and Defence Policy Paper No. 308, January 2025. Institut Delors. https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PP308_Defense_Gnesotto_EN.pdf
- Spanish Ministry of Defence. 2025. *El difícil equilibrio en el triángulo transatlántico 2025*. https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2352431/el_dificil_equilibrio_en_el_triangu_lo_transatlantico_2025_dieeea15.pdf

- Arteaga, F. 2024. “*Europa en guerra y la defensa europea: ¿cómo siempre?*” Real Instituto Elcano. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/europa-en-guerra-y-la-defensa-europea-como-siempre/>
- European Union. (2025, March 19). *Joint white paper for European defence – Readiness 2030*. European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/white-paper-for-european-defence-readiness-2030_en
- Koenig, N. (2018, July 20). *EU–NATO cooperation: Distinguishing narrative from substance* (Policy paper). Jacques Delors Institute Berlin. https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/20180720_EU-NATO_Koenig.pdf